Alongside some of history’s other great political shifts, the Athenian experiment was a distinctly orderly transformation. The Acropolis siege aside, the process lacked the popular activism, the violence, and the terror one usually associates with radical progressive change. As carefully managed as it was far-reaching, this was a revolution without Jacobins or Sansculottes.

Yet for those in Attica who lived through the years of the experiment, the experience of all this change must have been exhilarating and at times bewildering. Some aspects of public life looked and felt much as they had always done; others now seemed quite different. But the most unsettling change will have been in the beliefs and the assumptions that nourished and sustained the system as a whole. Here, many of the old certainties—comfortingly familiar, if seldom equitable—were suddenly rendered irrelevant or discarded completely. In their place arose a new set of common understandings, promising hitherto undreamed-of privileges for many, as well as obligations and responsibilities that were perhaps a little daunting. And all people were now called on to embrace shared loyalties and a sense of collective mission that seemed to disregard the ingrained local and economic distinctions of earlier eras. So how was the significance of this dramatic, if orderly, transformation to be understood? As ever, in times of radical discontinuity, there was a pressing need for explanation, for an authoritative narrative that would help men and women make sense of their new politico-cultural surroundings.
We already have some general idea of the form taken by this narrative—a tale of revival, of reassuring continuities with the distant past, of reconnection with the Athens of Theseus and Erechtheus. But how was the moment of change itself woven into this narrative? How was it to be remembered?

In the end, of all the incidents and events that contributed to the transition from Peisistratid domination to popular rule, only one was deemed fit for a permanent place in official memory;¹ and at first sight, at least, the choice was a surprising one. Overlooked, for example, was the mass siege of the Acropolis that ended the insurgency of Isagoras and Cleomenes. No matter that Cleisthenes’ reforms were already well on their way to implementation by this point, it is still easy to imagine how the story of popular struggle against Athenian reactionaries and non-Athenian aggressors could have been turned into a stirring, patriotic foundation myth, ideal for a regime that was built on the idea of collective responsibility. Yet the siege would never be officially memorialized by a monument or a regular ceremony.

Also overlooked were the achievements of Cleisthenes himself. Given the Athenian genius for mythmaking, it is not unthinkable that his successors might have seen fit to celebrate him as a visionary founding father. A simple posthumous statue and inscription in a prominent public space would have sufficed to fix his place in memory for all time as a farsighted author of bold political departures. But again, this is not what happened. Aside from awarding him a public grave in the Kerameikos at some later point, the Athenian state never recognized Cleisthenes’ achievements in any official form of commemoration. Instead, it chose to mark the political change of the late sixth century by celebrating an altogether different kind of accomplishment, a murder no less, whose perpetrators did not even live to see the new form of government introduced.

The celebration of Harmodius and Aristogeiton is such a familiar feature of the Athenian cultural landscape that it is easy for us to lose sight of its essential improbability. The details of their story can be quickly summarized: these two otherwise unremarkable members of an aristocratic clan take it upon themselves to kill the Peisistratid Hipparchus in 514/3, apparently for petty, personal reasons; they succeed in the attempt, but are themselves killed in the aftermath. In itself, this is hardly the stuff of legend. But in the hands of skilled mythmakers, the murder became one of the defining events of Athenian history. Never mind the deed’s rather dubious motivations, and never mind the fact that it did not end the Peisistratid domination of Athens; by the classical period, Harmodius and Aristogeiton were widely seen as brave and selfless heroes who had delivered Athens from the clutches of “tyranny,” transforming the political fortunes of their home state in the process. With barely a nod to

¹http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17798

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historical reality, a senseless act of violence was now officially embraced as a patriotic act of tyrannicide. 

