The sacred space on the Athenian Acropolis was in many ways as anomalous as the state that controlled it. By the end of the fifth century, it ranked with the most prestigious Panhellenic sanctuaries for the opulence of its buildings and the sheer quantity of its votive deposits. Yet for all its impressive grandiloquence, this was very much a local space. Alongside the monuments of Delphi or Olympia, with their expression of numerous different voices and perspectives, the material culture of the classical Acropolis seems narrowly monophonic and distinctly parochial. Its buildings and votives were dedicated for the most part by citizens of the host state, and there was little need to heed the sensibilities of others. Here, the Athenians’ vision of past and present could be freely articulated without disturbance or challenge as they volubly celebrated their gods, their heroes, and, in no small measure, themselves.

The story of the site’s evolution, from modest Mycenean citadel to perhaps the most bombastic and self-regarding sanctuary in the Greek world, is still imperfectly understood. But it is becoming increasingly clear that an important chapter in this story was written in the years 508–490 B.C. To help us understand why, we should first briefly review earlier developments.1
FROM HABITATION TO SANCTUARY

For all but the last century or so of the long period stretching from the end of the Bronze Age to the Periclean era, the material assemblage on the Acropolis offered little hint of the grandeur to come. Granted, the citadel’s formidable Cyclopean walls, erected in the later thirteenth century, would survive largely intact down to the time of the Persian sack. But the Mycenean palace complex had ceased to function by the end of the Bronze Age, and it would be at least five hundred years before another truly monumental structure arose within the fortified enclosure.

The palace complex itself, of which only the merest suggestion remains, was not so much destroyed as abandoned. Parlous evidence from the time indicates that it was joined on the citadel by a modest settlement that flourished briefly during the late Mycenean period. But with the return of inhumation to the site (for the first time since the Middle Bronze Age) in the Submycenean era (ca. 1100–1000), the Acropolis entered its own dark age. Except for a few scraps of pottery, the material record is almost completely blank for the next two and a half centuries. And while later disturbances may help to explain the relative absence of visible activity from the Protogeometric period to the Middle Geometric period (ca. 1000–750), it seems safe to conclude that the landmark shift in the function of the Acropolis, from fortified settlement to uninhabited sanctuary, was still some way from completion.2

This conclusion gains further strength from the abrupt manner in which the near silence is broken. By earlier standards, the Acropolis of the Late Geometric period (ca. 750–700) is a hive of activity, and the manifestly votive character of the numerous deposits confirms that the site now functioned as a sanctuary of some significance. Whatever forces lay behind this development were not confined to central Athens. Elsewhere in Attica, the same period saw new sanctuaries spring up at Eleusis, Brauron, and the Academy, while a sudden rise in cult activity is also generally visible further afield in Greece, especially at the emerging Panhellenic sanctuaries. But among the Attic sites, none comes close to matching the number and wealth of the items that were now dedicated on the Acropolis.

To judge from the huge quantity of sherds recovered, the fine local vases of this period were a particularly popular form of votive. More expensive items are also attested, not least some early bronze figurines and around seventy fragments from the legs and handles of tripods. However, not until the seventh century do we find evidence for building activity of any kind. This comes in
the form of a pair of rather primitive limestone column bases found at the site of the later Old Athena Temple, several decorated architectural terracottas, an inscribed marble roof tile, and what appears to be a bronze disk akroterion. Even if all these items did not belong to one building, it seems reasonable to infer that we have among them remains of the first substantial sacred structure on the Acropolis, most probably a modest temple of Athena Polias, the city’s patron goddess.3

Curiously, this significant development seems to have taken place at a time of general cultural recession. Though the range of votives visible on the seventh-century Acropolis is not unlike that of the Late Geometric period, the quantity declines sharply. The entire century has yielded barely a hundred sherds and around ten times fewer tripod fragments than we saw in the eighth century. But it is also clear that these lower numbers do not reflect any decline in the relative standing of the sanctuary, since there is a marked decrease all over Attica in the numbers of settlements, active cemeteries, and sanctuary deposits during this same period.

