INTRODUCTION

Since the very earliest of times, the city of Athens and the surrounding region we know as Attica were locked in a seamless embrace of political and cultural communion (see figs. 1 and 2). Or so the Athenians themselves would like us to believe. Only rarely do we catch a glimpse of a slightly different reality, one of lingering local pride in the towns of the rural periphery, stirred apparently by memories of an erstwhile autonomy before all was forever subsumed within the polis of Athens.

One such glimpse is afforded by Thucydides (2.16). After reminding us that the majority of the people in the Athenian polis in his own day lived outside Athens, he goes on to describe the feelings of this majority as they were forced to evacuate their homes and seek refuge within the city walls at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War just before the Spartans’ first invasion of Attica in 431 B.C.

They were heavyhearted and unhappy as they left the homes and the ancestral sanctuaries they had always possessed since the time of their self-government in days long past [ek têς kata to arkhaion politeias] and prepared to change their whole way of life, each one thinking that he was forsaking nothing less than his own polis.

Despite the enduring vitality of local forms of cultural expression in Attic towns and villages, it is highly unlikely that any developed form of self-gov-
ernment had ever existed in the region outside Athens itself. There is no evidence that the strong particularist sentiments described by Thucydides actually posed a serious threat to the integrity of the polis at any time during the classical period.1 But it is still striking how little room there actually was for the expression of such sentiments in the public discourse of classical Athens. There was indeed no single ethnic noun to distinguish the totality of the region’s population from its urban minority. By a kind of metonymy, all were simply “Athenians” (Athenaioi). This sublimation of the periphery to the center was also expressed in the official name given to the peninsula as a whole, the Attike or Atthis ge, meaning the “land belonging to the Athenians.” Thus, even if there was once a time when Athens did not control all of Attica, any possibility of a group identity for the rural majority that was not in some way defined by their urban counterparts had been effectively erased from the language by the classical period. Linguistically and politically, the two were indissolubly fused.

AN EXTRAORDINARY POLIS

This kind of fusion of urban and rural populations was hardly unusual in the Greek pattern of political development. But fusion on this scale was quite extraordinary. Most poleis were relatively simple, face-to-face communities. The average Greek state, it is reckoned, had only between four hundred and nine hundred male citizens living in a territory of fifty to one hundred square kilometers. The polis of the Athenians was as many as fifty times larger than the mean. On the eve of the Peloponnesian War, it had a total population of perhaps two hundred thousand, dispersed over an area of approximately 2,650 square kilometers, and a citizen body of around fifty thousand adult males, making it a different species of polity altogether. The Athenians clearly were not a face-to-face community in any conventional sense. Since they could never hope to meet or know more than a fraction of their fellows, theirs was necessarily an “imagined community.”2

Even among the leading city-states of the classical era (ca. 480–320), Athens was exceptional. In terms of territory and population, it was roughly double the size of Corinth and four times larger than its neighbor Megara. The polis of Argos may have been more populous than both of these, but its territory was still relatively small, encompassing only those towns in and around the plain of Argos, like Nauplia and Mycenae. Sparta, meanwhile, never had more than ten thousand full citizens. Though it controlled a large portion of the southern Peloponnese (ca. 8,400 square kilometers) for much of the archaic and classical pe-
periods, it needed coercion and a purpose-built military apparatus in order to do so. Boeotia (ca. 2,600 square kilometers), an area of comparable size to Attica, was home to a plurality of poleis. Despite the introduction of federal institutions in the 520s, relations between Thebes and the rest were rarely smooth. A degree of political unity was achieved for a period of around forty years in the fourth century, though even then, traditions of local autonomy inevitably prevented the Boeotians from enjoying the kind of easy corporate solidarity that the Athenians in Attica had long taken for granted. It is certainly possible that the population of Syracuse in Sicily surpassed that of Athens at the end of the fifth century, after the latter had suffered very heavy casualties in the Peloponnesian War. But by that point, the Syracusans’ sixty-year experiment with a form of democracy was over, supplanted by what would prove to be a fairly durable tyranny.3

