

“Isolation Through Autochthony in Classical Athens”

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Abstract

In this paper, by employing a holistic approach, taking into consideration the literary, iconographic and topographic evidence — along with the historical and ideological context of the classical period — I will examine how the ideology of autochthony (a major ideology of the classical period) isolated the Athenians from the rest of the Greeks. Special emphasis will be given to the autochthonous aspects of the heroes Erechtheus, Erichthonios and Kekrops, all of them connected to autochthony, though myth and iconography.

Erechtheus, Erichthonios and Kekrops

Erechtheus is the oldest of the Athenian heroes who received cult on the Acropolis, attested both in the Iliad and the Odyssey.¹ In the Iliad (2.546-551), Homer connects the hero with the city of Athens and the goddess Athena — the major and poliadic goddess — who is mentioned as his nurse. Furthermore, Erechtheus is presented as an autochthonous hero — born from the Earth — and additionally his cultic status and persona are emphasized, given that he receives sacrifices of bulls and rams. In the Odyssey (7.80-81), the testimony on the hero is more laconic. No matter of that, Homer has Athena entering the temple of Erechtheus and links the cults of Athena and Erechtheus. Scholars that focus on the cultic evidence, believe that Erechtheus is predominantly presented as a god in Homer.² Others that focus on the autochthonous nature of the hero (and his birth from the Earth), claim that Erechtheus is mostly presented as a hero-king, rather than a god.³ It seems that Homer’s Erechtheus has both divine and heroic attributes.⁴

¹ The bibliography on Erechtheus is massive. The most important recent studies remain those of Kron 1976, 32-83; *LIMC* IV (1988), s. v. Erechtheus 923-951; Meyer 2017, 244-267; Mitsios 2018, 102-172; forthcoming a).

² Rosivach 1987, 295; Papachatzis 1989, 176. Mikalson (1976, 146 n. 21), based on the interpretation of the verb «ἰλάονται», believes that the sacrifices were made for a god, rather than a hero.

³ Hadzisteliou-Price 1973, 136.

⁴ Kearns (1989, 133) notes that the epithet «μεγαλήτωρ» in Homer is attested mostly for humans, rather than gods. For the presence of Erechtheus in Homer, see also Mitsios 2018, 108-111.

Like Homer, Herodotus (8.55) also presents Erechtheus as an autochthonous hero — calling him the “Earthborn” — and relates him with the cults of the Acropolis and the strife between Athena and Poseidon for the land of Attica. In another passage (8.41.2-3) the historian relates Erechtheus’s sanctuary on the Acropolis with snakes — the chthonic element *par excellence* — further emphasizing the autochthonous nature of the hero.⁵ Lastly, Herodotus (8.44) connects the Athenians of historical times with Erechtheus, stating that they switched their name to Athenians when he became a king.

We may not have any iconographic depiction of Erechtheus in an autochthonous context — and in fact his appearance in art is very limited — but his connection to autochthony cannot be questioned, given that he is presented as an autochthonous and “Earthborn” hero, already by the time of Homer.⁶

Erichthonios is another Athenian hero connected to the ideology of autochthony. In fact, he has been interpreted by some scholars as a doublet of Erechtheus.⁷ The first account on Erichthonios may derive from two fragments of Pindar (*fr.* 253 Sn-M; *Danais fr.* 2 K), who names Erichthonios as the son of Earth and Hephaestus.⁸ The first secure testimony on the hero derives from Euripides (*Ion* 20-25), who calls Erichthonios “the Earthborn” and speaks of his nurture by the daughters of Kekrops (Aglauros, Herse and Pandrosos), stating that two snakes guarded the chest in which he was placed. The fullest account on the hero derives from Apollodorus (3.14.6), who also calls Erichthonios “the Earthborn” and attests that he was the founder of the Panathenaia, the major festival of the city of Athens. According to his testimony, Athena wiped off with wool (*ἔριον*) the semen of Hephaistos who chased her (trying to rape her) and then Erichthonios was born from the Earth. Several other ancient authors — including Isocrates (*Panathenaicus* 126) and Pausanias (1.2.6; 1.14.6) — mention that Erichthonios was “Earthborn”, reaffirming the autochthonous nature of the hero. In fact, his relation to autochthony is indicated by the very etymology of his name. According to

⁵ Most recently on the aspects and symbolisms of snakes, see Mitsios 2023, 34-36.

⁶ For the limited iconography of Erechtheus, see LIMC IV (1988) s.v. Erechtheus nos 1-80.