But why go to all this trouble, especially when commemoration of an episode like the Acropolis siege would have required far less distortion or embellishment? Why did the Athenians choose to memorialize the end of the “tyranny” and not the birth of the new order that followed so soon thereafter? As we shall see, to make full sense of this tyrannicide tradition and its grip on the Athenian imagination, we need to view it in relation to the larger scheme of official memory that was beginning to emerge in Athens in the late archaic period. First, though, we should look at how and when this rather unlikely tradition was originally contrived and promoted.2

THE AFTERLIFE OF HARMODIUS AND ARISTOGEITON

It is worth stressing at the outset that a range of oral traditions concerning the events of the late sixth century, some of them flagrantly at odds with the official story, were still in circulation many years later. To judge from various sources from the late fifth century, it was still possible at that time to recall, for example, that Hipparchus was actually the junior of Hippias and that the tyranny continued for four years after the former’s murder; that when the end really did come (in 511/0), it did so only with the help of Spartan troops, and that their assistance was only secured when Cleisthenes bribed the Pythia at Delphi; and that the Athenian Isagoras had again called in the Spartans in his efforts to reverse Cleisthenes’ reforms, before the climactic siege of the Acropolis finally ensured that the people of Athens were masters of their own political destiny.3

This is not to suggest for a moment that these popular memories took the form of a coherent sequential account, fixed firm in the minds of all. Oral traditions are by nature fluid. And as Thomas (1989, 238–61) has shown in her perceptive and detailed treatment of these particular strands of memory from the late sixth century, they could easily be massaged to fit the needs of the moment. Some details could be emphasized or improved and others conveniently forgotten. This is especially true in the fourth century. By this time, fading recollections were more inclined to exclude or modify actions that were unflattering to the Athenians, and as Thomas demonstrates, they were often colored by more recent memories of the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants. Thus, in the orators and other authors, we find allusions to a story that Cleisthenes did no more than borrow money from Delphi to pay for the Spartan intervention in 511/0, reducing Cleomenes and his men to the status of mere mercenaries in
the process. More bizarre, he then apparently “restored the demos from exile” (like some erstwhile Thrasybulus), before embarking on his reforms.4

But whatever this continuing fascination with alternative accounts of the liberation, they plainly were not felt to be incompatible with the official narrative. Unlike the more skeptical Herodotus and Thucydides, the orators invariably refer to Harmodius and Aristogeiton in positive—even glowing—terms. While their interest in other possible versions of events seems to diminish progressively over time, the deed of the Tyrannicides remained an important historical touchstone in public speech all the way down to the end of the classical period, its appeal seemingly undiminished.5 Though popular memories that might have undermined its appeal were still current well over a century after the events in question took place, the tyrannicide tradition proved to have a remarkable resilience. To what did it owe this durability?

Doubtless, glamor played a part, as did the tradition’s essential simplicity. By compressing or flattening history and reducing what was a highly complex and not always palatable sequence of incidents to a single, vivid, patriotic act, the story was, to say the least, memorable. But surely the main reason for its success was institutional support. While recollections of, say, the Acropolis siege survived only in oral tradition, memory of the “tyrannicide” was permanently and indelibly seared into the Athenian cultural landscape.

The most visible memorial was of course the statue group in the very center of the Agora. This landmark possessed a singular potency. The rampaging troops of Xerxes made a point of sparing Antenor’s original bronzes from destruction so that they could be shipped home as a trophy. In response, the Athenians, who were content to wait decades before restoring other monuments victimized by the Persians, commissioned Kritios and Nesiotes to replace the Tyrannicide group almost immediately (fig. 26). These were in fact the only public portrait statues to be erected in Athens before the fourth century, and even thereafter, measures were passed restricting the placement of other statues in their vicinity, thus reinforcing their singularity.6

No doubt enhancing the second monument’s appeal to the imagination was the particular way it represented the state’s unlikely liberators. Extant copies and reproductions of the statues in other media reveal that the pair were captured in sculpture—heroically nude—moments before the killing, as they advanced, with swords drawn, on their victim. From what survives of the epigram, we can get some further sense of how the public image of the Tyrannicides was constructed. Part is preserved on a fragment of the base, part in a quotation by the metrist Hephaestion.7 It reads:
Truly, there arose a great light for the Athenians when Aristogeiton and Harmodius killed Hipparchus . . . made their fatherland . . .

