

## Always To Be Best: The Competitive Spirit in Ancient Greek Culture

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Competition is, of course, one of the sacred words of the American vocabulary and of its capitalistic economy; it is the force that drives forward the advance of material progress and prosperity, that spurs the discoveries of science, that hastens the development of the arts. Every American schoolchild knows, or used to know, Ralph Waldo Emerson's saying that if a man makes a better mouse-trap, the world will make a beaten path to his door. This was also the belief of the British industrialists of the nineteenth century who made the North of England the workshop of the world and London its financial center. It was for them that the poet Arthur Hugh Clough wrote his tongue-in-cheek version of the Ten Commandments The Latest Decalogue. The seventh commandment, for example, turns up as:

Do not adultery commit;  
Advantage rarely comes of it. (13-14)

And the tenth appears as:

Thou shalt not covet; but tradition  
Approves all forms of competition. (19-20)

We know too that competition was the essential element in ancient Greek and especially Athenian culture. Yet if you try to think of a corresponding abstract noun in Ancient Greek you will think for a long time. Even recourse to that standby of the Edwardian British schoolboy faced with the daunting task of translating into Demosthenic Greek an oration of William Ewart Gladstone the *English-Greek Lexicon* of Gerald Maclean Edwards (Cambridge, 1912) will give you nothing better than \_\_\_\_\_ (**agnisis**), a word that does occur in Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.50.4) but is not an abstract noun; it simply denotes a particular athletic contest. Something like what we mean by competition as an abstract noun does, however, surface in the work of an early Greek poet, Hesiod, who sometime around 700 B.C. composed a long poem called \_\_\_\_\_ (*Theogonia*), the *Birth of the Gods*. It appears not in the form of an abstract noun a very rare phenomenon in early Greek but as the name of a goddess: \_\_\_\_\_ (**ris**). The usual translation of this word is strife. And she is, Hesiod tells us, the daughter of Night, hateful strife

that gave birth to painful toil. . . famine and fearful sorrow, fighting, battle, murder, slaughter, quarrels, lies, disputes, lawlessness and ruin. . . . (226-232)

But in a later poem, the *Works and Days*, which deals with the life of the small farmer, Hesiod has second thoughts; he revises his mythology. There was, after all, he says, another daughter of Night, the elder one; she too is called Eris, and Zeus himself has set her in the roots of the earth: She is much kinder to men. She stirs up even the shiftless men to work, for any man grows eager to work when he sees his neighbor, a rich man who is keen to plough and sow and put his house in order; neighbor vies with neighbor in the race for wealth. This Eris is good for men. And potter competes with potter, craftsman with craftsman; beggar is jealous of beggar and bard of bard. (19-26) This comes very close to our own notion of competition as the driving force of progress.

To the modern ear the choice of potter as an example of competitive strife may seem strange; how many of us know a potter? But in the archaic world, where metal was scarce and expensive, glass almost unknown (glassblowing was first developed in Syria in the first century B.C.), all large storage vessels for wine, grain and oil, all utensils for eating and drinking, were made by potters. They competed not only in the elegance of the shape of their pots but also in the variety and sophistication of their decoration, which by the sixth century B.C. had reached high artistic levels. The rivalry of potters was proverbial; Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* speaks of the belief that friendship between men who are alike is rare such men are potters to each other. (8.1.6) And their rivalry is documented for us on a famous red-figure vase of Euthymedes, which shows on one side the arming of Hector and an inscription Euthymedes son of Pollias painted me and on the other, three nude male drunken dancers, a scene described by Max Hirmer, the noted art critic of Greek vase-painting, as a particularly successful example of foreshortening. This side too has an inscription, which reads: \_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ (h s oud pote **Euphr nios**) Euphronios never made anything like this. Rivalry between beggar and beggar can be observed any day in our nation s capital at the Metro entrances where men with plastic cups dispute title to place, and there is a classic instance of it in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus fights Irus for the right to beg at the suitors feasts. Homer uses Hesiod s word for the situation: Get out, says Irus, or there will be *eris* between us. (18.13) There is indeed; a boxing match decides the issue, won by Odysseus, who gets the prize offered by the suitors a bubbling sausage hot of the fire, stuffed with blood and fat. As for bard

competing with bard, Hesiod tells us later in the *Works and Days* that he himself, when he made the only sea voyage of his life (a trip of some sixty-five meters from Aulis to Euboea) to take part in the funeral games for Amphidamas, entered a contest for bards: And there I am proud to say that I won with a song and went away with a two-handled tripod which I dedicated to the Muses. (656-657)

But it was not only men who competed. Alcaeus, in exile from the city, speaks of living where the women of Lesbos go to and fro in their trailing robes, being judged for beauty in the precinct of Hera. (130B.17-18) This is not an isolated instance; we have evidence for beauty contests \_\_\_\_\_ (**kalliste a**) also for Tenedos and Basilis in Arcadia (as well as a beauty contest for young men at Elis). Such contests have their mythological prototype in the judgment of Paris where the three great goddesses, though not in trailing robes, competed for the prize, a competition that sealed the fate of Troy. A different kind of contest for women is attested by an inscription scratched on the foot of an Attic black-figure cup: I am Malosia's prize of victory; she won the girls' carding contest.