⁷ Kron 1976, 37-39; Mikalson 1976; Parker 1987, 200-201; Kearns 1989, 110-115, 160-161; Dowden 1992, 86; Gantz 1993, 233-237; Brulé 1996, 44-46; Hurwit 1999, 33; Blok 2009a, 259; Frame 2009, 458; Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 88; Connelly 2014, 123.

⁸ The testimonies are cited from Harpocration s. v. *autochthones* and may refer to Erechtheus, instead of Erichthonios, as Kearns (1989, 161) states. For the issue, see also Shear 2016, 157 n. 53, as well as Frame 2009, 463 n. 238 for the difficulties on the dating of the *Danaid* of Pindar.

scholars, the name of Erichthonios derives from the words *erion*/ἐρίον (meaning=wool) and *chthon*/χθών (meaning=Earth).⁹ Given that, the origin of his name is in complete agreement with the mythological episode, attested by Apollodorus, where Athena wipes off with the wool (*erion*) — in disgust — the semen of Hephaestus that fell on the *earth* (*chthon*).

Just like his relevant figure of Erechtheus, Erichthonios is also connected to snakes. Pausanias (1.24.7) identifies the serpent inside the shield of the statue of Athena Parthenos (made by Pheidias) with Erichthonios (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Detail of the snake (identified with Erichthonios) inside the shield of Athena Statue of Athena Parthenos at Nashville.

⁹ For bibliography on the etymology of Erichthonios, see Connelly 2014, 133 n. 27.

In contrast to Erechtheus's iconography, we have plethora of depictions of Erichthonios birth in vase painting. The first depiction of Erichthonios is shown on a black-figure lekythos from Palermo, dated to 490-480 B.C (Figure 2).¹⁰



Figure 2. Palermo, Mormino Collection 769.

Erichthonios on a black-figure lekythos from Palermo

The same lekythos also attests the first depiction of Kekrops, the autochthonous and *diphyes*/mixanthropic hero, who was worshipped on the area of Erechtheion, further emphasizing the message of autochthony. The majority of Erichthonios depictions in vase painting show him in the “*anodos*” scenes, where *Ge* (Earth) delivers the baby hero to Athena, pointing to his autochthonous nature.¹¹ On a red-figure kylix, dating from 430 B.C. and

¹⁰ Palermo Mormino Collection 769. *BAPD* 270.

¹¹ For the birth of Erichthonios and the “*anodos*” scenes see *LIMC* IV s. v. Erechtheus nos 1-28; Mitsios 2018, 142-145 (with emphasis on vases from the Acropolis of Athens).

attributed to the Codrus Painter, *Ge* delivers the baby Erichthonios to Athena, in the presence of Kekrops and his daughters (Figure 3).¹²



Figure 3. Berlin, Antikenmuseen F 2537

The birth of Erichthonios on a red-figure kylix of the Codrus Painter

Kekrops was another important Athenian hero who received cult on the Acropolis (on the wider area of the Erechtheion) and was connected to autochthony.¹³ The hero first appears in Herodotus (8.44) and is connected with the prehistoric phase of the city. Similarly, Thucydides (2.15.1) relates Kekrops with the early kings of Attica. In fact, it has been suggested that the etymology of the name of Kekrops should be sought in prehistoric times.¹⁴

The first account on the *diphyes* and mixanthropic nature of Kekrops comes from Euripides (*Ion* 1163-1164), who talks about “Kekrops’s serpent coils”, indicating his *diphyes*/mixanthropic nature, being half human and half snake. Apollodorus (3.14.1) is the fullest account on Kekrops and presents him as an autochthonous and *diphyes*/mixanthropic hero, the first king of Athens.

¹² Berlin, Antikenmuseen F 2537. *BAPD* 217211.

¹³ For extensive studies on Kekrops, see Kron 1976, 84-103; *LIMC* VI (1992) s.v. Kekrops, 1084- 1091; Gourmelen 2004; Mitsios 2018, 167-211; 2023; 2024; forthcoming a); forthcoming b).

¹⁴ Kron 1976, 86, n. 385.

In art, Kekrops is depicted as a *diphyes* and mixanthropic creature, with his upper part in human and his lower in snake shape. Most iconographic depictions of the hero — only with few exceptions — show him as half human and half snake, emphasizing his autochthonous nature.¹⁵ His autochthony is also indicated by the absence of any information regarding his birth and genealogical line, indicating that Kekrops was a product of the Earth itself. His first iconographic depiction is attested on a black-figure lekythos from Palermo, dated to 490/480 B.C. (Figure 4).¹⁶ As stated above, on the other side of the lekythos, the figure of Erichthonios — the other major autochthonous hero — is shown, a fact that stresses out the message of autochthony on the iconography of the vase. The connection between the birth of the “Earthborn” Erichthonios and the *diphyes* and mixanthropic figure of Kekrops is attested in other vases, such as the kylix of Codrus which we have examined above (see Figure. 3). In fact, in ancient Greek art and myth, the figure of Kekrops was considered the autochthonous hero *par excellence* when it comes to iconography (being *diphyes*, half human and half snake), while Erichthonios was considered the autochthonous hero *par excellence* when it comes to myth (being “Earthborn”).