We note in passing the text’s Homeric flourishes, which reinforce the timeless heroism of the act commemorated. The emotive opening, the light-of-deliverance metaphor, and the closing phrase all seem to be chosen for their epic—specifically Iliadic—flavor. In other words, these men were not assassins or murderers but true warriors in the tradition of the great heroes. More interesting, though, is the epigram’s presentation of the historical significance of the deed. Incomplete as the text may be, the “light of deliverance” metaphor carries with it an implicit claim that the killing of Hipparchus “liberated” Athens from “tyranny.” Here, in this compressed version of history, we have the official line, cut in stone for all to see in the political hub of the city.8

The general message is echoed in another epigram, this one probably the epitaph on the public grave of the Tyrannicides, which was situated at the outermost extremity of the Demosion Sema. The evidence for the text comes from an incomplete inscription found on Chios, and it is usually printed as follows, with Lloyd-Jones’s restoration of the missing portions of the first distich.9

The format of the epitaph is certainly novel; the verse rendering of an Assembly decree is without any known parallel in Attic funerary epigraphy. But the content is more familiar. Again we have the compression of history, again the epic diction; and the official line is forcefully restated. The killing of Hipparchus was not a senseless act of ad hominem violence. Rather, it was a self-
less military action perpetrated by heroic warriors, who thereby transformed the political fortunes of their state.  

To emphasize the point that these men were, in effect, gallant war heroes, the Athenians instituted regular cult honors for the Tyrannicides, much as they did for the slain Marathonomakhai. An *enagisma*, a chthonic ritual offering reserved for the heroized and the dead, was administered by the polemarch and performed each year at their tomb. And it is likely that these rites came to be celebrated as part of the Epitaphia, the festival for the war dead, thus further legitimizing the killing of Hipparchus as a military accomplishment.  

Other, less visible honors could also be listed, among them the special public privileges awarded in perpetuity to the immediate descendants of the assassins, such as free meals in the Prytaneion (*sitēsis*) and immunity from fiscal burdens (*ateleia*). Suffice it to say, the Athenian state went to considerable lengths not just to perpetuate the memory of Harmodius and Aristogeiton but also to stipulate exactly how they should be remembered. Whatever the realities of their deed and its motivations, they would always be seen officially as selfless benefactors of the polis and heroic agents of political change.

And there are many signs that the official view of the Tyrannicides and their deed was very eagerly embraced. Local vase painters were particularly enthusiastic in their response to the promotion. By the 460s, scenes of the illustrious pair, including images of the replacement statues, were well established in the repertoire. Indeed, it seems that the group by Kritios and Nesiotes became something of an iconic motif in Attic art. Most notably, from around 460, Theseus himself can sometimes be seen assuming the poses of the Tyrannicides in vase scenes, especially in those that depict his struggles with Skiron and the Krommyonian Sow. And it is likely that this idea of having Theseus “anticipate” the actions of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was first developed by artists commissioned to work on major public monuments. Clearly, the Tyrannicides were now associated with the very highest traditions of Athenian heroism.  

A series of skolia, or popular drinking songs, also celebrate the Tyrannicides in much the same terms as the official commemorations. However, the exact nature of the relationship between the songs and the public honors remains unclear. It is widely assumed that the former were composed relatively soon after the death of Hipparchus, before the official promotion of the killers as tyrannicides began. It is also widely assumed that the songs were partisan political statements, functioning, in effect, as propaganda for the claims of one group or another in the struggle for power that followed the expulsion of the Peisistratids. Neither assumption is easily justified. I would agree with Thomas (1989, 258–60) that efforts to date the skolia precisely and assign them to par-
ticular sources are probably futile. The very nature of the genre prevents us from knowing exactly when or in what circles these drinking songs were originally produced. Besides, there is a good chance that they did not possess the kind of political significance often assigned to them.\textsuperscript{14}