That the Athenian political community was consistently larger and more dispersed than the citizen body of any other major state was remarkable enough. That the Athenian state was also more consistently and more radically democratic than any rival over a span of nearly two centuries, from the late sixth to the later fourth, was little short of astonishing. Only the Athenians, it seems, ever developed institutions that allowed citizens throughout an area the size of Attica to play a regular and meaningful role in the political and military life of their state. The result was not so much a city-state as a region-state, a polis without real parallel or precedent among its contemporaries. It surely was no accident that this extraordinary polity, with all the resources, human and natural, of an entire region at its disposal, came to leave a deeper stamp than any other on the political and cultural fabric of classical Greek antiquity.

All of this raises an interesting question: If, as is generally believed, the state first acquired its anomalous scale fully two or more centuries before the classical era, why do we see so few signs of impending Athenian greatness in earlier times? This question has never been satisfactorily answered, and the ancients themselves have hardly encouraged us to ask it.

The Athenians had absolute faith that theirs was a glorious history, one that stretched back all the way to the gilded age of Theseus, and beyond Theseus to days of snaky-tailed ancestor-kings who, the story goes, were born literally from the soil of Attica. Fortunately for Pericles and his fifth-century contemporaries, precious few documents had survived from earlier centuries to disavow them of these happy fancies. No less fortunately, such prominent non-Athenian authorities as Herodotus (e.g., 1.56) and Plutarch (e.g., the Lives of Theseus and Solon) were content for the most part to take them at their word.

For the realities of early Athenian history were a little less impressive. Down to the last decade of the sixth century, Athens was a city-state of modest—at
times, even negligible—significance. True, Attica was already widely recognized as a center of ceramic production, and fine sculpture could be seen in the region’s more important cemeteries and sanctuaries, commissioned by a relatively small, wealthy elite. But in 510 B.C., there were few buildings of any great distinction in Athens, and the city had produced only one writer of any real note, the lawgiver-cum-poet Solon. Athens was not yet a major force in interstate relations. Its involvements in external affairs were generally limited in scale and only local in their ambition—a squabble with Megara, a smaller neighbor to the west, over the island of Salamis may have lasted for as long as a century. And the state seems to have been chronically vulnerable to threats from without. A series of insurgents, from Cylon in the 630s to the Spartan king Cleomenes in 508/7, were all able to take the Acropolis with disconcerting ease.

This military vulnerability was compounded by a domestic political situation that was only fitfully stable at best. However sophisticated the state apparatus bequeathed by Solon in the early sixth century, the operations of its institutions are almost entirely invisible in the events of subsequent decades. Public life down to 510 was little more than a loosely regulated arena in which a highly personalized contest for power was waged by the dominant families and individuals of the day. Theirs are the voices we hear time and again on the grander grave monuments and on the more opulent dedications that then littered the Acropolis. Of the single collective voice of the demos, so well known to us from countless classical monuments and inscriptions, we hear not yet a trace.

If we then fast forward a mere twenty years, to 490, things begin to look quite different. We see an assembly of Athenian citizens dispatching some ten thousand hoplites to confront a much larger force of Persians at Marathon on the Attic coast, where a stunning victory is achieved. Only ten years later, an Athenian navy, the largest in Greece, helps to turn the tide of Xerxes’ invasion at Salamis. Leadership of a huge alliance of Greek states follows, then imperial hegemony over much of the Aegean basin. From the revenues of empire, a building program of unprecedented extravagance is initiated, and fully half of the citizen body, we hear, is employed in the service of the state. By 430, only the Spartans come close to rivaling the military capability of the Athenians, and Athens is unchallenged as the cultural capital of the Greek world, a status it will not relinquish until the rise of Ptolemaic Alexandria.

