HIERARCHY, DEMOCRACY, AND DIFFERENTIATION: 
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOW IN THE TRANSITION 
FROM ARISTOCRACY TO DEMOCRACY IN THE 
LITERATURE OF ANCIENT GREECE 

by 

DAVID GRZYBOWSKI 

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We hereby approve the thesis/dissertation of

David Grzybowski

candidate for the degree of Master of Arts.

Committee Chair

Timothy Wutrich

Committee Member

Paul Iversen

Committee Member

Rachel Sternberg

Date of Defense

March 2, 2015

*We also certify that written approval has been obtained for any proprietary material contained therein.
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Hierarchy, Democracy, and Differentiation: The Significance of the Bow in the Transition from Aristocracy to Democracy in the Literature of Ancient Greece

Abstract

by

DAVID GRZYBOWSKI

This essay examines ancient Greek views on archery by examining its role in literary portrayals. The bow has traditionally been understood simply as the weapon of cowardly men, as opposed to the spear or the sword. This essay argues that Greek conceptions of the bow as expressed in the Homeric epics were quite varied, with the status of the bowman himself as important as his weapon. However, by the Classical period, Greek ideas had changed, so that the bow was considered largely the weapon of foreigners. By the end of the fifth century, the Greeks no longer treat the bow in their dramatic literature as a weapon of contemporary significance.
1. **Battle in the Shade**

In Book XI of the *Iliad*, there is a scene in which Diomedes, fighting alongside Odysseus, achieves two heroic feats. First he kills the Trojan captain Agastrophos, son of Paion, and then he nearly kills Hector himself with a mighty spear-cast. Priam’s son escapes death with the aid of his helmet, a gift from Apollo, but makes a hasty retreat with Diomedes piling on abuse at the fleeing hero. Diomedes then turns to the task of looting Agastrophos’ corpse. At just this moment, Paris, Hector’s brother who has been hiding behind a stone column nearby, jumps out from his hiding-place and shoots Diomedes in the foot. Being an undistinguished warrior, Paris is unaccustomed to even this measure of success and gleefully celebrates his glorious victory. Unimpressed, Diomedes turns to Paris and retorts as follows:

You archer, foul fighter, lovely in your locks, eyer of young girls.
If you were to make trial of me in strong combat with weapons
your bow would do you no good at all, nor your close-showered arrows.
Now you have scratched the flat of my foot, and even boast of this.
I care no more than if a witless child or woman
had struck me; this is the blank weapon of a useless man, no fighter.
But if one is struck by me only a little, that is far different,
the stroke is a sharp thing and suddenly slays him lifeless,
and that man’s wife goes with cheeks torn in lamentation,
and his children are fatherless, while staining the soil with his red blood
rots away, and there are more birds than women swarming about him. (XI.385-95, Richmond Lattimore, trans.)

All the same, Diomedes is no longer able to fight, and so after removing the arrow from his foot, he returns to the Greek camp in Odysseus’s chariot.

In this essay, I intend to explore the portrayal of the bow and the Bowman in Ancient Greek literature, beginning first with Homer and concluding with Euripides. The bow has a dual nature—expressed, for instance, in Heraclitus’s epigram, “the name of the
bow is life, but its work is death”¹ (F 8)—in early Greek literature. On the one hand, it is a powerful weapon wielded by gods and heroes alike; on the other hand, it is also the weapon of tricksters and cowards like Paris. My first goal in this essay is to explain these two perspectives and reconcile them as elements of a potential “Homeric” society.²

By the fifth century, however, matters have changed dramatically. Each of the great Athenian tragedians has at least one play in which the bow plays a role: Aeschylus’ Persians, Sophocles’ Philoctetes, and Euripides’ Heracles. Each playwright presents the bow in a different fashion: Aeschylus as a weapon of foreigners, Sophocles as an item driving a particular story, and Euripides as a highly complex symbol. I will conclude the argumentative portion of this essay with a discussion of these works, focusing especially on the Philoctetes and the Heracles.

In between these two bookends, I will have a historical review of the period between the era when the Homeric epics were initially composed and the age of the tragedians. I will specifically trace political developments, from monarchy to aristocracy to tyranny and finally to oligarchy and democracy. In this section, I will also show how ideology changed alongside governmental forms. I will additionally include an explanation of changes in military practices during this period and specifically how the bow was involved in these developments.

¹ In the original Greek: τῷ τόξῳ ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος. The pun arises from another Greek word for bow, βιός, which differs from the word βίος, life, by an accent.

² In this I am taking a Unitarian approach to the Homeric epics and also assuming that it is possible to distill from the epics a picture of a unified “Homeric” society that might conceivably have actually existed. However, both of these are merely working assumptions. I will address in my argument the possibility that these two attitudes might have arisen out of the process of oral composition over time and so justify my approach.
In a final section, I will summarize my conclusions and address various potential lines of criticism of my general argument. Thus, my essay will consist of two argumentative sections, a historical interlude an introduction, and a conclusion.
2. The First Living Creature

Greek literature begins with Homer, the educator of Hellas, and so in this beginning section, I will argue that there are two different perspectives on the bow present in the Homeric epics, specifically the Iliad, and that these two perspectives can be understood as outgrowths of aristocratic Greek society passing judgment on different uses of the bow, praising it when it is used by fellow aristocrats fighting in the front ranks and condemning it when it is used by warriors less prominent and brave.

Consider the passage quoted above in the introduction: Diomedes’ response to Paris when he is shot. This is a prime sample in the argument that the Iliadic heroes denigrate the bow. As Farron puts it:

The consensus among classical scholars is that the ancient Greeks and Romans regarded military archery as lower class, cowardly, immoral and ineffectual. Commentators on passages where condemnation of military archery is expressed and the books and articles that mention this subject make this observation and elucidate it with the same few parallel passages always beginning with Iliad 11.385-95, or they cite a commentary, book or article that does this.

And on first blush, that does seem to be the message: Diomedes, one of the greatest of the Greek heroes, heaps nothing but scorn on Paris and his bow—in fact, the first invective he flings is “archer.” Consideration of the larger context, however, yields a rather different conclusion.

Diomedes also criticizes the archer when Pandaros wounds him with an arrow (5.119), shortly thereafter killing the offending bowman. Earlier still (4.112-140) Pandaros disrupts the single-combat between Paris and Menelaos by shooting Menelaos. In contrast to Paris, Pandaros very nearly kills his target, with his arrow passing through

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3 The Odyssey is more consistent and generally positive.
5 169.
every layer of Menelaos’ armor, and the hero is only saved by the intervention of Athena. Helenos is another Trojan hero using the bow, once more against Menelaos and ineffectually (13.583-85). For his part, Paris twice more removes a Greek hero from the fight, first Machaon (11.505-7) and later Eurypylos (11.580-83). However, none of these other victims of archery complain or disparage the bow or bowman. Nor do any of the Trojans when the Greek heroes Meriones and Teukros deploy their bows in battle. Diomedes alone disparages archery.

Diomedes’ diatribe seems largely focused on Paris himself. In his earlier response to Pandaros, Diomedes in fact does not say anything against archery but rather against attacking people unawares, and even more specifically, against boasting over the feat of merely wounding a foe rather than killing him (5.115-120). However, most of the times when a man is attacked in the Iliad, he does not see it coming; only about a quarter of the time does he notice the attacker before he strikes.\(^6\) Considering both the uniqueness of Diomedes’ outburst and the non-uniqueness of his situation, his words take on a much more specific and personal cast. Diomedes, the great hero who fights against the gods themselves, has been shot twice in one day by archers whom he did not see; even worse, on both occasions his assailants only wounded him slightly but still gloated as though they had achieved a glorious triumph over him. Like a man who has stubbed his toe twice on the same spot, he is angry and annoyed and not in the mood for fine distinctions or even obvious facts. The point of his retort is not to condemn the bowman as such but to vent his anger at Paris.

Turning to the words of his speech, this interpretation explains some of the expressions and exaggerations that Diomedes employs. His opening salvo of invective—

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\(^6\) Farron, 178.
“You archer, foul fighter, lovely in your locks, eyer of young girls”—points directly to Paris himself. He begins with the weakest insult, “archer,” but immediately proceeds to more severe insults. “Foul fighter” not only refers to Paris’ reluctance to enter close-combat but also his weakness and cowardice on display in his challenge to Menelaos in Book III (3.15-94, 340-382). The last two, “lovely in your locks, eyer of girls,” impugn Paris’ masculinity in two respects: one the one hand, Paris cares for his appearance more than is appropriate for a man to do; on the other, he is more concerned with the wooing of women than with the waging of war, again, contrary to the norms of masculinity.

Diomedes does include the practice of archery in his list of Paris’ effeminate qualities, but it is also the first word out of his mouth after he has been shot, and he quickly moves on to stronger language.