When the end of this recession finally came, it did so in dramatic fashion. The monumentalization of the Acropolis sanctuary in the second quarter of the sixth century (referred to in chapter 2) marks the second major efflorescence on the citadel since the collapse of the Mycenaean system. But only now are intimations of its future grandeur readily apparent. A key element in this transformation was the construction of a ramp—some eighty meters in length—that led up to the west entrance and would have greatly improved access to the summit. Possibly, the old Bronze Age gateway was also adapted to allow for greater traffic in and out of the sanctuary. And sometime between 580 and 560, the crown of the old Mycenaean bastion that abutted the southern flank of the ramp was restored, and the site was converted into a small precinct for Athena Nike, complete with a cult statue and an altar set up by one Patrokles.4

Meanwhile, the area within the colossal circuit wall was undergoing its own transformation. Most conspicuously, the primitive seventh-century temple of Athena Polias was now in all likelihood overshadowed by a new structure erected on the south side of the site (figs. 12–13). The “Bluebeard temple” is generally restored as a peripteral structure in the Doric order, about forty meters long and twenty meters wide. Its more distinctive features included the use of both marble and poros metope panels (some of them decorated) and two brightly painted pedimental compositions, both of which were centered on lion-and-bull groups—one perhaps flanked by large serpent figures, the other flanked by a Heracles-Triton (?) group in the left angle and the mysterious, eponymous “Bluebeard” figure in the right.5
Other structures were also added at this time. Though no suitable foundations have been found, the superstructural remains are quite substantial. They include terracotta materials from as many as five different buildings from ca. 570–550, a range of Doric architectural members, and a series of small, poros pedimental groups, which depict such themes as Heracles’ battle with the Lernaean Hydra and the same hero’s later apotheosis. According to the consensus view, at least some of these remains belonged to the buildings referred to in a later inscription as oikêmata (“chambers”), which perhaps functioned as the treasuries of prominent Athenian families.6

Consonant with all of this building activity, the sanctuary also experienced an abrupt increase in the quantity and extravagance of its votive deposits. Most notable are the life-size marble statues that now appear on the Acropolis for the first time. These include not only the well-known male figure, the Moschophoros, or “calf-bearer,” but also the earliest examples in the site’s impressive sequence of korai. Among other highlights of the inventory from this period are a marble frontal four-horse chariot group of unknown function, vases decorated by such master painters as Sophilos and Cleitias, and a bronze Athena statuette of a Palladion or Promakhos type, the first in what would be another distinguished series.7

As others have observed, this monumentalization of the sanctuary must relate in some way to the foundation of the Great Panathenaia in ca. 566 B.C. Just as the festival in many ways aped the format of the new Panhellenic games recently founded at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea, so it seems the Acropolis, the ritual locus for the Panathenaia, now aspired to the condition of a Panhellenic sanctuary.8

But we probably should not imagine that the newfound grandeur of the site was the product of any coordinated public policy. Significantly, when officials made dedications at this time, they did so as individuals, not in the name of any larger, more impersonal body, such as “the demos” or “the Athenians.”9 As noted in chapter 2, what fueled the sudden transformation of the sanctuary in ca. 575–550 was not so much collective planning and deliberation as competition. Like the sites at Olympia and Delphi, the Acropolis had provided since the eighth century a suitably public context for the competitive display of elite credentials; on the Acropolis, though, the competition was confined exclusively to the great families of Athens.10

For reasons also noted in chapter 2, it is surely probable that the Boutadai, the family that controlled the cult of Athena Polias, played a decisive role in the foundation of the Great Panathenaia. If so, it would be surprising if they were not also responsible for a number of other developments that may relate to the
festival, like the ramp, the new Nike sanctuary, and at least one of the oikēmata that were erected at this time. But for all their influence, the Boutadai did not monopolize activity in and around the sanctuary. If, again on the Olympic or Delphic model, some or all of the oikēmata were in fact treasuries, they were presumably built and operated not by different states but by several rival families. A case was made in chapter 2 for seeing the “Bluebeard temple” as an Alcmeonid initiative, and the wide variety of names visible on other large monuments suggests that the group of elites vying for public recognition in mid-sixth-century Athens was actually quite extensive. The monumentalization of the Acropolis was largely a result of the energies generated by this spirit of rivalry.