¹⁵ For the iconographic treatment of Kekrops, see *LIMC* VI (1992), s.v. Kekrops nos 1-42; Mitsios 2018, 200-213 (with emphasis on iconographic depictions deriving from the Acropolis of Athens).

¹⁶ Palermo Mormino Collection 769. *BAPD* 270.



Figure 4. Palermo, Mormino Collection 769.

Kekrops on a black-figure lekythos from Palermo

Sophocles (*Ajax* 202) and Euripides (*Ion* 202) call the Athenians “Erechtheids” and Pindar (*Isthmionicus* 2.19) refers to the Athenians under the same name, relating the people of Athens with the hero Erechtheus. Similarly, Herodotus (8.44), connects the Athenians of prehistoric times to Kekrops, mentioning that the Athenians during Kekrops’s reign were called “Kekropidai”. From these sources we note that both the heroes Erechtheus and Kekrops are highly relevant to the Athenians of the classical period, who considered themselves their descendants/offspring.¹⁷

¹⁷ Most recently, for the contribution of Erechtheus and Kekrops to the shaping of Athenian identity, see Mitsios forthcoming a).

Autochthony in Classical Athens

But what was the importance of autochthony — a major ideology of the Athenians of the classical period — and how did it isolate the Athenians from the rest of the Greeks?

The word *autochthon* (αὐτόχθων) derives from the words αὐτός + χθών, meaning “the one from the same land” and has the same meaning as *gegenes* (γενετής) (see Plato, *Sophist* 247c; 248b).¹⁸ The word *autochthon* is first attested in Aeschylus (*Suppliant Women* 250) and is used regularly thereafter. *Autochthon* (αὐτόχθων) is opposite to an immigrant/outsider (ἐπὶλυσ) and mixed populations (μιγάδες).²⁰

Several different ancient authors associate autochthony with the city of Athens. Hellanikus (*FGrH* F 27) attests that “the Athenians were autochthonous, born from the Attic land”. Thucydides claims that “the Athenians dwelt in the country without a break in the succession from generation to generation” (2.36.1) and that “the same people have always inhabited Attica” (1.2.5). Plato states that “the Athenians praised themselves for coming out of soil” (*Menexenus* 237b) and Lysias (2.17) attests that “the Athenians were born of the soil and possessed in one and the same country their mother and their fatherland”. Plato (*Menexenus* 237b) and Hyperides (6.7) associate Athenian autochthony with nobility of birth and piety (εὐγένεια) and given that, even the lowest Athenian citizen was considered superior when compared to a non-Athenian one.

The ideology of Athenian autochthony has been studied by scholars from several different angles. Autochthony has been studied in relation to Athenian myths,²¹ funerary speeches,²² Attic drama (especially the works of Euripides),²³ iconography,²⁴ the works of

¹⁸ Rosivach 1987, 297.

¹⁹ As attested in Herodotus (4. 197. 2; 8. 73. 1-2); Isocrates (4. 63; 12. 124); Plato (*Menexenus* 237b).

²⁰ As attested in Isocrates (4.24; 12.124).

²¹ Montanari 1981; Rosivach 1987.

²² Loraux 1981.

²³ Saxonhouse 1986; Meltzer 2006; Calame 2011.

²⁴ Shapiro 1998.

Herodotus²⁵ and Plato (especially his work *Menexenus*),²⁶ gender studies,²⁷ and Perikles's Citizenship Laws of 451/450 B.C.²⁸

In fact, the ideology of autochthony is almost contemporary with Perikles's Citizenship Laws.²⁹ Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution* 26.3) and Plutarch (*Life of Perikles* 37.3) attest that according to the Citizenship Laws of Perikles, the Athenian citizenship was granted when both parents were of Athenian background, while previously the Athenian heritage of the father was enough for the award of the citizenship. Whether the Citizenship Laws of Perikles were influenced by the ideology of autochthony or if they were the ones that played a role on its formation, remains a hotly debated subject and scholars argue for both cases.³⁰ Given the iconographic evidence we have examined above and the fact that in most of the cases myths predate historical facts, I believe that the ideology of autochthony predated Perikles's Citizenship Laws.³¹

The ideology of autochthony has long been connected to the funerary speeches. In the funerary speech for the war dead of the Battle of Potidaea (*CEG 10*), it is stated that the “*aether* took the soul of the war dead, while the Earth took their bodies”.³² It has been stated by scholars that in the funerary speech of Perikles, the Athenian war dead returned to the Earth, where they first belonged, being autochthonous and products of the Attic land.³³ The tragedies of Euripides — especially the works *Erechtheus* and *Ion* — are related to the ideology of autochthony and have already been connected by scholars with the funerary speeches.³⁴

²⁵ Loraux 2000; Thomas 2000.