In the second line of his speech, Diomedes claims that if Paris were to come closer to fight him, then his archery skills would be of no use. This is quite plausible, but also quite obvious: the very purpose of a bow is to attack one’s enemy at range. Later in the battle, Teukros effectively uses the bow at close-range, but he does so in conjunction with his brother Ajax, who provides cover with his shield (8.67-72). Later, when Helenos tries to match his bow against Menelaos’ javelin, Menelaos survives and his javelin strikes Helenos in the hand, both injuring him and destroying his bow (13.893-95). Then Diomedes refers to the nature of his wound—“Now you have scratched the flat of my foot, and even boast of this”—as well as to Paris’ gloating. At no point in the Iliad does Paris kill anyone with his bow, though the audience knows that he will eventually kill Achilles; in fact, he does not so much as wound any of his targets in the chest-area, where an arrow might be lethal—unlike Teukros, Pandaros, or Meriones,
Paris is not even a good archer. He has no right to boast of his meager accomplishment. At the same time, Diomedes is minimizing the extent of his wound. The arrow did not merely scratch his foot but went completely through it rendering him unable to walk. Paris has knocked one of the greatest Greek heroes out of the fight for the foreseeable future—indeed, Diomedes does not return to the fray for the remainder of the *Iliad*. The cowardly and effeminate archer has just succeeded where is much more heroic brother just a few lines earlier (11.343-68) spectacularly failed. The remaining lines simply drive home these points: claiming that the bow, at least in Paris’ hands, is not an effective weapon and dismissing Diomedes’ own distress. The interpretation that the Homeric heroes are hostile to archery or that the bow is an unheroic weapon cannot stand on this passage alone.

When considering the archers on the Greek side, Teukros and Meriones, the *Iliad* seems quite favorable toward bows and bowmen. Meriones kills Harpalion (13.650-52) and wins the archery competition during Patroklos’ funeral games (23.859-83). Teukros, whom Meriones defeats, distinguishes himself greatly in battle. Fighting alongside his brother Ajax in Book VIII, he mows down the advancing Trojans:

> Then which of the Trojans first did Teukros the blameless strike down? Orsilochos first of all, and Ormenos, and Ophelestes, Daitor and Chromios, and Lykophontes the godlike, and Amopaon, Polyaimon's son, and Melanippos. All these he felled to the bountiful earth in close succession. (8.273-77, Lattimore trans.)

Shortly thereafter, Teukros kills Gorgythion with an arrow to his chest (8.303) and Archeptolemos, Hector’s charioteer, with another chest-wound (8.313). Much later, in the battle by the ships, and he slays Kleitos and would have slain Hector himself had Zeus not broken his bowstring (15.445-65). Far from being a useless weapon, the bow is
essential to the Greeks’ defense and so powerful that only divine intervention can defeat it.

Nor do the heroes abuse Teukros in the same way that Diomedes does Paris. In Book VIII, Agamemnon himself praises Teukros and urges him onward:

Agamemnon the lord of men was glad as he watched him laying waste from the strong bow the Trojan battalions; he went over and stood beside him and spoke a word to him: “Telamonian Teukros, dear heart, O lord of your people, strike so; thus you may be a light given to the Danaans, and to Telamon your father, who cherished you when you were little, and, bastard as you were, looked after you in his own house. Bring him into glory, though he is far away; and for my part, I will tell you this, and it will be a thing accomplished: if ever Zeus who holds the aegis and Athene grant me to sack outright the strong-founded citadel of Ilion, first after myself I will put into your hands some great gift of honor; a tripod, or two horses and the chariot with them, or else a woman, who will go up into the same bed with you.” (8.278-99, Lattimore, trans.)

Beside the ships, Ajax calls out for his brother’s aid asking, “Where are your arrows/of sudden death, and the bow that Phoibos Apollo gave you?” (15.440-41). Just after Teukros’ bowstring breaks, Hector even praises him, calling him the Greeks’ “bravest man” (15.489). Far from disparaging archery, heroes on both sides grant tremendous respect to a skilled and effective bowman.

Additionally, even the gods in the Iliad respect the bow and one skilled in its use. Apollo and Artemis are, of course, both archers, and both grant skill in archery to mortal heroes (Artemis, 5.51-52; Apollo, 23.872-73). Apollo is even credited with giving both Pandaros and Teukros their bows (Pandaros, 2.827; Teukros, 15.441). Apollo’s archery

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7 ‘The original Greek is even more favorable than Lattimore’s translation: ἀνδρὸς ἀριστῆος, meaning “of the man who is preeminent.”
8 However, there is another account at 4.106-11 of how Pandaros created his own bow.
is vividly portrayed in the early part of the *Iliad*, as he inflicts plague on the beasts and men of the Greeks (1.44-52). In Book XXI, Hera and Artemis enter into a scuffle, and while the contest is in close-combat, where Hera quickly proves her supremacy, she mentions that the bow is an advantage to Artemis (481-88).

So what explains the scholarly consensus that the *Iliad* portrays the bow as “unheroic?” There are two main reasons. The first is that the bow does not have a very prominent role in the story. In the entire poem, there are five heroes who loose arrows, and, as H. L. Lorimer says, “None of the individual archers of the *Iliad* is a first-class hero, unless we grant Paris the courtesy title.”9 Philoctetes, who would eventually slay Paris, is mentioned (2.716-25), but does not appear. Odysseus, though a skilled archer in the *Odyssey*, does not have his famous bow with him in the *Iliad*, and though he takes with him Meriones’ bow in Book X (260), he only uses it to drive horses (500), not to shoot arrows. No human is described as “famed for the bow,” only gods, while the epithet “famed for the spear” is applied to mortal heroes many times.10 If the bow is supposed to be a weapon suitable for a hero, one might expect it to appear more frequently.

The other reason is that there actually are unfavorable associations with the bow in the *Iliad*; scholars are not blind. For instance, although it is quite common in the *Iliad* for heroes to be attacked unawares, it is considered unmanly to strike in this fashion; Hector considers it a point of pride that he faces men openly in battle, saying to Ajax, “Yet as great as you are I would not strike you by stealth, watch/for my chance, but openly, so, if perhaps I might hit you” (7.242-43). In Book XIII, Idomeneus boasts “for

9 1950, 290.
10 Farron, 182.
my way/is not to fight my battles standing far away from my enemies” (262-63).

Additionally, Pandaros’ shot against Menelaos is an immoral action, the interruption of a single-combat, and the bow is an instrument for injustice. There is also the use of the bow by Paris, noteworthy for his cowardice as Diomedes expresses. As Farron puts it, “That he [Homer] had three of the Greeks wounded by Paris’ arrows is a cogent indication that military archery could be used to indicate cowardice.” For another thing, the bow is used by the laoi, the mass of common people, with some frequency. Finally, the bow does appear on cursory examination to be a substantially less effective weapon than the spear. German surgeon H. Fröhlich’s tables of wounds in the Iliad include twelve wounds caused by bows and only five of them being fatal, giving the bow the lowest kill ratio of any other manufactured weapon at 42%: the spear stands at 80% lethality, the sword at 100%, and even the humble sling at 66%. These comments and negative portrayals, coupled with the infrequency of the bow’s appearance lend themselves to the interpretation of the bow as an inappropriate weapon for heroes.

With the bow portrayed both positively and negatively, the challenge is to find a way to reconcile these two understandings of archery. Do they emerge from a confused oral tradition or from a coherent Homeric society? And if the latter, how are these contradictory notions to be reconciled?

Here the Analyst leaps forth. The best way, according to him, to understand the Iliad, and the Homeric corpus in general, is as a composite built out of oral tradition. The

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11 181.
12 Cf. Van Wees, 1994b, 137; Lorimer, 289.
13 Saunders, 2. It is noteworthy, however, that Fröhlich’s tables only count wounds, so Teukros’ eight kills listed above, which do not have wounds described along with them, are not counted. Including them increases the bow’s lethality to 65%. Additionally, Fröhlich did not distinguish between thrust spears and thrown javelins; reconstructed tables making this distinction give the javelin 81% lethality and the spear 78% (Saunders, 15).
picture the poem gives is not of a really-existing society, but simply a hodgepodge of different elements culled from different times and places to serve the poetic needs of a moment. The problem, then, is not to reconcile the two perspectives on the bow, but to determine their respective origins.

A related subject is the question of Homeric society: whether the Homeric epics describe a coherent society, and especially one that actually existed at some point in history. The view that it does was memorably defended by M. I. Finley, who also attempted to describe this society in detail in his book *The World of Odysseus*. Andrew Lang did likewise before Finley, and the success of these and other attempts at reconstruction show that there is a large measure of coherence within the epics.

The problem with the claim that there is a unified and historical “Homeric society” is that it only takes one piece of evidence to demonstrate inconsistency, and that such evidence does exist. For instance, the epics describe both temples and palaces together, something which archaeology has proved to have never been the case. Additionally, Snodgrass (1974) has found different and mutually exclusive marriage practices presented in the epics. Thus, the historical Homeric society is mythical. Instead, the Homeric poems should be understood as creations born of a poet or poets’ imagination; they are fantasy, not history.