Following the comprehensive victory of Peisistratus at Pallene and the departure of his defeated rivals into exile, one would expect that this competitive spirit diminished appreciably in the years that followed. And a decrease in votive activity would have been all the more likely if, as some have maintained, Peisistratus actually took up residence atop the Acropolis. But there is really no evidence to support this idea, which, in any case, seems to rest on a rather extreme interpretation of the nature of Peisistratus’s authority. As it stands, the material record for the years 546/5–528/7 is not especially impressive, though it is hardly negligible. It may include up to three more oikēmata, along with early examples of the large-scale equestrian monuments with which the site would come to be so associated. A number of korai also appear to belong to the period, including one—the Lyons kore—that may have served as a caryatid. Not one of these items can be securely linked to Peisistratus himself. Assuming that at least some were dedicated by others, we might conclude that the appearance of competitive rivalry, if not perhaps its reality, was maintained during the first phase of the tyranny.

This is even more true of the second phase, when, as the archon list makes clear, the Peisistratids enjoyed better relations with erstwhile rivals like the Alcmeonids and the Philaids. The Acropolis inventory for ca. 530–510 is unprecedented for the number, quality, and variety of its monumental dedications, ranging from the splendid seated Athena, commonly thought to be the work of Endoios seen by Pausanias (1.26.4), to the image of a mounted hippalektryon, a fanciful beast, half horse and half cock, which enjoyed a brief vogue in contemporary vase painting. But no doubt the most definitive dedications of this period were the korai, which enjoyed an unprecedented level of popularity from the time of the “Peplos” kore (ca. 530) on (fig. 14).

At the same time, for all the sanctuary’s prosperity while Athens was under the stewardship of Peisistratus’s sons, members of the preeminent family are conspicuously absent from the register of known dedicators. And if, as
many now think, the Old Athena Temple should be dated to the end of the sixth century, it appears that the citadel saw little building activity between 528/7 and 511/0.14

Indeed, reviewing the evidence for the tyranny as a whole, one is most struck precisely by the absence of any fundamental change in either the appearance or the character of the city’s premier sanctuary. Established patterns of display by the wealthy continued largely undisturbed throughout this period. In fact, there is little suggestion here of any “tyranny” at all, perhaps a further sign that the regime did not, in the end, mark a dramatic departure from the norm. Of course, our failure to identify any Peisistratid buildings or votives hardly proves that there were none, and it remains possible that a temporary decline in votive activity took place in the aftermath of the battle of Pallene. But the flood of dedications after 530 more than compensates for any earlier falloff. Evidently, in so far as the Peisistratids did feel the need to express their preeminence through monuments, these statements were reserved for another public space in a different locale, the open square between the Areopagus and the Eridanos, which they themselves seem to have developed especially for this purpose. In the meantime, as far as we can tell, it was business as usual on the Acropolis.

IMPRINT OF A NEW ORDER

Though the old Peisistratid square underwent a more drastic facelift during the years 508–490, the Acropolis was similarly, if less obtrusively, stamped with the mark of a new political culture at this time. The ravages of the Persian sack would of course deny the period any lasting influence on the physical appearance of the sanctuary. Yet in the years following Cleisthenes’ reforms, there is a discernible shift in the function and resonance of the space, the first visible intimations of that distinctive character we associate with the Acropolis of the high classical period.

At the outset, it should be emphasized that there was little change made at this time to the overall layout of the sanctuary, its perimeter, or its monumental approach. The Nike bastion was apparently left untouched, as were the circuit walls and the gateway. Within the walls, the existing oikēmata were also preserved, though one structure from the Peisistratid era appears to have had its roof replaced.15 Of the innovations, by far the most visible took place on the city’s most hallowed site, the precinct of Athena Polias on the north side of the citadel. Here, the primitive seventh-century temple, venerable witness to the Acropolis exploits of Cylon, Peisistratus, Hippias, and, more recently,
Cleomenes, was finally dismantled after more than a century of service. In its place arose, at some point during the first decade under the new order, a far grander successor, a limestone peripteral Doric structure over forty meters in length, known generally as the Old Athena Temple, or the Arkhaios Neos (fig. 15). Together, the new building and the “Bluebeard temple” would dominate the Acropolis skyline until the early 480s, when the latter was demolished to make way for the ill-fated predecessor of the Parthenon.