Two claims made in the skolia especially stand out: that Harmodius and Aristogeiton changed the course of Athenian constitutional history by killing the tyrant and making the Athenians “equal before the law” [isonomous] and that the pair thereby earned a place in the Isles of the Blessed among fellow warrior-heroes like Achilles and Diomedes. Much the same claims were of course made, implicitly or explicitly, in the official public commemorations. So did popular sentiment influence state policy, or vice versa? Both claims, I suggest, required such a suspension of disbelief that they can only have been the product of a willful, concerted effort to transform perceptions of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. They surely were not the spontaneous creations of symposiast revelers, and the songs, we can presume, were simply part of the warm, popular response that apparently greeted the state’s promotion of the new tyrannicide tradition.\textsuperscript{15}

All of which raises an important question: when did the Athenian state actually begin its promotion of this tradition? Though we know the exact year (477/6) when the group by Kritios and Nesiotes was installed in the Agora, it is harder to establish when the various other public honors were introduced. There is no firm evidence for any of the descendants’ privileges before the middle of the fifth century, and the public grave presumably does not predate the creation of the Demosion Sema, a development most scholars would place somewhere in the 470s.

Be that as it may, many believe that the enagisma for the Tyrannicides was first instituted somewhat earlier, during the last decade of the sixth century.\textsuperscript{16} And it is very probable that Antenor’s original statue group was set up in the Agora around the same time. A range of dates for the latter are certainly possible, anywhere from 507, when the situation in Athens had finally stabilized, to the early 480s. But a number of factors favor the upper part of this range: the elder Pliny (HN 34.17) synchronizes the dedication of the monument with the expulsion of the kings from Rome; Pausanias (1.8.5), who saw both Tyrannicide groups together, observed that the original bronzes looked “old-fashioned” [arkhaioi]; and Antenor is not known to have been associated with any project commissioned after 500 B.C. Moreover, on the issue of date, the objections of the minority, who support a date lower in the range, have been satisfactorily answered by Castriota (1998, 213–15). On balance, it seems reasonable to conclude that Antenor’s group was dedicated between 507 and 500, precisely
when the Agora area was being reconfigured to serve as the primary center for the city’s political life.\textsuperscript{17}

Assuming, then, that both the cult and the first Agora monument were in place by around 500 B.C., it looks like the whole tradition of the Tyrannicides—reimagining the hapless Harmodius and Aristogeiton as titanic “warriors” and selfless agents of political change—was an early innovation of the new order.\textsuperscript{18} Henceforth, in the official view of the transition from the Peisistratid regime to popular government, the decisive event would not be the mass siege of the Acropolis nor even the reforms of Cleisthenes, but the killing of Hipparchus. So why did the leaders of the new order choose to place so much weight on this particular moment and go to such lengths to create a special place for it in official memory?

\textbf{MAKING SENSE OF THE TYRANNICIDE TRADITION}

For all the lively debate over such issues as the political significance of the skolia and the date of Antenor’s statues, there is general agreement about the larger function and purpose of the Tyrannicides in Athenian culture. Most scholars believe that the rationale behind the heroization of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was to turn them into “symbols of the new democracy” or the like (see, e.g., Ehrenberg 1950, 533; 1956). Close analysis of the symbolic language used in the cult and monuments has produced some interesting variations on this theme. Kearns (1989, 55), for example, suggests that the cult conforms to the traditional pattern of veneration for heroes as protectors of communities. And since the deed for which the Tyrannicides were heroized “related only to internal politics” and not to some external threat, she believes that they may have been seen and promoted as protectors “not of Athens in general, but of Athenian democracy.” Others, like Taylor (1991, 6), see parallels with hero cults established for \textit{ktistai} and \textit{oikistai}, the “founders” of towns and colonies. In Taylor’s view, cult worship of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was established “because founding heroes were required by the new democracy.” A more refined version of this opinion is offered by Castriota (1998, 208).