Still, the success of Finley, Lang, and others cries out for an explanation. Even if the epics are of a composite nature, and even if they are not perfectly consistent or exemplary of a single moment in time, they still exhibit a large measure of internal coherence, and archaeology has confirmed that they are not total fabrications. The search for consistency cannot be simply dismissed *a priori*; each attempt at reconstruction must
be weighed according to its comprehensiveness and congruity with archaeological evidence, as well as its general plausibility. Indeed, based even on the seemingly confused descriptions of combat, scholars have been able to make plausible reconstructions of historical military practice.\textsuperscript{14} Military historian Hans van Wees makes a strong case against the idea that it is hopeless to distil a consistent picture of the Homeric world:

That view is both wrong and dangerous. It is wrong, because poets surely can, consciously or unconsciously, create consistent images, even if they are not required to be consistent to the extent that, say, historians are. Again, a long oral tradition might well produce confused images, but we simply do not know enough about the nature of the Greek epic tradition to deny \textit{a priori} that it could produce a consistent picture. It is, moreover, dangerous not to look for consistency, because it allows too much scholarly license: if one assumes that a text is inconsistent, one can simply select evidence to suit one’s purposes, and discard anything that does not fit.\textsuperscript{15}

Van Wees’s last point, that the search for a coherent picture disciplines scholarship, is especially important. It is easy enough to read one’s own prejudices into a text; being able to ignore or otherwise dismiss contrary evidence makes the enticement to do so all the greater.

This temptation indeed appears to have seduced the major scholar of bows in the \textit{Iliad}, H. L. Lorimer. She argues that the bow as a weapon of war was alien to the Greeks, the province of foreigners rather than Hellenes. She points out that Paris and Dolon (who possesses a bow, although he never has a chance to use it) are both equipped in an Asian style\textsuperscript{16} and that Teukros fights alongside Ajax in a fashion employed by the

\textsuperscript{14} I refer here specifically to Hans van Wees (1986; 1988; 1994a; 1994b), and in his papers he provides a survey of other scholars’ work on this subject.
\textsuperscript{15} 1994a, 2.
\textsuperscript{16} 1950, 295, 297.
Assyrians. Pandaros’ archery seems excused by him leaving his chariot at home so that he cannot fight as an “ordinary” hero. Lorimer also points out that archaeology indicates that bows were not used by the Mycenaeans for war, and military archery only appears on pottery in the Late Geometric period. Additionally, she says, though the bow was used by the laoi, the mass of people, “Apart from the use of the bow by individual heroes, archery plays an insignificant part in the Iliad,” and that a scene involving large numbers of Locrian archers and slingers is a later interpolation. In short, by Lorimer’s account, “The bow is sometimes frankly intrusive and is always foreign; the two archers who can make out a case for a reasonable antiquity (Paris and Teukros) are in whole or in part Asiatic.”

I agree with Lorimer that there is a strong foreign connection with the bow in battle, but she goes too far. She argues, for instance, that Apollo must have an Asiatic connection largely on the basis of his close association with the bow; this may well be the case, but her argument is weak. Additionally, just looking at the Iliad, there are four men who carry a bow on the Trojan side and three on the Greek, not including Philoctetes who evens out the score when he appears later in the epic cycle, and the Greek hero Teukros kills far more men with his bow than any Trojan does. As Farron summarizes, “there is no cultural different between Greeks and Trojans in this matter, nor did Homer want to create the impression that there is.” If taking the bow to war is supposed to be a totally Asian practice, then the Greeks do it far more than one would expect. And as for

17 Ibid., 297.
18 Ibid., 290.
19 Ibid., 299-300; Archaeology continues to confirm this claim (Cf. Cohen, 698-99).
20 Ibid., 289.
21 Ibid., 301.
22 Ibid., 300.
23 Ibid., 300.
24 178.
Pandaros, he might have left his chariot at home simply for the reason he gives, compassion for his horses; we simply do not have enough information about his character beyond his brief portrayal in the *Iliad* to say for certain.

Lorimer is unquestionably right in one matter, however: the bows used by the Homeric heroes are generally composite bows, an Asian technology. Pandaros’ bow is the clearest case, though the account in the *Iliad* of its construction is confused.\(^{25}\) Odysseus’ bow in the *Odyssey* is also composite,\(^ {26}\) and the adjectives used to describe the heroes’ bows in the *Iliad*, as opposed to those of the masses, fit the composite bow better than the self-bow.\(^ {27}\) Composite bows, first developed in the Asian steppes in the Early Neolithic Period,\(^ {28}\) were more powerful for their size than self-bows and required substantially more training to use. Steppe nomads initially used them because they wanted a powerful bow usable on horseback that did not depend on finding high-quality wood; more settled peoples adopted them either out of prudence when they saw their effectiveness or when they were conquered by the steppe peoples.\(^ {29}\) In Greece, however, the composite bow never truly caught on—Greece was, after all, never in close contact with the Asian steppes—but self-bows were used at least for hunting and composite bows were used in Crete.\(^ {30}\) Their prominent appearance in the Homeric epics, including in the hands of Greek heroes indicates that awareness and appreciation of the composite bow did penetrate to the mainland.

\(^{25}\) Lorimer, 1950, 290-93.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 299.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 289.  
\(^{28}\) Rausing, 148. A self-bow is made from a single piece of wood, while a composite bow is made from laminated wood, horn, and animal sinew. The advantages of the composite bow are greater power and greater compactness, allowing it to be used more easily on horseback. Its main disadvantage is that it takes substantially longer to manufacture.  
\(^{29}\) Cf. O’Connell, chp. 6.  
\(^{30}\) Lorimer, 1950, 277-78, 300; Cohen, 699-700.
The question is thus, how did the self-bow and the composite bow relate to each other in the Greek mind? In the *Iliad*, there are instances in which mass archery shifts the course of the battle—for instance, it forces Ajax to retreat behind his shield while he defends the Greek ships (16.102-8)—but these are few. It is possible that these unnamed warriors are deploying composite bows, but unlikely. Composite bows from Asia would have been very expensive and the training necessary to use them not widely available; in the *Odyssey*, the suitors struggle to string Odysseus’s composite bow because they do not know the proper technique. It seems, rather, that most archers used self-bows, while only the truly elite archers, those with the wealth and dedication necessary to acquire and learn how to effectively use it, could employ the composite bow. Additionally, if one could use a composite bow, one’s effectiveness in battle was tremendously increased by the superior range and power of one’s weapon.

With all the aforementioned factors in mind, it is now possible to piece together a coherent picture of how the bow was understood in a hypothetical Homeric society. In the first place, there is no single concept of “the bow.” There are, in fact, multiple kinds of bows used for by different kinds of people in different fashions. The self-bow was readily available and training in its use was a normal part of aristocratic, and perhaps even non-aristocratic, education. This bow was generally used for hunting wild animals or exhibiting one’s general martial prowess. A man especially skilled with the bow might take it with him to war, and so might one lacking the wealth to purchase heavier armor and weapons or a shield. In battle, a Bowman would take cover behind his companions’ shields or behind terrain features and take whatever shots he could. Arrows fired at a heavily-armored champion were unlikely to kill him, but they could distract

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31 Lorimer, 1950, 292.
him, force him to take cover, or even slightly wound him. Against men with equipment similar to his own his shafts would be more effective. These archers could alter the course of a battle, but only by chance or in large numbers, and when they lacked shielded defenders, they were completely at the mercy of enemy champions.

There were some men, however, men of wealth and social standing, who could afford, or whose fathers could afford, to acquire foreign composite bows through trade. Provided these men also had talent and interest, they could train with these bows and even carry them into battle. Their relatively high social standing gave these men a position of prominence in their armies: they brought with them warriorcompanions and had the equipment and training to fight as both archers and as heavily-armed champions as the case might dictate. If they chose to fight as archers, they could be extremely effective, killing enemies, even heavily-armored ones, with incredibly rapidity. However, as effective at killing as they were, they still depended on shield-bearers for defense. This meant that they did not dare to close with other champions as long as they fought as archers. In this sense, they did not live up to the heroic archetype of one who meets his enemy on fair ground and proves his superiority in hand-to-hand fighting; the archer is a less glamorous figure than the champion. In battle, he is one of the most valuable participants, but in song, he is not going to be as highly honored.

This interpretation explains all of the various perspectives and portrayals of the bow in the Homeric epics. On the one hand, an effective archer with a composite bow is highly respected, but on the other, he does not win for himself quite the same glory as one who fights hand-to-hand without the same need for shield-bearing companions. Different bows will be used by people with not only differing abilities but also differing
degrees of wealth, which determines their standing in a heroic army. The “upper-crust” archers will be more respected because they can kill their peers in armor; the “lower-class” archers will be scorned because they are helpless before their betters.