The date of the Arkhaios Neos has long been a matter of dispute. Though it has traditionally been assigned to the 520s and seen as a Peisistratid monument, a number of scholars would now date it toward the end of the sixth century. Certain features of the temple, such as the single-step (as opposed to the standard three-step) stylobate and the double-cella plan do seem to recall earlier structures. But other features look forward with equal insistence. With sides of six columns by twelve columns, the building anticipates the broader, shorter proportions of early classical temples. And various technical details, such as the echinus profiles of its capitals and the moldings and painted palmettes of the sima, collectively suggest a date close to 500 B.C.

There is perhaps greater unanimity about the date of the temple’s marble pediments. A growing number of scholars would place the sculptures after 510 B.C., even if some maintain that the temple itself is somewhat earlier. Perhaps the most arresting feature of the pediments is their willful anachronism. In the case of the well-known Gigantomachy (Acrop. 631), Stähler (1972) and, more recently, Moore (1995) make a compelling case that two horse protomes (Acrop. 6454, 15244) should be restored to the center of the composition as part of a two- or four-horse chariot group, with Zeus and perhaps Heracles riding as passengers (fig. 16). If this reconstruction is correct, the result, as Childs (1994, 3) points out, would have seemed distinctly old-fashioned by about 500 B.C., since the frontal chariot motif seems to have reached the peak of its popularity years earlier, in the middle decades of the sixth century.

The archaism of the second pediment, now sadly fragmentary, is even more pronounced. Though stylistic details again favor a date toward the end of the sixth century, the pediment’s central scene, a group of two lions savaging a bull, looks like a direct allusion—perhaps a gesture of homage—to the very similar tableaux in both pediments of the “Bluebeard temple.” More generally, the use of such a highly traditional heraldic format in a temple of this late date can only be, in the words of Childs (1994, 4), “a purposeful repetition of earlier pediments.” This striking conjunction of a traditional pedimental scheme with a more contemporary one reinforces the overall impression of a distinctly Janus-faced building, one that simultaneously anticipates later developments.
and acknowledges considerable debts to the art and architecture of an earlier time.

The more progressive aspect is also visible in what seems to have been another feature of the temple’s decorative scheme. Several marble relief fragments—one featuring a well-preserved charioteer figure—are stylistically contemporary with the Arkhaios Neos and apparently formed part of an extended frieze composition, the earliest known in Athens. The only plausible context for a frieze of this scale (1.21 meters high) at this time would be a temple, and a number of authorities would restore it to the Arkhaios Neos as a decoration above both porches or as a continuous frieze running around the entire cella wall. Either way, this innovative Ionicism on an otherwise orthodox Doric structure obviously looks forward to the Parthenon and may well have directly influenced the Ionic decorative scheme of the later Erechtheion, since at least part of the cella building of the Old Athena Temple probably continued to occupy the site down to the time of its eventual successor.21

Though by some distance the most impressive, the Old Athena Temple was not the only new structure erected on the Acropolis during this period. Roof materials of two (possibly three) other, smaller buildings from the era have survived, along with some poros masonry from a large oikēma known as Building B, which was recovered from the foundations of the classical Propylaia complex. The most striking feature of the latter is its apsidal plan, perhaps suggesting a purposeful archaism.22 Some would also assign the first phase of the entrance courtyard that preceded the later Propylaia to ca. 500, but this date would be inconsistent with the chronological scheme presented here so far.23 However, two other infrastructural projects do seem to have been undertaken at this time. These took the form of a cistern (perhaps around eight meters wide), located under the site of the classical structure known as the Northwest Building, and a small spring house (dedicated to the nymphs and, later, to Pan, Hermes, Aphrodite, and Isis), which was built on the south slope of the Acropolis in the area of the later Asklepieion. Both structures date to the end of the sixth century.24

Three final candidates for inclusion in the list of building initiatives pursued by the new regime in the general area of the citadel should also be mentioned at this point: the temple of Triptolemos in the City Eleusinion, the temple of Dionysus Eleuthereus, and the Acropolis precinct of Artemis Brauronia. All three initiatives relate to the foundation or development of festivals that reinforced linkages between Athens and different parts of Attica, festivals which are usually thought to have been promoted by the Peisistratids. But as we saw in chapter 1, it is not self-evident that the family did in fact aim to promote a
broader sense of national community in the region, and it is even less clear that it was in their best interests to do so. As it happens, a reasonable case can be made that the associated building projects were all pursued after, rather than before, 510 B.C. The pertinent evidence and the evolution of the three festivals concerned are discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