I suggest . . . that Harmodius and Aristogeiton were never meant to be understood \textit{literally} as the destroyers of tyranny or as \textit{ktistai} of the new egalitarian constitution, but rather as something more subtle, as archetypes or prefigurations of these innovations, the way in which a generation or two later the mythic Athenian protagonists of Attic rhetoric and public programs of visual art were deployed to prefigure the heroic de-
fence of Greece against the Persians. Thus the Tyrant Slayers would have celebrated the emerging democracy along the more allusive or indirect lines suggested here for the fifth-century Athenian victory monuments.

There is certainly a measure of truth in all of these views. From the testimony discussed earlier in this chapter, it is abundantly clear that the Tyrannicides came to be associated in the popular mind with the regime that was built on Cleisthenes’ reforms, whether we call it “democracy,” isonomia, or simply “the new order.” But none of these suggestions really comes to grips with the deeper cultural logic behind this association.

With all the benefits of hindsight, we can see that the regime that came into being in 508/7 was quite different from anything that had preceded it; popular government was something entirely new. But did the Athenians themselves see it this way?

In all probability, they did not. During the course of this study, we have come across numerous indications that this momentous political shift was not represented at face value. There are, it appears, very good grounds for thinking that the citizens of Athens were strongly encouraged to see their new order as no more than the restoration of an older, ancestral order that had been suspended or dismantled by the Peisistratid “tyrants.” And once we understand that they perceived the political shift in these terms (as a resumption of the traditional scheme of things), it becomes easier to appreciate why, in their eyes, the landmark moment in the shift was the end of the tyranny, not the events that followed. From their perspective, the reforms of Cleisthenes and the Acropolis siege served only to recodify and preserve the time-honored practices of a distant past. Thus, if there really was a choice over which particular transformative moment to commemorate, the only possible alternative to the killing of Hipparchus was the event that truly did end the tyranny, namely, the expulsion of Hippias and his family from Athens by the Spartans. The latter was obviously unsuitable. Hence the strenuous efforts by Athenian mythmakers to magnify the significance of what Harmodius and Aristogeiton accomplished and to commit to official oblivion the four inconvenient years of tyranny that followed.

In other words, the reason the Tyrannicides came to be associated with democracy was not because their act was thought to have triggered a sequence of events that led ultimately to the introduction of a new, more popular form of government in Athens. The association was actually much less oblique and more immediate than that. According to the prevailing logic, because the tyrants had only to be removed for the normal course of Athenian constitutional history to be resumed, Harmodius and Aristogeiton were themselves directly responsible for the
recent political change. They were not seen as the “founders of democracy” or as prefigurations of such, since popular government in Athens was now deemed to have been founded long before they were moved to commit their fateful act. While people may have come to celebrate the pair in the broadest terms as “symbols” or even “protectors” of democracy, the original cause for celebration was much more specific; they had given their lives to have the old order restored.

In this way, the Tyrannicides came to play a central role in the representation of political change in the late sixth century. They were, in the end, a device created by leaders to help deflect attention from the novelty of recent innovations and, thereby, to forestall any harmful accusations of “revolution.” Memorialized with an ostentatious monument in the heart of the city and an appropriately traditional species of cult practice, Harmodius and Aristogeiton duly took their place in the ever swelling imaginary pageant of Athenian history.

A REVOLUTION FORGOTTEN

Before closing, it is worth looking at some possible longer-term consequences of this general disavowal of the novelty of change by leaders of the new order. Their efforts to manufacture some kind of historical charter for their reforms came at an extremely formative moment in the construction of an official collective memory in Athens. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the results of these efforts would have a profound impact on the way future generations would perceive what had gone before.