I want to draw particular attention to the importance of differentiation in the foregoing account. All manner of differences between people are relevant to their treatment—personal wealth, fighting skill, one’s companions and equipment—and yet they are all considered part of the same society. Their world is tiered and ordered, though a person’s place in the world is not absolutely fixed and personal excellence or failing can change one’s status. It is also a world of strife\textsuperscript{32}: the orderliness of Homeric society does not mean that the outcome of every interaction is predetermined or that every dispute is resolved peacefully. Nor do the epic poems portray this world as even remotely harmonious or perfect. On the contrary, the full spectrum of human vice is on display, and just as there is the strength and prowess of Ajax and Diomedes, the patriotism of Hector, the faithfulness of Penelope, and the cunning, resourcefulness, and self-discipline of Odysseus, there is also the greed of Agamemnon, the effeminacy of Paris, the gluttony and wantonness of the suitors, and the destructive wrath of Achilles. Somehow, the Greeks of Homer’s day managed to reconcile the idea of an ordered universe with one also in constant flux, including both aspects in their myths. However they managed this, I will argue that the Greeks eventually abandoned this differentiated worldview, opting instead for one which emphasized social identity and uniformity. Now I will turn to political and military history to show how the Archaic period evolved into the Classical.

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Empedocles who posited two cosmic forces: Eros, “love,” and Eris, “strife.” When Eros grows strong, the world becomes more unified and uniform; when Eris waxes, more differentiated and discordant.
3. “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!”

As Heraclitus’ dictum goes, “Everything flows; nothing abides,” and ancient Greek politics certainly bear out this observation. In this section, I will provide an overview of political changes in Archaic Greece. I will show how kingships evolved into aristocratic republics, how the rise of the tyrants involved the introduction of demotism into Greek political thinking, and how the post-tyrannical oligarchies and democracies embodied demotism in their constitutions. Additionally, I will discuss military developments during this period and focus in particular on how the bow was used in Greek warfare into the early fourth century B.C.

Aristotle provides the basic outline for the political and military developments of this period that all subsequent historians either support or critique. By his account, Greek society was originally ruled by kings, as portrayed by Homer. Eventually, however, the kings came to be considered too powerful and so were replaced by what we might call aristocratic republics with regular courts and magistracies. Aristocrats used their ownership of land, superior military prowess, and control of public apparatus to maintain their supremacy over the mass of the people. The mass of the people did not appreciate this arrangement and so agitated for reform. The tyrants took advantage of this internal disorder to seize supreme power for themselves, often driving out or dispossessing the aristocrats to reward their popular supporters. The tyrants ruled for a time, but their lawless oppression was overthrown by bold heroes along with the

33 Demotism is the idea that the people should rule, as distinguished from democracy, a political arrangement in which the people actually do rule.
34 Politics 1297b16-28; Polybius has a similar and more detailed exposition (VI.7-9). With the dearth of information from the Archaic period, it is necessary to assume that Aristotle at least got the general sequence of events right, even if his interpretation is not completely accurate.
Spartans, who specialized in driving out tyrants. In general tyrannies were replaced by oligarchies, but Athens became a democracy.\(^{35}\)

Alongside this political evolution went military developments. The aristocrats fought as cavalry, which gave them a substantial edge over common soldiers, but the development of hoplites shifted the balance of power to the middling-orders who could afford hoplite gear. The increasing military power of these plebeians was a major factor in their political rise, as the defense and aggrandizement of the city no longer lay in the hands of the nobles but with the populace.

George Grote, in his nineteenth-century twelve-volume *History of Greece* (1846-56), gave his own interpretation to events, portraying the political history of Greece as an alternation between two principles of rule: on the one hand, an aristocratic one based on hierarchy and involving concentration of power into a small number of hands; on the other, a democratic one based on equality and involving the dispersion of power among large numbers of people. Thus, Grote attributed the development of republics to the rise of hoplites, the tyrants appear as aristocratic reactionaries, and then finally the hoplites overthrow the tyrants and establish their oligarchies and democracies.\(^{36}\) Later scholars have elaborated and complicated this picture—Andrewes hypothesized that the hoplites might have been involved in the rise of the tyrants; Lorimer explained in detail how the hoplite, and specifically the hoplite phalanx and mass combat, undermined aristocratic rule; Hanson has developed ideas concerning a rising middle class during the Archaic

\(^{35}\) The overthrow of the tyrants by the Spartans and the installation of oligarchies are attested by Thucydides (1.18-19).

\(^{36}\) Grote, II and III.
period—but the basic picture painted by Aristotle in the fourth century remains the orthodoxy.

In Homer, there are traces of public authority, though nothing so well defined as a state. Many nobles might be referred to as “kings,” but in each region there is one person who holds authority in certain spheres, particularly receiving visitors from abroad and conducting war. They also conduct certain religious rites on behalf of the community, and under the aristocratic republics one of the major officials, often still called “king,” continued to be responsible for these sacrifices. The kings and other nobles might also act as judges in legal cases, though again, in the republics these judicial functions were handled by elected magistrates.

As a sign of changing politics, under the aristocratic republics there were documents issued that we might call written constitutions. Most notably, at Sparta there was the Great Rhetra, which required regular meetings of a public assembly and established the Gerousia, a council of elected noblemen with probouleutic powers. There were also less foundational laws promulgated, some restricting the discretion of magistrates and others stipulating penalties for certain crimes. If the aristocrats were in uncontested control, there would be no reason for them to issue limitations on their own powers. Someone was demanding these changes, someone who was not aristocratic but was in a position to force the aristocrats to grant them some concessions.

That someone was the body of citizens who composed the assemblies. In the Homeric epics, there are popular meetings to settle matters of public concern: Achilles

37 Lorimer, 1947; Andrewes, 1956; Hanson, 1995.
38 Yamagata, 1997.
39 Hesiod notably complains of how these noble judges gave rulings (W&D 248-51, 263-66).
40 Plutarch, Lycurgus 6.
41 Cf. Hammer, 37-38. Draco’s laws would fall into this category.
summons one in the *Iliad* to address the outbreak of plague, and Telemachus summons one in the *Odyssey* to attempt to win support in throwing the suitors out of his house, and assemblies of armies continued throughout the historical period well into Xenophon’s and Alexander’s times.\(^{42}\) In the beginning these assemblies consisted of landowners and perhaps others who might be in a position to contribute to the military power of the community. Additionally, during the late Dark Age and Archaic period, commercial activity throughout the Aegean increased. In the Homeric epics, merchants are deprecated as greedy and unathletic, but they did know how to increase their own wealth, eventually rivaling some of the older noble families. *Thetes*, landless laborers, and foreign slaves were not considered citizens even though they lived in the territory and under the jurisdiction of the state.

Long excluded from government affairs, the citizens demanded reform. Limitations on the powers of magistrates and codification of the laws gave aristocrats less freedom to abuse their superior authority; giving the assemblies the power to refuse nobles’ proposals prevented the aristocrats from taking a state to war without the consent of the people who would fight in the war. Also, since the aristocrats controlled the populace through debt, often charging extremely high interest rates, cancellation of debts was one plank in the reform movement’s platform. So also was redistribution of land, since the aristocrats held property titles for much of the available farmland. Another issue was reform of voting and eligibility for office.\(^{43}\) In Sparta, for instance, votes were settled by the volume of the shouts in favor of candidates or proposals, a practice which,

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\(^{42}\) *Iliad* I.54; *Odyssey* II.6-8.  
\(^{43}\) Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, II.
especially in closely contested votes, gave great discretion to the presiding officials.\footnote{Cartledge, 2009, 78.}
Also, non-aristocrats, even wealthy ones, were excluded from public office. All of these issues were elements of the reform movements in the late Dark Age and Archaic period.

In Sparta, the citizens’ reform movement was successful. Around the end of the seventh century and during the early part of the sixth, Spartan society was dramatically reshaped. Land was confiscated by the state and redistributed to citizens in equal shares. The two kings and the Gerousia retained substantial power, the kings especially when on campaign abroad, but sovereignty was shifted to the ephors. Originally, the ephors appear to have been priests responsible for observing the sky for omens; when in power, they did so every eight years in order to judge whether the kings should retain their power. Indeed, the kings were so weakened that every month they were required to swear to uphold the laws while the ephors swore to not dissolve the kingship for as long as they did so. For their part, the ephors were elected from the whole body of the citizenry for one-year terms. Additionally, the Spartans instituted a system of public education for citizens’ children, the \textit{agoge}, in order to instill patriotism. The Spartan citizens called themselves \textit{homoioi}, “peers,” and prided themselves on the large measure of equality between them.\footnote{Cf. Andrewes, 66-76; Cartledge, 1987, 14-18; idem., 2009, 70-84; Lazenby, 63-73.}

Sparta’s success resulted from two major factors: the conquest of Messenia, and the development of hoplite warfare. Sparta had conquered the region of Messenia during the early seventh century and, after two lengthy and difficult wars, enserfed the population, then called helots, who paid half of their produce to their Spartan masters. Thus, when land redistribution occurred, not only did the Spartan state have an enormous
amount, but the surplus of land likely made redistribution more palatable to the aristocrats, since it was primarily their estates in Messenia rather than Laconia that would be redistributed. In order to defeat the Messenians, the Spartans adopted and eventually perfected hoplite warfare, which I will discuss more below. All the Spartan citizens trained and equipped themselves as hoplites, elite heavy infantry. The cavalry was abolished and converted into the kings’ royal guard, so that nobles had no special distinction in war. Messenian estates paid for the Spartans’ gear and allowed them the leisure to train constantly so that the Spartan army was the best-drilled force in Greece; this fact would repeatedly prove crucial in battle for over two centuries.