To judge from the extant remains, the Acropolis also saw a huge number of smaller monuments installed during the period. The great majority of these were private offerings. But altogether more historically significant was a small handful of monuments that mark the emergence of an entirely new voice in the sanctuary, the somewhat impersonal, collective voice of the demos-state. For centuries, the site had resounded with competing verbal and visual statements made by families and individuals; only now do we hear the first strains of a voice that rose above sectarian and private interests and purported to speak for all citizens.

The most unusual items in this group were two stelai that referred to events of the recent political past. One, already mentioned in chapter 3, listed the names of Peisistratus’s immediate family and denounced them for their “crime”; the other likewise condemned the actions of the followers of Isagoras. Similarly unprecedented was a third item, the Assembly decree from the late sixth century regulating the conduct of cleruchs on Salamis (IG I3 1; see discussion in chap. 2). Since it would become common practice to display copies of decrees in this particular location, one can safely presume that a number of these public documents would have been visible here by 490.25

But by far the most visually impressive of the new public installations was the extravagant dedication set up to commemorate the Athenian victories over the Thebans and Chalcidians in ca. 506. This thank offering to Athena consisted of a four-horse chariot group in bronze surmounting an engraved plinth; the elegiac quatrain solemnly described how the “sons of the Athenians” [paides Athenaión] successfully subdued the hubris of their opponents with “chains of iron.” To emphasize the point, the actual chains that had held the enemy captives were displayed as a trophy on a wall nearby.26

The considerable body of marble sculpture from the period may yield the remains of other public monuments. Among the more likely candidates is a small Gigantomachy group that appears to have adorned the pediment of a small building and that could well have been influenced by the more substantial version of the battle in the pediment of the Old Athena Temple.27 Meanwhile, a plausible case for a somewhat larger pedimental composition of similar date has now been made by Triandi (1994). Featuring a central Athena figure flanked by riderless horses and a pair of kneeling youths, this group, if correctly
reconstituted, must have belonged to a building of some scale and significance, presumably an otherwise unattested temple erected in ca. 500 B.C.28

It may also be at this juncture that the presence of Theseus began to be felt on the Acropolis. Shapiro (1988) has made a compelling case that the original version of the Marathonian Bull dedication seen by Pausanias (1.27.9–10) was dedicated here by the demesmen of Marathon in the closing years of the sixth century. Working from images of shield devices on vases of the era, Shapiro suggests that the monument took the form of an unaccompanied bull figure, perhaps cast in bronze. Meanwhile, Theseus himself likely makes his debut in Athenian monumental sculpture in a statue group erected around this same time. A nude male torso with traces of the hand of another figure on its left shoulder has long been thought to belong to a group that showed the hero wrestling with one of the foes he encountered on his journey from Troezen to Athens, possibly Prokrustes (fig. 17). Whatever the group’s original context and function, it is hard to imagine that it was part of a private monument. As we shall see in chapter 5, Theseus came to enjoy an extraordinarily exalted position in the years following the reforms of Cleisthenes, as a kind of talisman or symbol of the new pan-Attic order. One therefore suspects that it would have been unacceptably presumptuous at this time for any family or individual to exploit the hero’s likeness in this most public of settings for their own self-aggrandizement.29

This is not to suggest that self-aggrandizing monuments ceased entirely in 508/7. Indeed, established votive practices continued almost seamlessly from the Peisistratid period down into the early fifth century. Some dedications, such as what appear to be a pair of Gigantomachy reliefs, no doubt responded to recent iconographic developments. Others, such as a curious series of seated male statuettes, may reflect larger changes in the political environment.30 But the great majority of private dedications made after 508/7 conform to the preferred types and styles of earlier times.

Equestrian images were still favored by the wealthy, as were korai, a type that would retain its appeal all the way down to the time of the Persian sack. The inventory for the years 508–490 also features a number of distinguished freestanding male figures, including several (of various scales) that resemble the kouros type.31 While more modest items, like vases and relief plaques, are also very much in evidence, it is clear that no steps were taken at this time to restrain the extravagance of private dedications and that the change in political culture did not precipitate any immediate shift in the votive behavior and tastes of the citizen body.