This is especially evident when we consider later understandings of the synoecism process. In chapter 5, I showed how this particular issue appears to have been all but settled back in the late sixth century, after which point it was simply axiomatic that the polis had been transformed from a city-state into a region-state during the reign of King Theseus. In the case of ideas about the evolution of popular government in Athens, there seems to have been more room for differences of opinion, as the debates of the later fifth century illustrate. Yet even here, I suggest, certain fundamental assumptions were effectively fixed during the age of Cleisthenes and rendered nonnegotiable ever afterwards.

Most fundamental was a strong, shared sense of constitutional continuity, the belief that some form of collective popular rule had prevailed in Athens since the very distant past, interrupted only by the Peisistratid “tyranny” and two brief periods of oligarchy in the late fifth century. Lacking as we do any record of political oratory from the early years of the new order, it is impossible to ascertain exactly how the leaders of the time framed their historical charter for reform. How did they envision the origins of the popular government
they claimed to be reviving? It is certainly possible that they left its beginnings vague and unspecific. But to judge from the manifest contemporary interest in Theseus, Triptolemos, and other figures from early Athenian history, there is a good chance that they either intimated or asserted that this regime was very ancient indeed. So, even if the synoecist Theseus had not yet been officially burdened with the further role of “founder of democracy,” the conceptual basis for seeing him as such—belief in a long and almost continuous tradition of popular rule in Athens—was probably current by the early fifth century.20

To appreciate just how firmly ingrained this particular belief became, we need only consider the words of three prominent authors of the later fifth century. Thucydides was evidently quite exercised about the official characterization of the murder of Hipparchus as a public-spirited act that ended the tyranny. But even he seems to have taken it for granted that when the tyranny finally did fall, traditional democratic practices were automatically resumed. Thus, the historian notes (8.68.4) that when the oligarchs persuaded the demos to abandon their democracy in 411, this brought to an end a century-long chapter in Athenian constitutional history that had begun with the expulsion of the Peisistratids. To him at least, the novelty and momentous significance of Cleisthenes’ reforms was no longer apparent.

And if his comments elsewhere (2.15.1–2) are any guide, it looks like Thucydides could scarcely imagine a time when there was not some degree of popular involvement in affairs of state. While he represents the synoecism of Attica very much as a change imposed from above by a powerful Theseus, he suggests that the unification was actually accomplished by encouraging men from all over Attica to participate in the political life of Athens. They were, in his words, “to use this one state” [miai polei tautē khrēsthai] instead of the multiple local states that had flourished in the past. As for the institutional details of this process, Thucydides envisions Theseus insisting that there be only “one council chamber” [hen bouleuterion] for the entire region. And since Athenians of the late fifth century will have associated this kind of building more readily with a democratic body, like the Council of 500, than with, say, the elitist Areopagus, the mention of the bouleuterion here presumably means that the historian saw popular deliberation as a key ingredient of political life under the new Thesean regime. Even during the monarchic period, it appears, the Athenian state was a democracy waiting to happen.

The general conviction that the Athenian constitution was much the same after the tyranny as before it can also be found in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, performed in 411. The plot and setting of the play prompt characters, on several occasions, to muse about the tumultuous events of the late sixth century.21
One such occasion comes when Lysistrata herself tries to get the Athenians and the Spartans to ponder their historic debts to one another. After reminding the latter of how Cimon had led an Athenian force to help them when their state was threatened by the twin perils of an earthquake and a helot revolt, she bids the former to reflect on how the Spartans were their “only” allies on the day the tyranny fell, adding, “and they freed you, and instead of a sheepskin, they draped your demos with the civic cloak again” [humas...kèleuthēsōsan kantites katōnakes ton démon humōn xklainan empeskhon palin] (1155–56).

Like others alluded to earlier in the chapter, this passage is certainly good evidence for the survival of memories that flatly contradicted the claims of the tyrannicide tradition. But more interesting for our immediate purposes is the word palin, “again.” Clearly, the assumption here is that the demos simply resumed its earlier control over the state once the tyrants had been expelled, even though this means, in effect, crediting the Spartans with the restoration of popular government in Athens. Equally clearly, this understanding of events left little room for any far-reaching intervention by Cleisthenes.