An example of an ultimately unsuccessful reform movement is Athens. There Solon, a reform-minded but moderate aristocrat, attempted to mollify the citizenry with key concessions—reforming magistracies and elections and cancelling debts—but refused to employ the drastic measures of the Spartan reformers. There was a measure of land-redistribution, but the citizens did not get as much as they had wanted.46 Still, the leading citizens, the most wealthy, were allowed to participate on an officially equal footing with the aristocrats. Athenian politics then factionalized along regional lines rather than class: the people of the city vying with the people of the plain.47

In his poems, Solon defends himself, claiming that he had sailed the ship of state safely between the Scylla of aristocratic oppression and the Charybdis of popular revolution.48 In particular, he emphasizes that he was genuinely public-spirited and not interested in personal aggrandizement, unlike various other men who took advantage of

46 Solon’s friends are said to have profited from his arrangements: they learned (somehow) that he was going to cancel debts and so borrowed large sums to buy land.
47 Herodotus 1.59.3.
48 Aristotle, Constitution of Athens, XII.
the citizens’ discontent to seize absolute power for themselves. These men were called tyrants, a title initially synonymous with king, but by this time kings were public magistrates with limited duties, so a new title was needed. Arising in large commercial centers, the tyrants were generally aristocrats who offered the citizens reform and revenge against the other nobles.\textsuperscript{49} Their rising to power almost invariably involved drastic violence against their enemies, and once they were established, they ruled with popular support backed up with mercenary bodyguards.

Contemporaneous with the rise of the tyrants was the development of the hoplite phalanx. The earliest discovered \textit{hoplon}, the round shield that gave hoplites their name, comes from a grave in Argos dating to around 700 B.C.\textsuperscript{50} The distinguishing feature of the \textit{hoplon} was that it was strapped to the arm rather than held by the hand alone. This made the \textit{hoplon} less mobile than earlier shields but allowed it to be made heavier and so offer better protection. By the time of Tyrtaeus in the mid-to-late seventh century, Greek infantry forces had split into two sections: heavy infantry fighting in a close formation and light infantry behind and on the flanks.\textsuperscript{51} Fighting in close formation made the greater protection offered by a heavier shield more useful than the greater mobility of a lighter one. An army that equipped its heavy infantry with \textit{hopla} would thus be superior to one that did not.

In the early part of the seventh century, Pheidon of Argos achieved supremacy over much of the Peloponnese. Pheidon is counted by Aristotle as the first of the tyrants: although he was officially king of Argos, in his day the king was largely a figurehead for an aristocratic government, but he used his personal popularity and military success to

\textsuperscript{49} Aristotle, \textit{Politics} 1310b14-16; Fleck and Hanssen, 2013.

\textsuperscript{50} Snodgrass, 1999, 41.

\textsuperscript{51} Van Wees, 2004, 62.
free himself from the control of his fellow nobles.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Politics} 1310b26-28.} The Argive army of his day is described as the best in Greece but “linen-wearing” rather than bronze-armored.\footnote{Parke and Wormell, 1.} Additionally, Pheidon engaged in land reform along similar lines to what Sparta would eventually establish: the number of citizens was to remain constant and they were each to have the same amount of land. It thus appears that even if Pheidon did not invent the hoplite phalanx, he at least established the political dominance of hoplites, under his tyranny of course, at Argos and used their superiority in battle to establish Argos’ dominance in foreign affairs.

According to orthodoxy, the rise of the tyrants was merely an epiphenomenon to the development of hoplite warfare, but there are reasons to think that the tyrants influenced its evolution. In Homer the word “phalanx” refers to a mobile body of companions fighting alongside a hero.\footnote{Van Wees, 1986, 295.} In the Classical period, “phalanx” refers to a mass-formation of heavy infantry fighting in line on behalf of a city. The tyrants provide a bridge between these two usages. During the Archaic period, the tyrants were the most prolific employers of mercenaries in Greece and kept large retinues in heroic fashion: their phalanxes thus constituted the largest single unit of soldiers at a state’s disposal.\footnote{Trundle, 5.} The tyrants also decided matters of war and peace and led the army in battle, at least in name if not personally. The entire army was thus, in a sense, one phalanx belonging to the tyrant himself. The tyrants also help explain how the hoplite style spread so uniformly throughout Greece and why the hoplites adopted heavy bronze armor only to progressively slough it off through the Classical period. Though Pheidon’s troops...
triumphed with only linen armor, other tyrants equipped their bodyguards not only for
defense but also to display their wealth. Later, when there were no tyrants trying to
overawe their subjects, pragmatic concerns such as cost and mobility encouraged hoplites
to adopt lighter armor.

In a few rare cases, tyrannies could last for more than three generations, but all of
them inevitably fell. The newly enfranchised plutocrats and some remaining aristocrats
eventually grew tired of having the tyrant sitting above them, and the original tyrants’
descendants grew soft or otherwise incapable of holding on to power as a consequence of
no longer having to fight for it. The stage was thus set for coups and revolutions. The
Spartans, having successfully reformed and avoided tyranny, made a special point of
aiding these anti-tyrannical movements, replacing the tyrants with oligarchies and, most
importantly for Sparta, replacing the Argive-led confederacy of states with a system of
alliances later known as the Peloponnesian League.56 The Spartans were more concerned
with a state’s relationship with Sparta than with its form of government—as evidenced by
their attempt to restore the Peisistratids around 504 B.C.—but they were content to ride
the ideological wave. The Spartans thus acquired a reputation as champions of liberty
against oppression, which they confirmed with their resistance to the Persians and again
by challenging the Athenian empire.

In Athens, things went somewhat differently. There the Alcmaeonidai, one of the
dominant noble families, expelled the Peisistratids with Spartan assistance. However,
when the Spartans tried to impose an oligarchic constitution, the head of the
Alcmaeonidai, Cleisthenes, resisted, expelling the troops the Spartans had stationed in

56 Thucydides, 1.18.1.
Athens as a garrison, and establishing a democratic constitution. He was able to do this because of the unique path of reform Athens had taken in the previous century. One of Solon’s reforms was to grant *thetes* the franchise, albeit with limited political rights, and Peisistratus headed a party specifically made up of political outsiders, the “over-the-hills men,” so the Athenian citizen body was relatively expansive and had a history of inclusion. Athenian democracy was simply an application of the same principles applied by Sparta and other anti-tyrannical parties to the peculiarities of the Athenian situation. It also helped to maintain Athens’ independence from Sparta: since the Spartans were unfamiliar with democracy, they considered it alien and threatening and so opposed it. The Spartans and Athenians were still willing to cooperate against external threats, but Athens was free to create its own hegemony in the Aegean.

Though Grote saw in the tyrants the expression of an autocratic principle of government, in fact, aside from the tyrant himself, the primary beneficiaries were the citizenry at large, while aristocratic elites suffered. Under the best documented tyranny, that of the Peisistratids at Athens, the tyrants left originally republican institutions intact and expanded state services to better serve people neglected by the aristocratic regime. The tyrants were not particularly ideological, however, and used every justification for their position they could lay hands on: racial tensions, economics, public works, religion, success in war, mutual support networks, and overwhelming wealth and prestige. Their primary ideological legacy was to destroy the legitimacy of traditional justifications for aristocratic rule. After the tyrants, birth and religion could not support a

59 Cleisthenes of Sicyon was reputed to have given the Dorian tribes unflattering names, and other tyrants also appear to have exploited racial divisions, at least within the Peloponnese. Cf. Andrewes, 54-65.
state. Wealth was a crucial factor, but it could only justify an individual person’s prominence within the state; the state itself had to rest on a demotic foundation.

Even in the oligarchies there existed assemblies of the whole citizenry who could reject proposals. The difference between the early Athenian democracy and the various Greek oligarchies was that the Athenian *thetes* were considered citizens and the Council did not possess probouleutic power, placing the balance of power in the hands of the Assembly. It was not until the mid-fifth century that the Athenians made the Assembly autonomous, breaking the last vestiges of aristocratic rule and placing power in the hands of orators who could sway the masses. Both the oligarchies and the democracies were demotic regimes. Under both, the citizenry elected magistrates as well as having the final say on major issues. Both positioned themselves ideologically opposite to both tyranny and rule by mere right of birth.\(^6^0\) Democracy and oligarchy only came into conflict with each other when Athens established its Aegean empire and made itself a rival to Sparta in the middle of the fifth century. Demotism was thus firmly established throughout Greece at the dawn of the Classical period.