²⁶ Loraux 2000; Pappas 2011.

²⁷ Nimis 2007; Räuchle 2015.

²⁸ Blok 2009b; Pelling 2009.

²⁹ For Perikles' Citizenship Laws, see Patterson 1981; Walters 1983; Boegehold 1994; French 1994; Podlecki 1998; Blok 2009b; Kennedy 2013, 53-55.

³⁰ Ogden (1996, 66) and Blok (2009a, 271-2), argue that the ideology of autochthony contributed to the formation of Perikles' Citizenship Laws, while Hall 2002 (204-205), believes the opposite.

³¹ The lekythos from Palermo with the depiction of both Kekrops and Erichthonios is dating from 490/480 B.C., suggesting that the autochthonous figures were shown at least in the iconography of that time, predating Perikles' Citizenship Laws.

³² Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 79.

³³ Nimis 2007, 399.

³⁴ Lacore 1983; Francois 2004.

In terms of the ideology of autochthony, it has been suggested that the Athenians had no memory of any migration and they believed that they have always lived in the same land.³⁵ Likewise their mythological heroes Erechtheus, Erichthonios and Kekrops they believed that they were born and sprung from the Earth itself, being “products” of the Attic land. The continuous, undisturbed and unstopped habitation of the city of Athens by the Athenians connected every Athenian citizen with the ideology of autochthony.³⁶ It was this specific ideology that differentiated and isolated the Athenians from their political rivals, the Spartans, who were of Dorian origin and were considered ἐπὶ λυδῆς/ outsiders, migrated from elsewhere.

Herodotus (5.72), in his description of the Spartan king Kleomenes entrance to the shrine of Athena on the Acropolis, attests that the priestess of Athena Polias said the following words: “Go back, Lacedaemonian stranger, and do not enter the holy place since it is not lawful that Dorians should pass in here”. In Herodotus’s testimony the Spartan king is treated as an outsider and ἔπηνλυσ, not allowed to participate in Athenian cult, as it was taking place on the Acropolis, the religious centre of the city of Athens. We see from the words of the priestess, that autochthony and Athenian/Ionian origin are the key elements for participating in Athenian cult and the major religious activities of the city.

Concluding Remarks

The study of the Athenians and the city of Athens under the context of autochthony, helps us to better understand Athenian civilization. The interpretation of the word “Greekness” more like a word meaning opposition to barbarity, rather than a word for a united nation by the Athenians,³⁷ placed the ideology of autochthony in the centre of the Athenian beliefs of the classical period.³⁸ The ideology of autochthony was crucial for the identity of the city of Athens and was connected to democracy, the democratic values, the equality between the Athenian citizens and the abolishment of tyranny.³⁹ Therefore, we see that autochthony differentiated and isolated the Athenians from the rest of the Greek states. In fact, in some

³⁵ Rosivach 1987, 296; Osborne 2010, 250.

³⁶ Pappas 2011, 78.

³⁷ Hornblower (2008, 37-44), mentions that the word “Greekness” in classical times basically means opposition to barbarity.

³⁸ On identity and ethnicity, see Gruen 2013.

³⁹ Montanari 1981; Rosivach 1987, 301; Valdés Guía 2008; Lambert 2010, 143; Osborne 2010, 106.

(extreme) cases, their differentiation and isolation of the Athenians took the form of snobbism, making the Athenians feeling superior compared to the rest of the Greeks.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For the ideology of autochthony as a reference for Athenian superiority and snobbism against the rest of the Greeks, see Parker 1987, 195; Shapiro 1998, 151.

Abbreviations

BAPD = Beazley Archive Pottery Database. <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk>.

CEG: P.A. Hansen, *Carmina epigraphica graeca saeculorum VIII-V a. Chr. n.*, Berolini et Novi Eboraci.

FGrH: F. Jacoby, *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* Berlin.

IG: M. Fraenkel, *Inscriptiones graecae*. Berlin.

LIMC: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zürich and Munich.

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