A similar case of amnesia comes somewhat earlier in the play, when the chorus of old men, the embodiment of the spirit of Marathon, recall their siege of Cleomenes on the Acropolis (274–82). Though they are obviously proud of this exploit, they conspicuously fail to see its larger political implications, remembering it only as a patriotic military action. But, again, if the antiquity of Athenian democracy was by this time an article of faith, we cannot be surprised that the true significance of the events of 508/7 was now forgotten.

It is against this background that we should return, finally, to the testimony of Herodotus and reassess his characterization of Cleisthenes’ contribution to democracy in Athens. As we saw at the beginning of chapter 2, the historian’s definitive statement on the subject at 6.131.1 (recognizing Cleisthenes as ho tas phulas kai ten démokratien Athenaiouisi katastases) is generally thought to mean that he saw the Alcmeonid as the true, original author of Athenian democracy. As we also noted at the time, this interpretation, if correct, would make Herodotus the only ancient author who had at least some sense of the landmark significance of Cleisthenes’ reforms. Was Herodotus so singularly perceptive? Was he alone able to see through the carefully constructed illusions that sustained the Athenians’ proud claims for the antiquity of their constitution?

If Herodotus really did intend to challenge Athenian constitutional memory by stressing the momentous novelty of Cleisthenes’ reforms, it is fair to say that his case is less than convincing. Though his account of the measures (5.65, 69) does stress their broad popular appeal, his discussion is limited to a sketchy description of the new demes and tribes, and there is a striking absence, at this
point, of any editorial comment on the larger historical significance of the new system. Stranger still, the historian’s impassioned defense of the Alcmeonids as “tyrant haters” (6.121–24) does not even mention the fact that it was Cleisthenes, one of the family’s most illustrious members, whose reforms laid the basis for the collective rule of the demos in Athens. Instead, his case focuses only on the Alcmeonids’ role in the expulsion of the tyrants, where their primary contribution, it seems, was to secure Spartan assistance by bribing the Pythia (5.63.1; cf. 5.66.1, .90.1, .91.2).

Then there is Herodotus’s well-known pronouncement (5.78) that “political equality” [isegorie] helped the Athenians to defeat the Boeotians and Chalcidians, making them “by far the most powerful” [makroi protoi] state in central Greece. How did they acquire this equality? Not, apparently, as a result of any major constitutional reforms. Rather, according to Herodotus, it came with the freedom won when the Athenians “got rid of the tyrants” [apallakhtentes turannon]. As in Thucydides and Aristophanes, the implication here is that the privileges of collective popular rule were essentially an Athenian birthright, unjustly suspended during the tyranny and immediately re-claimed thereafter.

It is therefore hard to avoid concluding that Herodotus had no wish to challenge official Athenian memory after all. Nothing in his text is inconsistent with the overall scheme of constitutional history that had been promoted and developed in Athens since the late sixth century. The only possible evidence to the contrary is the single, brief statement at 6.131.1, words that are widely understood to mean that Cleisthenes “established” democracy from scratch. But even here, the key verb form [katastēsas] is ambiguous. And it is surely no coincidence that authors who maintain more explicitly that popular government in Athens predated the tyranny use forms of the very same verb (kathistēmi) to describe Cleisthenes’ contribution to the history of démokratia (see, e.g., AP 29.3; Isoc. 15.232). In their texts, the word can only mean “set in order” or “restore.” I suggest that Herodotus is using it in much the same way here: Cleisthenes was not the author of any new political reality; he simply reorganized the tribes and the ancestral democracy.