One group of monuments may, however, be a conspicuous exception to this general rule. I refer here to a number of surprisingly lavish items dedicated
by artisans during the period, artifacts that have come to be seen by some as symptoms of the egalitarian ethos supposedly prevalent in Athens around the time of Cleisthenes’ reforms. The offering of a kore to Athena by the likes of a fuller named Simon is certainly a remarkable development. The unexpected intrusion of ordinary citizens into an arena traditionally dominated by the elite must reflect some kind of broader shift in the social environment.

But it is hard to relate this discontinuity in any straightforward way to the political changes of 508/7 B.C. In the first place, it is apparent that this kind of votive behavior among nonelites did not suddenly begin in the last decade of the sixth century; it starts at least a decade earlier. Accordingly, even if the dedications by artisans were now more extravagant than before, the key variable here must have been something other than the political climate. Besides, there is nothing conspicuously egalitarian about wealthy artisans mimicking the self-aggrandizing practices of their social superiors; had a genuine egalitarian ethos prevailed at this time, it surely would have encouraged the elimination of such ostentatious behavior altogether. I do not deny the possibility of any linkage between these nonelite votives and the founding of a new political order in Athens. But instead of seeing one of these developments as a simple consequence of the other, it is probably more realistic to regard them both, in some sense, as products—direct or indirect—of longer-term structural forces. Not the least of these forces, it seems, was the growing affluence and self-assurance of the commercial classes.

STOREHOUSE OF SHARED MEMORY

Would the Acropolis have looked much different in 490 than it did in, say, 510? There were certainly important changes in the fabric of the site, including the replacement of the seventh-century temple of Athena Polias by a more imposing successor, the construction of a handful of smaller buildings and facilities, and the addition of a series of public installations, the very first of their kind. But it is nonetheless clear that the overall appearance of the citadel, unlike that of the Agora, was not drastically altered during the period. How, then, does the new regime reveal itself in the material culture of the late archaic Acropolis?

Again, the accent seems to have been very much on continuity. Despite the historical significance of the new public monuments, they would still have been physically overshadowed by the sheer mass of private dedications—some of them highly expensive—that filled the sanctuary much as before. And while this continuity might be seen as the result more of inertia than of any conscious choice, evidence from the one large-scale building erected during these years suggests otherwise.
If the architectural details, the proportions, and the innovative Ionicism of the Arkhaios Neos reveal it to be a building very much of its time (perhaps even a little ahead of its time), other features, especially the heraldic lion-and-bull pediment, have to be considered deliberate archaisms, the intention presumably being to blend the temple seamlessly into its timeworn setting. This combination of retro design features and a general reluctance to disturb the existing fabric of the surroundings is of course exactly what we saw in the Agora, but here, in the city’s most hallowed sacred space, it is even more pronounced. So far as this tells us anything about the public image of the new order, the compound effect must again have been to imply a reassuring conformity to the traditions of Athenian government, however those were now conceived.

Though helped by a little trompe l’oeil, much of this impression of continuity was of course sustained by a very real continuity of practice. A citizen who wished to flaunt his piety and affluence in a prominent public setting was just as free to do so on the Acropolis in 500 B.C. as his ancestors had been in earlier decades. The lavish private dedications of the period, whether made by elites or nonelites, should caution us against searching too hard for traces here of any genuinely egalitarian ethos or spirit. Clearly, this regime was not entirely uncomfortable with the continuing expression of inequities of wealth and status within the citizen body.

Is there, then, no distinctive new ethos or spirit animating the Acropolis monuments of the new order? The signs are not numerous, but they are there. To find them, we must shift our attention away from the glamorous offerings of the rich, to the small, but interesting, group of artifacts deposited here in these years by the demos-state.

The group included items that were, by any standards, unconventional votives. Over the centuries, all manner of deposits had accumulated in the sanctuary, from the humblest of vases and figurines to some of the great masterpieces of archaic Greek plastic art. But ultimately, whatever their form, the objects in this vast, diverse assemblage were bound together by a common purpose: all were in some sense thank offerings to divinity. Drafts of Assembly resolutions and edicts proscribing enemies of the polis do not self-evidently belong in this company. These are not expressions of the piety of any group or individual; they are simply state documents. So why display them in this particular space?