In military affairs, there was a tendency toward uniformity throughout the Archaic period. The rise of the hoplite phalanx vastly reduced the prestige of cavalry service: it was in fact more prestigious to be able to serve in the cavalry but choose to fight in the infantry.\(^6^1\) Lighter-armored infantry faded to the background as well—but it did not by any means disappear. Light infantry would not receive its due in military practice until the Peloponnesian War, when Demosthenes and Cleon defeated the Spartan garrison on Sphacteria with a combined-arms assault, but it is discernably present throughout the fifth

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\(^{60}\) Herodotus, 7.102-104.

century, when the hoplite supposedly held his helmet high. What changed from the heroic worldview, in which light troops were deprecated but still included as part of the fighting army, was emphasis: where Homer shone the spotlight on individual heroes while still recognizing the importance of other warriors, historians and orators during the Classical period focused entirely on the entire citizen-hoplite phalanx.

The extra emphasis placed on the hoplite at the expense of light infantry had a significant impact on how the Greeks understood the bow. By the Classical period, the bow was no longer appreciated as a Greek weapon, even though Greeks continued to use it. Instead, it was regarded as the weapon of foreigners, particularly of the Scythians and of the Persians. Athens in fact established a force of Scythian bowmen to serve as policemen in the mid-fifth century. In artistic representations, archers are generally portrayed as foreigners during this period.62 Most notably, the hero Heracles’ prowess as an archer becomes less significant—at Olympia, even those exploits in which he was traditionally depicted using a bow are changed.

However, the bow does not completely vanish from the field of the Greek mind. In the next section, I will examine the works of the great Athenian tragedians to elucidate just how the bow survived as a symbol. Aeschylus simply reiterates the common understanding of the bow, but Sophocles and Euripides reappropriate it to suit their own purposes. What they do not do, however, is reconnect the bow with its role in real life.

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62 Cohen, 702.
4. Missing the Mark

There are times when art imitates life, but most of the time there is a clear distinction between what is real and what is constructed. In this section, I will turn back from history to literature and examine the bow in Classical Greek drama and show how the great Tragedians did not fully appreciate the bow as it was used in the real world around them. Aeschylus portrays the bow merely as the weapon of foreigners; Sophocles treats the bow as an element of the received Homeric tradition and an important symbol, but he does not update it to reflect new realities; Euripides attempts a defense of the bow as part of his criticism of contemporary ideals, but, like Sophocles, he fails to connect the bow with its contemporary uses.

Aeschylus, in his surviving plays, hardly includes mention of the bow at all. The Persians, performed in 472 B.C., is the only one to include the bow, and it primarily drives home idea of the bow as a foreigner’s weapon. The Persians are associated with archery ten times throughout the drama—even the god Ares is referred to as an archer when supporting the Persians (86). By contrast, the Greeks are described using bows only once: confident of victory at Salamis, Xerxes had positioned troops on a small island in order to kill Greeks washed ashore after the battle; these Persian soldiers were killed by men hurling stones and archers (460). Instead, Aeschylus describes the Greeks as douriklotois, a Homeric term meaning “famed for the spear” (85). The famous “Dorian spear” is mentioned by the shade of Darius as that which conquers the Persians at Plataea (817). The clearest expression of the Greeks as spearmen comes in dialogue between the Chorus of Persian nobles and the Persian Queen-Mother: “Chorus: Are bow-plucked shafts their armament?/Queen: Pikes wielded-close and shielded panoplies” (238-39;
Seth G. Benardete, trans.). The dichotomy of bow-shooting Persians and spear-wielding Greeks is not absolute, but it is clearly present.

Aeschylus follows a conventional pattern of the times in his portrayal of the bow. As mentioned above, artistic representations of archers presented them generally as foreigners. Herodotus also emphasizes how the Persians use bows while the Greeks do not. Two mentions come in his account of the battle of Thermopylae: the best known is the claim that the Persian arrows are so numerous that they will blot out the sun (7.226), but there is also his report of the Persians deploying archers against the Phocian hoplites during their flanking maneuver (7.218). Herodotus even provides a different version of the slaughter of the Persian soldiers after Salamis in which the work is done by hoplites rather than light-infantry (8.95). He gives mention to the light infantry at Plataea, but the place of honor clearly goes to the hoplites (9.28-30).

Sophocles takes a more adventurous tack with his portrayal of the bow. In the Ajax, the titular character’s brother Teucer (Teukros) argues with Menelaus in favor of the burial of his brother. Menelaus, filled with rage at being thwarted, makes a snide remark about Teucer being overly-proud for a mere archer. Teucer retorts, and two more lines of stichomythia follow before the subject changes (1120-24). The matter of Teucer being an archer is never raised again throughout the rest of the play. From this exchange it is possible to deduce that archers were looked down upon but also might stick up for themselves and nothing more.63 Sophocles wrote an entire play devoted to Teucer, but unfortunately it only survives in fragments.

The bow features quite prominently in the Philoctetes, played in 409 B.C., but as a historical inheritance rather than a part of contemporary life. The titular character,

63 Cf. Papadopoulou, 144.
equipped with the bow of Heracles, has been stranded on an island by the Greeks, but a prophecy has recently come to light to the effect that the bow of Heracles must be brought to Troy in order for the Greeks to capture the city. The Greeks task Odysseus with retrieving the bow, and he brings Achilles’ son Neoptolemus along to help. The bow is thus an important plot device: the goal of its retrieval motivates the entire action of the play.

Symbolically, the bow is also of great importance, and there are many different interpretations for it one might adopt. For one, it is a divine talisman, connecting the human world with that of the gods, having been originally given to Heracles by Apollo, and it represents the power of Man to subdue nature, since it was used so frequently in Heracles’ adventures.64 For another, it is a representation of close friendship: Heracles gave the bow to Philoctetes as thanks for Philoctetes lighting Heracles’ funeral pyre after he was poisoned by the robe of Nessus, thus ending Heracles’ earthly agony and facilitating his apotheosis.65 There is additionally a pun throughout the play between the word for bow, biōs, and the word for life, bión.66: for Philoctetes, the bow is his means of preserving his existence by hunting and also a representation of his very soul.67 The unifying feature of all these possible interpretations is that Philoctetes and his bow are inextricably intertwined: Philoctetes is an archer and his bow is part of his identity, which is in accord with inherited mythology.

In the epic background of the play, the bow is also the instrument with which Philoctetes is destined to kill Paris, avenging Achilles, whom Paris killed with a poisoned

64 Harsh, 412.
65 Gill, 138.
66 Henry, 3-4.
67 Gill, 138-39; Norman, 84-85.
From this it might seem possible to deduce some conclusions: perhaps Achilles being killed by Paris and with a poisoned arrow and by Paris means that he is cheated of his glory by a coward wielding a coward’s weapon, and perhaps Philoctetes slaying Paris is a kind of poetic justice. There is, however, insufficient surviving evidence to make this leap. There is, in fact, another version of Achilles’ death which involves Apollo loosing the deadly arrow while in the form of Paris.\footnote{Hyginus, \textit{Fabulae} 107.} In this version, far from being cheated of his rightful glory, Achilles is crushed by the overwhelming power of a god armed with the deadliest of weapons. Additionally, the story of how Philoctetes killed Paris is lost to us.\footnote{Apollodorus (\textit{Epitome}, V.8) records the event, but he gives no description.} This means that we know nothing about the precise setting of their confrontation, their actions, any words they might have exchanged, how the situation was built up, what other characters might have said or thought, and so on. In short, everything necessary to say anything about the meaning of the bow vis-à-vis the original story of Philoctetes is lost to us.

The bow in the \textit{Philoctetes} is best characterized as a MacGuffin, an object, person, or other element that motivates the story but otherwise serves no useful purpose in the plot.\footnote{The word is most commonly used in connection with Alfred Hitchcock’s movies and with mystery or thriller stories, but the device is of ancient origin: the Golden Fleece, is one example, as are various monsters that Heracles must capture or kill. In Hitchcock, a MacGuffin is “‘nothing at all,’ an empty place, a pure pretext for setting the action in motion” (Zizek, 182), but this is not its only usage. For instance, in the opening of the \textit{Iliad}, “the plague is a MacGuffin, a visible form for Apollo’s anger with Agamemnon and the Achaean army, but the anger matters more than the plague itself” (Scodel, 90). The website TVTropes has collected a variety of instances of the MacGuffin across genres and provides a relatively precise definition: something is a MacGuffin if and only if it (a) is replaceable with something else for purposes of the plot and (b) it does nothing, either because it has no useful function or simply because no one makes use of it. A MacGuffin does not have to be without symbolic significance, however, only plot significance.} The primary defining feature of a MacGuffin is that it can be replaced with some other item without noticeably changing the story, and the bow of Heracles does meet this criterion. If instead Philoctetes had owned, say, the club of Heracles, and the
prophecy motivating Odysseus and Neoptolemus had said that the Greeks needed to bring the club of Heracles to Troy, the story could follow the same plot and sequence of events. Some elements would not fit quite as well—for instance, there is archery imagery throughout the play\textsuperscript{71}, and the idea of a wounded man with a club, even a magical club, fending off Odysseus, let alone the armies of Agamemnon and Menelaus, is moderately ridiculous—but a precise and perfect fit is not necessary for a replacement. Additionally, replacing the bow with a club does not fit with the mythic background which clearly states that Philoctetes possessed the bow of Heracles and that the bow of Heracles was needed for the Greeks to capture Troy. To give Philoctetes Heracles’ club instead of his bow would have interfered with the audience’s suspension of disbelief, but the internal consistency of the play itself would be unchanged. Thus, the bow of Heracles fits the bill as a MacGuffin.