The representation of the new order as a revived regime from the past certainly goes a long way toward explaining why later observers were more interested in how the tyranny ended than in the constitutional reforms that followed soon afterwards. Even among the more learned, inquisitive, and skeptical of these observers, it seems, there was no longer any memory of the true novelty of Cleisthenes’ reforms. And it is against the backdrop of this prevailing view of constitutional history, shaped in the late sixth century, that we
must understand the debates over the “traditional mode of government” (*patrios politeia*), that arose in connection with the oligarchic revolutions of 411 and 404.

In the minds of those who were determined to preserve democracy at all costs, their preferred form of regime was sanctioned by the full weight of tradition (see, e.g. Thuc. 8.76.6). And since this had been the consensus view in Athens for the better part of a century, the proponents of more oligarchic forms of government faced the tremendously difficult task of challenging a cherished shared memory. To claim the all-important ancestral precedent for their proposed changes to the constitution, they, too, had to represent their program as *dēmokratia*—supposedly the original, true form of Athenian *dēmokratia*, which had evolved at a time when the composition of the demos was somewhat less inclusive. To give credence to the claim, they tried to relate their version of the “traditional mode of government” to the existing body of laws and to the likes of Draco, Solon, and Cleisthenes, the names associated with the oldest items of legislation known to the Athenians. The implication, of course, was that the radical democracy of the late fifth century had no historical charter, since it had strayed from the course ordained by these great lawgivers of the past (see *AP* 29.3, 34.3, 35.2; Diod. 14.3.3; Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.2).22

Following the brief civil war of 403, the debate became moot. Classical *dēmokratia* was restored, and the received view of constitutional antiquities was promptly reaffirmed and given new substance (see Diod. 14.33.6; Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.42). In the words of the decree of Teisamenos (Andoc. 1.83), the Athenians were to be governed “according to traditional precedent” [kata ta patria], using “the laws of Solon” and “the ordinances of Draco.” Most likely, none of the genuine seventh- or sixth-century laws still current in Athens contained anything that we would recognize as a “constitutional” prescription. But this was beside the point. What mattered most was to reassert a sense of continuity with the pre-Peisistratid past by establishing some general kind of link, however specious in reality, between the first Athenian lawgivers and contemporary radical democracy. As far as we can tell, this way of looking at Athenian constitutional history as a long, almost unbroken continuum was never again seriously questioned.

Given all the confusing historical claims and counterclaims of the later fifth century, not to mention the probable unavailability of the kind of hard evidence that might have settled the matter, it is no small wonder that fourth-century researchers like Aristotle and the author of *AP* were able to piece together a remotely coherent picture of preclassical political arrangements in Athens. True, the accounts of both authors are obviously colored by the assumptions
of the age. Both see Solon as the primary architect of Athenian democracy, and both largely avoid addressing the evolving role of the Assembly, arguably the single most critical issue in early constitutional history. Presumably, the two authors—like Thucydides and perhaps Herodotus before them—simply could not envisage a time when the 

\textit{ekkle–sia} \ was not a central component of the state apparatus. Yet, for all their understandable shortcomings, the accounts in the \textit{Politics} and \textit{AP} are impressively detailed and nuanced, a tribute to the rigor and intelligence with which the authors tried to recover a history that was by their time all but unrecoverable.\textsuperscript{23}

Far less surprising is the failure of these authors to comprehend the full magnitude of the political transformation that began three years after the fall of the Peisistratids. Earlier writers were no more enlightened on the subject, and by the latter half of the fourth century, the truth was even further from reach. It is entirely fitting that the ultimate responsibility for this collective amnesia should lie with the very men who orchestrated the transformation. Surveying the evidence discussed in this and earlier chapters, we can only conclude that Cleisthenes and his cohorts preferred their singular contribution to Athenian history to go largely unrecognized. Better this than the suspicion of “revolution.” It may strain the modern imagination to think that their radical experiment in political community could have been so successfully passed off as a revival of an older, traditional regime. But for the Athenians, apparently, this improbable fiction was all too irresistibly attractive.\textsuperscript{24}