The choice begins to make sense when we consider the ulterior motives behind the placement of artifacts in sanctuaries. Dedications were more than just prayers of thanks cast in stone, clay, or bronze. They gave the dedicator an opportunity to indulge in self-commemoration, to leave a permanent visual
record of his or her god-fearing character and socioeconomic status and, often, of the events or achievements for which the gratitude to divinity was due. As the premier location for votive deposits in Athens, the Acropolis was also the city’s primary memory site, a sprawling monumental archive of the names and deeds—lofty and humble—of times gone by. The presence of a series of state documents in this setting may not therefore have seemed quite so incongruous at the time as it does to us now. These, too, were entries in the citadel’s inventory of memory, albeit singularly novel ones.

It is not just that they mark the first appearance of the collective voice of the demos-state among the monuments of the Acropolis, they are also the first items to recognize and commemorate the citizen community as a historical agent. This development is significant, since it may be our earliest evidence for a conscious attempt to build and organize a scheme of collective public memory for the community as a whole.

Before 508, memory, like politics, was, for the most part, a highly individualized and presumably competitive business. The actions remembered on Attic votive and funerary monuments were invariably those of families, small groups, and individuals. We get no sense that any of these events, even deaths in battle or civic benefactions, were seen as contributions to any larger, shared historical cause. They are merely an assortment of episodes in a great number of essentially autonomous personal histories.

Nor, more generally, do we yet see signs in the environment at large of any great interest in recovering and celebrating the exploits of Athenians in the more remote past. The interest shown by vase painters in the deeds of Theseus, which begins in ca. 575–550 (see discussion in chap. 5), is quite exceptional. Other early kings of Attica, like Cecrops and Erechtheus, who would play such an important role in the formulation of the later Athenian claims to autochthony, do not establish themselves in local iconography until after the sixth century. And when sixth-century political leaders did seek to manufacture impressive associations with figures from the age of heroes, they showed little regard for geography. Those responsible for the various pedimental tableaux that adorned the buildings of the mid-sixth-century Acropolis very plainly felt that Heracles better articulated how they themselves wished to be perceived than did any local Attic hero. It seems that the sheer force of Heracles’ image prevailed over any possible anxiety about his non-Athenian background.

Similar priorities probably helped to shape the glamorous heredity claimed by the Peisistratids. A number of Athenian families would go on to boast of a descent from the Neleids of Pylos, albeit with the Attic kings Codrus and Melanthus inserted at a reassuringly early point in the genealogy. But the name
Peisistratus, which obviously recalled that of the fabled prince of Pylos in the *Odyssey*, was especially cultivated by the family. This flaunting of exogenous origins shows all too clearly that an “authentic” Homeric pedigree was still seen at this time as more useful to a family’s public image than was any thoroughbred Athenian lineage. There is little hint here or elsewhere of that almost fanatical pride in a native heritage that would so infuse the art and culture of classical Athens; the Athenians, it seems, had yet to discover their glorious shared past.34

The first compelling signs of an emerging collective historical consciousness come shortly after 508. As we have just seen, commemorations now describe how military campaigns, like those against the Thebans and Chalcidians, were waged and won by the “sons of the Athenians,” while resolutions of the Assembly are credited to the entire demos. Even monuments which memorialize individuals reflect the new perspective. The Tyrannicide group in the Agora, much like the later Acropolis dedication erected in the name of the polemarch Callimachus after Marathon, celebrates the honorands not just for their own admirable qualities but also for their contributions to the larger national interest.35 At the same time, the edicts issued against the Peisistratids and the supporters of Isagoras further reinforced a sense of this shared historical purpose by consigning those who had opposed it to the fate of perpetual ignominy.