At no point in the play is the bow actually used to shoot an arrow: in one instance, Philoctetes is apparently about to shoot Odysseus, but Neoptolemus holds him back (1299-1302). This is not difficult to explain—shooting arrows on stage would have been exceedingly dangerous—but it limits the significance of the bow to the action of the play. In fact, leaving aside this one instance, the only thing anyone actually does with the bow is to hold it or to hand it to another character. The bow does serve as a threat in Philoctetes’ hands—as long as Philoctetes possesses it, it is not safe for Odysseus to approach him\textsuperscript{72}—and Philoctetes offers to use the bow to defend Neoptolemus from the wrath of the Atreidai (1406). This second instance should not be taken too seriously: Neoptolemus is reluctant to rescue Philoctetes for fear of retribution, and Philoctetes

\textsuperscript{71} Harsh, 412.
\textsuperscript{72} Gellie, 146.
offers to aid in defending his homeland, an offer which Neoptolemus does not feel he can refuse even though one man with a bow is totally inadequate for the task. The bow is portrayed as a powerful and deadly weapon, at least in trained hands, but there are two mitigating factors. The first is its replaceability, discussed above. The second is that it is a magical bow, the bow of Heracles: the club of Heracles would have been portrayed as powerful even though no one used clubs in battle anymore.

Relating the play to contemporary events and discussions is thus the only remaining possibility of giving the bow some meaning as a bow, but even this approach fails. In order to do this, I must go beyond simply cataloguing events in and interpretations of the play and settle on an interpretation which I regard as correct. I propose to follow the interpretation initially elaborated by Alasdair MacIntyre and refined by Joseph Biancalana on the grounds that not only does it include a plausible connection to contemporary Athenian society and politics but it also wrestles with moral questions in a way related to the Homeric epics.

According to MacIntyre, the Homeric epics combine two distinct moral perspectives: that based on the virtues of excellence and that based on the virtues of achievement. In short, the morality of excellence admonishes one to be good, to be a brave and skilled warrior, and to deal with people fairly and honestly; the morality of achievement encourages the pursuit of power, wealth, and prestige without regard for the nobility of the means. Put another way, the morality of achievement is concerned with winning while the morality of excellence concerns how one plays. Different characters in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* incline more toward one morality or the other—Odysseus, for instance, exemplifying the morality of achievement and Hector personifying the morality.

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73 MacIntyre, 12-46.
of excellence—but no virtuous hero is completely lacking in either kind of virtue, and while there is tension between the two schemes—for example, Agamemnon, who is exalted on account of his wealth and power, butting heads with Achilles, esteemed for his bravery and skill—they still coexist in relative harmony. Eventually, however, these two approaches to morality came into conflict as people in real-world situations had to choose between what is excellent and what brings achievement.  

By the later part of the fifth century, the gap between the morality of achievement and the morality of excellence had grown wide, and thinkers of all stripes tried to address this gap. Pericles proposed that the two moralities could be harmonized in the Athenian empire: Athenian culture was the most excellent, so those measures which exalted Athens most highly in terms of wealth and power also furthered the goals of excellence. Thucydides was more pessimistic: he believed that the potential scope of the virtues of excellence was limited by the willingness of the powerful, who possessed and exercised the virtues of achievement, to allow them. Plato, writing in the fourth century, claimed that only the virtues of excellence were truly worth seeking.

Sophocles followed his own path. The experience of the Peloponnesian War, its atrocities and its disasters, had discredited Athens’s claim to excellence, so the basis of Pericles’ synthesis no longer held. As far as Sophocles could see, the only possibility of restoring the two moralities to harmony was an act of the gods, which is to say that in practice he had no idea of how to actually achieve his dream. In the *Philoctetes*, Odysseus represents the morality of achievement, while Philoctetes stands in for the

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74 A good example of this conflict would be in Aristides’ assessment of Themistocles’ suggestion to destroy the allied arsenal after the Persians had been expelled, placing many Greek city-states at the Athenians’ mercy: that nothing would be more profitable or more dishonorable (Plutarch, *Themistocles* XX.1-2).

75 MacIntyre, 47-87.
morality of excellence. Neither is portrayed in a completely positive light—Odysseus is Machiavellian and deceptive, while Philoctetes is filled with spite—so though Sophocles has his own sympathies, he does not intend to present one as clearly superior to the other. Neoptolemus initially has no idea that he is caught in the middle of a struggle between moralities. Eventually, however, Neoptolemus plants his standard on the side of excellence. His actions, taking Philoctetes home with him, defy the ancient myth, and so in order to restore the moral harmony of the epics, Heracles steps into the story as a deus ex machina, thereby reconciling achievement and excellence in the magical way that only the gods can.

Biancalana furthers MacIntyre’s interpretation, associating each morality with one of the competing social classes in Athens: the landowning aristocracy with the morality of excellence and the commercially-minded democrats with the morality of achievement. Thus, in the aftermath of the oligarchic coup of 411 B.C., Sophocles pleads for the two competing political factions to put aside their differences and work for the common good.

Even according to this political reading, the bow has no significance in relation to the real world. If Philoctetes is the representative of the nobility, then the fact that he is an archer is rather out-of-place, considering that even the wealthy aristocrats fought as hoplites in the fifth century. The democratic-leaning elites represented by Odysseus fought in the same way, and only the lower-class thetes and mercenaries fighting as light infantry used the bow in war. Sophocles is not attempting to champion the mass of the people by proving that even bows and bowmen have value. In short, Philoctetes is an

76 Biancalana, 160.
archer because that is what the myth said and Sophocles did not have a good enough reason to change that part.

The *Heracles* of Euripides, put on sometime between 424 and 414 B.C., does provide a thorough treatment of the bow but ultimately fails in the same way as the *Philoctetes*. Early on in the play there is an exchange between Lycus, who has recently murdered the king of Thebes and usurped his throne, and Amphitryon, Heracles’ mortal father. Lycus heaps scorn on Heracles’ claims to divine paternity and rationalizes his labors, making them appear much less impressive than the traditional stories allege. He then continues his diatribe by deprecating Heracles’ as a mere hunter of beasts and a bowman rather than a hoplite, calling him

> a man who, coward in everything else
> made his reputation fighting beasts,
> who never buckled shield upon his arm,
> never came near a spear, but held a bow,
> the coward’s weapon, handy to run away[.]
> The bow is no proof of manly courage;
> No, your real man stands firm in the ranks
> and dares to face the gash the spear may make. (157-64; William Arrowsmith, trans.)

Lycus’ indictment of Heracles as a bowman has two items, the first not dealing specifically with archery and the second taking aim directly at the bowman as such. On the one hand, many of Heracles’ exploits involved combating animals or other wild creatures such as the centaurs, using a bow just as any sensible hunter would, as opposed to contesting with men, which is the true test of manly courage. A more charitable interpretation of the myths would say that, once, the world was wild and dangerous, and mankind (i.e. the Greeks) was threatened by natural perils and uncivilized peoples. And unto this, Heracles, who slew the wild beasts and drove off the barbarians, making the
world (i.e. Greece) safe for civilization. Only after Heracles had performed his great deeds was the ethic of civilized warfare espoused by Lycus even conceivable, let alone practicable. By attacking Heracles as a mere beast-hunter, along with his deprecation of Heracles’ paternity and the fantastic nature of his accomplishments, Lycus is undermining the legitimacy of the hereditary aristocracy, which traced its lineage back from the gods and extolled the fabulous deeds of its human ancestors as justification for its social and political prominence.

Lycus’ second charge is that a man should prove his bravery by placing himself in the direct path of harm. Since an archer fights his enemy at a distance and is able to flee, he is not as brave as a hoplite who fights his enemy face-to-face. Here Lycus is being somewhat unfair. As we have seen in the *Iliad*, archers did place themselves in the thick of fighting. In contemporary warfare, light-infantry archers had to get very close to their targets in order to hit them: the Spartans in fact had developed anti-skirmisher tactics for their hoplites that involved the front lines of their phalanx running out at and killing light-infantry who came to close.77 As tempting as it might be to attempt to associate this line of invective with some kind of social commentary, Lycus seems to be only expressing opinions much like those of Diomedes discussed earlier. Like any other spear- or sword-fighter would, he does not appreciate being pelted with arrows to which he can give no reply by archers whom he has a hard time catching when he chases after them.78

In sum, Lycus is a modern man, a hoplite and a rationalist. He does not respect the hereditary aristocrats, evidenced not only by his words but by his usurpation of the throne of Thebes, or any other “divine” pronouncements or prohibitions. At the same

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77 Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.4.16-17.
78 Cf, the Spartans who survived Sphacteria, who remarked “spindles [arrows]… would be worth a great deal if they could pick out brave men from cowards” (Thucydides 4.40.2, Rex Warner, trans.).
time, he is not entirely without scruples or standards, allowing Megara to dress her children appropriately for death and advocating the hoplite style of warfare. It might seem strange for a tyrant, as Lycus undoubtedly is, to lend his voice in support of the community-oriented way of war conducted by hoplites, but as we have seen above, tyrants acquired their power by rallying the populace against the elites and were important for the development of hoplite warfare. Lycus simply fits the bill as a historically accurate tyrannical figure.