Why then did Athens emerge so rapidly as a major Hellenic power in the first half of the fifth century? Why did this not happen sooner? To answer these questions, I believe we need to look more closely at domestic developments in the years between the fall of the Peisistratid “tyrants” in 510/9 and the battle of
Marathon. Invoking the name of the man responsible for the most significant of these developments—a program of political reforms—we might refer to this time frame, purely for convenience, as the age of Cleisthenes. Specialists working in a number of different areas are increasingly inclined to see this as a time of comprehensive change, both within and beyond the realm of the political process. Yet more than thirty years have passed since the publication of the last monograph in English on any aspect of the period. Clearly, there is a pressing need for an up-to-date synoptic analysis that examines all of the evidence, written and material, for innovation during this era. The present study is intended to fill that gap. Its ultimate purpose is to show how the many changes implemented during the age of Cleisthenes would profoundly alter the course of Athenian history.5

THE ARGUMENT

The book begins by suggesting that the late rise of Athens to Panhellenic prominence may not be so surprising after all. There is a very good reason why Athenian power and influence were not commensurate with the size of the population and territory of Attica in the years before 510 B.C.: the incorporation of the region into the polis of Athens had not yet been fully accomplished. Only in 508/7, with the passage of Cleisthenes’ political reforms, did a unified Attica become a functional reality. At this point, for the first time, mechanisms were created that made it possible and even obligatory for indigenous adult males throughout the peninsula to enroll as citizens of Athens and play a regular part in the political and military life of the Athenian state. In other words, only in the last decade of the sixth century did Athens begin to operate effectively as a region-state and command the kind of resources that would allow it to exert so heavy an influence on Greek politics and culture in the years to come.

I then go on to show how Cleisthenes’ landmark reforms precipitated a whole series of innovations elsewhere in the life of the polis during the years 508–490, all of them reflecting or reinforcing in some way the new political realities. From military organization to ritual practice, from physical environment to the more intangible realms of collective memory and identity, almost no area of public interest or significance was left untouched by this wave of change and renewal. The process of transformation, I argue, is perhaps best understood as a bold exercise in social engineering, an experiment designed to bring together the diverse and far-flung inhabitants of an entire region and forge them into a single, self-governing political community of like-minded
individuals. The immediate aim was to correct the political instability and the military vulnerability of earlier times. The result was the creation of a new order, a citizen state on a scale previously unimaginable.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part subjects the contents of Cleisthenes’ reforms to a thorough reexamination and offers a new reading of their historical significance. Here, for convenience, those measures that were designed to facilitate the political incorporation of Attica (chap. 1) are treated separately from those that primarily concerned the institutions of the central government in Athens (chap. 2). I then turn to look at efforts to adapt the city’s primary public spaces to the needs of the new order. It appears that Athens was witness to a major program of construction during the age of Cleisthenes, and the evidence for it is discussed in some detail in part 2 of the book. Particular attention is paid to the various new buildings and commemorative monuments that were then erected in the Agora area (chap. 3) and on the Acropolis (chap. 4) and to the ways in which the existing fabric of these two sites was modified to provide a suitable setting for the new arrivals. In the third and final part of this study, the focus is broadened further still to cover innovations in other areas of public life. A diverse range of new initiatives are analyzed, the most important of which are: the creation of Eponymous Heroes for the ten new tribes and the promotion of Theseus as a founding father of the Athenian state (chap. 5); the institution of procedures for levying a new citizen army and the development of media for commemorating death and victory in its battles (chap. 6); the invention or reinvention of major “national” festivals (chaps. 7–8); and the commemoration of Harmodius and Aristogeiton as “tyrannicides” (chap. 9).

Due attention is also paid to the prehistory or possible prehistory of all of the developments addressed in the book. Almost every one of these innovations has at some point been assigned by at least one authority to an earlier era, usually to the eras associated with Solon and the Peisistratid “tyrants.” In some cases, the developments were indeed prepared or anticipated before the late sixth century, even if their form and function changed significantly after 508/7. In others, the higher date, however conventional, is founded on no more than supposition and/or excessive faith in the value of our ancient literary sources. In all cases, the evidence for the higher date is considered carefully and, I hope, fairly.