The sudden new awareness of their own collective accomplishment seems to have aroused in the Athenians an equally unprecedented level of interest in the deeds of their more distant predecessors. It cannot be a coincidence that this same period sees an astonishing rise in the level of cultural significance accorded to the Theseus figure, a development that will be explored in more depth in chapter 5. For now, we need only observe that Heracles was probably as much a victim of the new perspective as Theseus was its beneficiary. The superhuman exploits of the former may have had a peculiar appeal for leaders at a time when the power of a hero’s image depended more on his Panhellenic prestige than on the strength of his local connections. But as an outsider, Heracles could never play more than a tangential role in the highly particularistic new vision of the past that now began to dominate Athenian historical consciousness.36

Altogether better suited to the new vision of course was Theseus, whose Athenian credentials were well established. And if Theseus did not yet possess the glamor of his Panhellenic counterpart, his career could be creatively embellished in the decades to come, especially in the years following the transformative experience of the Persian Wars. But evidence for his rising cultural
profile is already visible somewhat earlier, not least in his first appearance on the Acropolis in the statue group of ca. 500.

The new interest in the seminal figures and events of early Athenian history may also help to explain the prominence of Gigantomachy scenes on the citadel at this same time. The theme was not a new one in Athenian art; Athena’s role in the battle had held pride of place in the iconography of the Great Panathenaia since the inception of the festival in the 560s. But by the time of its appearance in the pediments of the new order, this elemental conflict must have assumed a fresh significance. No longer was it simply an emblem or marker of the power of the city’s patron divinity—an iconic tableau from a world beyond the laws of time. After 508, the cultural resonance of the Gigantomachy would derive largely from its place at the very beginning of a historical continuum, one that linked all Athenians with what could now be seen as the formative events in their distant collective past. From this new vantage point, Athena’s contribution to the victory did not merely symbolize her distinguished position in the divine order; it now seemed to anticipate the manifestly glorious destiny awaiting her favored people.

We shall see further examples of this new style of historical consciousness in the chapters to come. But it is on the Acropolis, long the region’s primary memory site, where the early traces of this development are perhaps most explicit. Whether commemorating recent deeds (like the victories of 506) or the ancient exploits of Athena and Theseus, the public monuments erected here between 508 and 490 helped initiate the first systematic effort in Athens to give some kind of order and meaning to shared historical experience, real and imagined. The past was no longer the sum of the discreet personal and family histories of individuals, an unstructured environment without larger shape or purpose. It was now organized around a new vision of national heritage, the cornerstone of an emerging corporate identity, an as yet inchoate narrative in which the collectivity of the Athenians was both subject and principal actor. Henceforth, Athenian citizens were encouraged to see themselves as part of a storied fraternity, a historic community moving forward together through time. In the process, a new realm of memory was created—what we might call a historical imaginary. Through this diffuse, if essentially linear, sense of the past, the Athenians would be repeatedly confronted by mirror images of their own actions conducted by ancient simulacra of themselves. And sustained as it was by permanent public records, this particular realm of memory, unlike any others, now came with the “official” sanction of the state.

Thus, the new regime’s engagement with the past was far from casual. The insistent message of continuity embedded in the fabric of the Acropolis and
the Agora, whether through preservation or contrivance, was more than just a crude or superficial device for substantiating the claim that an old order was being revived. It was part of a larger, more ambitious project to fashion a suitably traditional environment for a citizen body that was now urged to see itself as a political community of great antiquity. In part 3 of this book, we shall pursue this aspect of the Athenian experiment further, examining efforts to reshape other areas of public life along similarly traditional lines.

The Acropolis would retain its time-honored roles as fortified stronghold of last resort, major cult site, and arena for competitive display well into the classical period and beyond. But during the course of the fifth century, in such monuments as the Nike temple, the Erechtheion, and, above all, the Parthenon, one senses a significant change in the overall tone and character of the place. The polyphony of earlier eras becomes less audible beside the ever more assured—at times bombastic—voice of the demos-state, staking its confident claims to a proud heritage in both word and image. And so the sanctuary increasingly assumes the guise of an unapologetic advertisement for the glorious accomplishments of the Athenian past, an exercise in brazen self-celebration. This shift in character was no doubt accelerated by the momentous triumphs of the Persian Wars and the subsequent exhilarations of empire. But its relatively unobtrusive beginnings can be detected somewhat earlier, during the age of Cleisthenes, when, for the first time, the acts of families and individuals were joined by collective deeds of “the Athenians” in the city’s great storehouse of memory.