Amphitryon replies to Lycus contrapuntally but largely ineffectually. He leaves the question of Heracles’ paternity to Zeus to answer and refers to other divine or supernatural beings as witnesses to Heracles’ courage, in effect ignoring Lycus’ accusations. As for the bow, Amphitryon has an extended and substantive rebuttal:

You sneer at that wise invention, the bow.
Listen to me and learn what wisdom is.
Your spearsman is the slave of his weapons;
unless his comrades in the ranks fight well,
then he dies, killed by their cowardice;
and once his spear, his sole defense, is smashed,
he has no means of warding death away.
But the man whose hands know how to aim the bow,
holds the one best weapon: a thousand arrows shot,
he still has more to guard himself from death.
He stands far off, shooting foes who see
only the wound the unseen arrow plows,
while he himself, his body unexposed,
lies screened and safe. This is best in war:
to preserve yourself and hurt your foe
unless he stands secure, beyond your range. (188-203, Arrowsmith, trans.)

Much as with his early arguments, Amphitryon refuses to argue on Lycus’ own terms.
Against Lycus’ charge that the archer is a coward for steering clear of danger,
Amphitryon makes no reply at all. Instead, he accepts Lycus’ characterization of the archer’s situation as accurate and argues, in essence, that avoiding danger is quite
praiseworthy. Amphitryon’s entire claim arises from this different conception of
efficiency, emphasizing self-defense and self-preservation over reliance on one’s
comrades. Against the hoplite ethic focusing on the community, Amphitryon proposes an
individualistic ethic for lone warriors. Unlike with Lycus’, there is not a contemporary
social class that would clearly identify with Amphitryon’s speech: the light infantry of
Euripides’ and his audience’s day had to fight in large groups and use unit-based tactics,
and the Homeric heroes apparently fighting all on their own were from days long past. If
there is any political meaning to Euripides’ play, at least so far as the bow is concerned, it
does not involve conflicts of interest between the social classes or the military relevance
of archers.79

When he appears, Heracles seems to live down to Lycus’ characterization of him
as a skulking and solitary hunter. Although he protests that he cares not who knows he
has returned to Thebes, he enters the city secretly and alone (595-98). He then, at the
advice of Amphitryon, lures Lycus into his house and slughters him like an animal
captured in a trap (603, 729). Suddenly, Madness strikes him unseen, much as an archer
would80, and he uses his bow again to massacre his family. When Heracles comes to his
senses, he finds himself in much the same position as his victims: grievously wounded
from a mysterious source with no possibility of reply.

In the play as a whole, then, archery and the bow seem highly ambiguous. On the
one hand, as Papadopoulou claims, they at least once had their place in the project of
civilizing the world; on the other, when imported into civilized life, the mysterious and
hidden nature of their application is terrifying and out-of-place. The bow is properly a

79 Cf. Foley, 170.
80 Cf. Papadopoulou, 149; Padilla, 7.
weapon to be turned against wild animals; its use against people, however useful and effective it might be, makes its wielder a dangerous and unpredictable man.\textsuperscript{81}

Perhaps, at least. The earthly bow is not what makes Heracles go mad but a divine and figurative one. Also, when Heracles goes mad, he does so in a specific fashion, believing that he is in the house of Eurystheus instead of his own and that he should slay his enemy’s children.\textsuperscript{82} Under those conditions, it is completely acceptable for him to use whatever weapons he needs to slay his enemies—he in fact uses his club instead of his bow against one of his sons (992). The inversion accomplished by Heracles’ madness is not him going from good Bowman to evil one but from defender to slaughterer of his family. The use of the bow is of course inappropriate in this latter role, but so is the use of the spear, the sword, the club, or any other weapon.

Later on, when Heracles is about to leave for Athens with Theseus, he contemplates his bow and arrows and considers whether or not to take them with him (1377-85). He weighs two concerns: on the one hand, they were the instruments with which he killed his family; on the other, he needs them to defend himself. But nothing stands in his way if he should want to pick up different weapons; Theseus surely has spares. The reason Heracles’ own bow and arrows are significant to him is that they were his weapons on his labors; they are a part of Heracles’ own identity. That fact explains his use of them during his madness more than any symbolism: Heracles is a Bowman; that is part of his character. Euripides could presumably have emphasized a different element of Heracles’ panoply, but the bow allows him to add a layer to the thematic

\textsuperscript{81} Papadopoulou, 149-50.

\textsuperscript{82} This aspect of Heracles’ madness is problematic, since he has just saved his own sons from unjust execution by Lycus but thinks it reasonable to murder Eurystheus’ sons. It has nothing to do with the bow, however.
reversal brought on by his madness: at first Heracles takes the advantages of archery for his own benefit, but then the gods turn those same advantages against him.

One aspect of Heracles’ character as an archer does change over the course of the play. At first, he exemplifies an individualistic and self-reliant ethic disparaged by Lycus, but by the end, he is willing to accept aid from his friend Theseus and join the community at Athens, affirming the values of a hoplite. Herein lies the political significance of the *Heracles*, as Foley puts it, “the *Heracles* implicitly demonstrates that the ideal of the archaic hero and his individualistic heroism need not conflict with Athenian political ideals, provided that the hero submits to the city, retains self-control, and remains marginal to its higher political life.”

It might be tempting to imagine some way this political message relates to contemporary archery. Perhaps, after their visible success in the Peloponnesian War, the lower-class citizens who fought as light infantry began to demand greater respect from their superiors. It is possible that Euripides intends to remind them to respect their place and to continue to subordinate themselves to the government largely controlled by their betters.

Unfortunately, such an interpretation fails. There is no evidence that the masses were agitating especially much on account of their performance in war. It also makes little sense to associate them with Heracles. After all, it is Lycus, the tyrant and rationalist, who is portrayed as the most modern; Heracles is more of a solitary hunter, something not frequently found anymore in late fifth-century Athens. A more likely target of Euripides’ admonitions is the notoriously over-the-top character of Alcibiades and others like him or perhaps the oligarchical faction who wished to overthrow the

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83 175.
democracy. Both of these groups, however, fought as hoplites, so just like Sophocles, Euripides fails to use the dramatic element of the bow to discuss the role of the bow in real life.

It is apparent, then, that none of the great Tragedians chose to update the dramatic portrayal of the bow to match contemporary practices. Instead, the bow was something alien, either in space or in time, used by foreigners or by men from bygone days. At this point, I will wrap up this analysis with a review and a look toward some implications.
5. “Now We Go Our Separate Ways...”

In my discussion of the bow I have covered a great many different subjects, ranging from Dark Age poetry to ancient military practice and dramatic performance. Now I will review the content of the earlier sections, explain how they all fit together, and draw additional conclusions.

In my first argumentative section, I looked at how archers and the bow are portrayed in the *Iliad*, beginning with Diomedes’ speech against Paris in Book XI. I demonstrated how Homer is in fact quite positive in his portrayal of the bow, although there are also notable negative elements. I then argued against an analytical reading of these two conflicting depictions, suggesting that there is an intelligible reading of the social world presented by Homer that contains both of these ideas. Finally, I explained this reading: that Homeric society differentiates bowmen by armament, skill, and manner of fighting and assigns differing values to different kinds of archers.

My historical section surveyed the history of Archaic Greece, describing the transition from monarchies eventually to oligarchies and democracies. I argued that this development in the form of government went hand in hand with changes in ideology, going from an aristocratic society to a demotic one. Additionally, I elaborated on the development of the hoplite, demonstrating that the practice and ideology of warfare came to value increasing uniformity in armament and manner of fighting, and in particular that the bow dropped out of the Greeks’ self-conception.

Finally, in my second argumentative section, I confirmed that the portrayals of the bow were not keeping up with its practical applications, examining the way in which it appears in the works of the three great Athenian tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and
Euripides. I showed how Aeschylus simply followed conventional attitudes in depicting the bow as the weapon of foreigners. With respect to Sophocles, I argued that although the bow appears prominently and has great symbolic meaning in the *Philoctetes*, it is anachronistic and unrelated to the bow as it was used in real life in the late fifth century B.C. I made a similar argument with respect to Euripides’ *Heracles*, demonstrating that while the bow is important within the play, it is not connected to the bow in contemporary Greek warfare.

These arguments complicate the notion that ancient Greek society simply viewed the bow as an inferior kind of weapon. In fact, Greek ideas varied through time and deprecation of archers and archery only reaches its height in the Classical period. Homer was in fact quite positive in his portrayal of the bow; the Classical Tragedians did not understand the bow and so kept it at arm’s length.
Bibliography