METHOD AND APPROACH

Any work on the politics and culture of 508–490 B.C. must confront a formidable array of methodological problems. Many pieces are missing from the puzzle and will most likely remain so. My efforts to plug the gaps necessarily in-
volve working assumptions, inferences, and suppositions that might not be shared by others. With this in mind, a few words on method seem appropriate.

The book does not consciously follow the prescriptions of any one particular approach or “school.” Nor is it driven by any larger theoretical agenda. Rather, it aims to combine the kind of inquiry one finds in conventional political histories with the more contemporary preoccupations of cultural history. Hopefully, it has some of the virtues of both approaches.

Like much recent work on ancient history, the book makes extensive use of archaeological evidence. Here, this is not just a point of principle but an absolute necessity. The literary sources for sixth-century Athens are not especially abundant or informative. Nor are they consistently reliable. For reasons that will be made clear in the chapters to come, scholars studying this period have in general put greater trust in the historical accounts of ancient writers than those accounts probably deserve. Through judicious use of the material record, we can not only form a clearer picture of the cultural milieu in which political events took place but also, in some cases, compensate for the misapprehensions and anachronisms found so often in the ancient texts.

Of course, archaeological testimony presents its own problems, not the least of which is dating. In that area, I depend largely on the published opinions of others; the alternative course would all too easily invite suspicions of prejudice and parti pris. But the dates of a number of the items discussed remain controversial, and I am all too aware that claims advanced on such evidence must be expressed with due caution.

This book also has much in common with recent work on ancient cultural history. Though I have taken some pains to recover the objective details of change in Athens during the age of Cleisthenes, I am also just as interested in exploring the ideological dimensions of this change and the contemporary mentalité. By and large, historians to date have been content to view the outcome of Cleisthenes’ political reforms as a relatively straightforward constitutional change, usually “the birth of democracy.” But as I try to show, the animating spirit here was more collectivist than egalitarian, and the shift to a more popular form of government was ultimately only one part of a larger, more ambitious experiment in community building. To have any hope of success, the authors of this project needed to do more than reform institutions. They had to address the values and attitudes of the people of Attica and try to refashion allegiances and identities.

Thus, as we study the innovations that comprised the Athenian experiment, it becomes clear that the perception of change was every bit as important as its reality. Of course, at this distance we cannot hope to enter the minds
of ordinary men and women and see the new order through their eyes. Even if all signs indicate that they responded positively to the transformation, their exact perceptions must remain largely a mystery. But we are in a good position to know how this transformation was represented to them, that is, how leaders intended the new order to be perceived. This is an ongoing concern in parts 2 and 3, where the focus shifts toward the analysis of architecture, imagery, verse inscriptions, mythical traditions, and the like. As I shall show, it is precisely in the area of representation that we can find plausible answers to two fundamental and related questions: why was there apparently such a high level of consent for so radical a break with the past and why, after the failure of Isagoras’s brief coup attempt, was the legitimacy of the new order never seriously challenged?

Yet despite this book’s modish interest in issues like identity and memory, its approach to the larger issue of historical causation might seem distinctly unfashionable. To explain what happened in Athens between 508 and 490, I have generally looked more to the designs and actions of human agents than to the impersonal, environmental, or structural forces of the longue durée. The preference here is not dogmatic; there is no single correct way to explain a complex historical change. “People make their own history, but they do not do it under circumstances of their own choosing.” Historians may choose to look either at the how those circumstances were shaped or at the human response to those circumstances. Both approaches are equally valid, even essential if a given change is to be fully understood.

The present study follows the latter course because the transformation in question seems to have been unusually abrupt and because detailed analysis of contemporary innovations can provide much new information about the nature of the change. From this close remove, it would, I think, be deeply unsatisfying to attribute any individual initiative to some kind of abstract structural predetermination. The study of long-term environmental conditions may help to explain why a major politico-cultural transformation was possible in Athens in 508/7 B.C., but it cannot in itself account for a specific initiative like the commemoration of the Tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, or for the extreme artifice of the new system of demes, tribes, and trittyes. These and all the other developments of the era were part of a highly creative and fundamentally unpredictable response to a given situation. To explain the logic or rationale behind them, we must consider the conscious aims and decisions of interested actors—albeit actors who were products of their society and who were operating within the constraints of a particular set of circumstances.
Even more unfashionable, the aims and decisions that this book seeks to recover are generally those of elite political leaders. Again, this choice is not dogmatic, and it certainly does not imply the endorsement of any naive or antediluvian “Great Man” approach to history. Rather, the preference for seeing the decision-making process as working in a “top-down” rather than a “bottom-up” direction is based on the contents of the political reforms themselves, which do not look like the spontaneous products of any revolutionary mass fervor. It is also based on what I believe to be a realistic assessment of how new initiatives are likely to have been conceived and implemented under the new order. Even if some innovations required the formal approval of a majority of citizens in the Assembly, they would still have been essentially elite initiatives, framed as proposals, amendments, or riders by those with the interest or capacity to do so.

It would be facile to ignore the key role played by ordinary Athenians—as voters and, ultimately, as soldiers—in the establishment of the new order in 508/7. But it would be equally facile to imagine that the masses were in any meaningful sense responsible for, say, the choice of the architectural idioms used in the Agora or the design of the pedimental schemes that adorned the Old Athena Temple. That said, I am not suggesting that the Athenians were duped or forced by their leaders into accepting the many changes of the era. Nor am I suggesting that we should see as crude propaganda the means used by these leaders to reshape beliefs and attitudes. As far as we can tell, the new order was broadly welcomed by the citizen body. And if we can at times detect attempts to manipulate perceptions of a changing reality, we can only imagine that most Athenians were all too willing to suspend their disbelief.

Identifying the individuals who actually were responsible for the style and content of the new order is still no easy matter. If our main sources are to be believed, Cleisthenes himself was ultimately responsible for the political reforms and the creation of the Eponymous Heroes, though he was presumably aided here by a circle of associates, a group that must have included his kinsman Alcmeon, who would become archon in 507/6. Beyond this, nothing is certain. The little we know about Cleisthenes could be summarized in a single paragraph. We have no record of any speeches he gave; know nothing of his character, personality, or appearance; and cannot be sure how or even when he died. Nor do we have anything more than a vague idea about the political scene in Athens between 508 and 490. However, given the obvious thematic links between the political reforms and the various other innovations in public life, it seems reasonable to infer that all were framed and implemented by
Cleisthenes and/or members of his circle and/or their like-minded successors. The evidence may not point to the existence of a single master plan or grand design hatched back in 508/7, but it does encourage us to view the many initiatives of this period as contributions to a single process of transformation, an ongoing experiment that lasted for the better part of two decades.

Whatever the validity of the approach to causation favored here, this work hardly claims to have exhausted the issue. The book is simply intended to add some new brush strokes to an ever richer picture of change in late archaic Athens, a picture that must ultimately be composed from multiple different perspectives.

Finally, I should make some mention of what is without question the single most important influence on the ideas and arguments presented in this study, namely, the specialist literature on modern nation formation. Whether written from the perspective of history, sociology, political science, or cultural studies, this literature offers the student of late archaic and classical Athens a wealth of comparative data on the building of complex citizen states. I have found especially useful its treatment of issues like political identity formation, the construction of public memory, and the relations between state and political community. Some no doubt would consider the parallels here self-evident, while others would find even the suggestion of such to be horrifyingly anachronistic. Either way, I stress that this is not intended to be a comparative work and that none of its arguments depend on the viability of any national model. Parallels are discussed explicitly only at the very end of the book, even if their unseen presence may be felt at various points throughout the text.