This same competitive spirit, the will to victory over all others, is also fundamental to the creed of the warriors of the *Iliad*; it appears in the advice given by two fathers to two sons Hippolochus to Glaucus the Lycian (6.208) and Peleus to Achilles the Achaean (11.784): \_\_\_\_\_ ( **ai n ariste ein ka hupe rochon menai llon** ), Always to be best, and superior to others. Achilles does not claim to be superior to Agamemnon, the Achaean commander in chief, in authority, but he does claim, and is universally admitted, to be the best fighter of the Achaeans. Agamemnon's decision to deprive him of Briseis, the prize awarded him by the Achaeans for his prowess in battle is therefore an unacceptable insult and his first reaction is to kill Agamemnon. Restrained by Athena in person, he chooses a different form of retaliation that brings death and wounds to Achaean leaders as well as to the rank and file, and eventually to his friend Patroclus and ultimately to himself. This quarrel between the heroes that brought ten thousand woes on the Achaeans ( *Iliad* 1.2) is the work of the bad Eris; Which of the gods, Homer proceeds to ask the Muse in the prologue to the epic, set them to fight each other in strife \_\_\_\_\_ ( **ridi xun eke m chesthai**)? (1.8) Another Achaean hero, Ajax, finding himself in a similar situation, reacts as Achilles did but was not restrained by a goddess. After Achilles' death his armor, made for him by the god Hephaestus, is offered by his mother Thetis as a prize for the warrior who did most in the fight to rescue Achilles' body from the Trojans. Ajax, with good

reason, expected to win, but Odysseus, pleading his case before the judges Trojan prisoners and the goddess Athena won the case. Ajax reacted by attempting to kill the commanders of the army and, thwarted by Athena, killed himself.

For the Homeric hero defeat in what he regards and others accept as his sphere of preeminence is a mortal injury, to be expiated only in blood. But there is one contest in which, though he may find it hard to accept defeat, losing is not a matter of life and death. That contest is what we would call sport and the Greeks call \_\_\_\_ (**ag n**).

The word is obviously derived from the verb \_\_\_\_ (**go**), to lead, to bring. An \_\_\_\_ (**ag n**) is originally a brining together —of ships, for example. The beached ships of the Achaean expedition on the shore are an **ag n** \_\_\_\_ \_ \_\_\_\_ ( **ne n en ag ni**), in the place where the ships are gathered, is a minor Iliadic formula. (15.428,16.239, 16.500, 19.42) There is a divine bringing together \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ (**the on ag na**) the assembled gods to whom the self-moving tripods of Hephaestus make their way, the assembly of divine statues (or unseen presences) to which the Trojan women make their unavailing prayer. (*Iliad* 18.373-377) But there is also a gathering of people to participate in an witness the funeral games for Patroclus, that are described in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Book of the *Iliad*.

After the assembled Achaeans have finished building the barrow over the bones of Patroclus, they start to leave. But Achilles stops them. He seats them as a wide assembly \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ (**h zanen eur n ag na**): they are now spectators of the funeral games. (258) These contests are in one respect quite different from those of the historical period; there are prizes for all contestants the struggle is for first prize but there is compensation for all. In the chariot race not only do all contestants get a prize but so does Nestor who did not compete, and though there is a moment of serious tension between Menelaus and Antilochus, it is resolved in gentlemanly fashion, by generous concessions on both sides. For the boxing match, both winner and loser get a prize, though the loser is in no condition to appreciate his: his dear friends surrounded him and carried him through the crowd with his feet trailing, spitting out clots of blood and letting his head hang on one side. (695-697) So too there are prizes for both wrestlers a tripod for the winner and for the loser a woman skilled in handiwork, valued at the price of four oxen. (704-705) Achilles declares a draw in this contest between Odysseus and Ajax, telling them to accept equal prizes (Homer does not explain how this is worked out). (735-737) The three runners in the footrace also get

prizes. The only contest in which the losers get nothing is the hurling match, for the simple reason that the prize is the mass of iron that the contestants throw. (826)

All this princely generosity in the matter of prizes is a startling contrast to what happened later, when the great \_\_\_\_\_ (**ag nes**) were established, first at Olympia, then at Delphi, Nemea, and the Isthmus. Here there were no third, not even second prizes. The winner alone was crowned with the appropriate garland of wild olive, laurel, or parsley. The crown, of course, was only the beginning of his reward. Since his victory conferred glory on his fellow citizens, honors and material prizes ere heaped upon him by his grateful city. At Athens the cash reward given to an Olympic victor was reduced to 500 drachmas in the legislation of Solon; he was given, at Athens and elsewhere, a seat of honor at assemblies and performances, as well as free meals at the city s table maintained for distinguished generals and visiting dignitaries. Plutarch speaks of an occasion when the victor was driven into the city through a breach made in the city walls, a ceremony symbolic of the fact that a city that could breed such men needed no fortifications. Statues of the victor might be erected in his home city and at Olympia. In fact, Plato speaks of the life of his Guardians, free of all the domestic and common worries of the ordinary man, as happier than the life men believe most happy, that of the victors at Olympia. ( *Republic* 465 D) No wonder that a commonplace of the epinician odes is to remind the victor that he is still a human being, not a god. Do not seek to become Zeus, Pindar tells Phylacidas of Aegina, who had won the pankration at the Isthmus. (*Isthmian Odes* 5.14) Do not seek to become a god, he warns Psaumis of Camarina, winner in the mule chariot race at Olympia. (*Olympian Odes* 5.27)

The victor was, if not a god, at least a hero in the eyes of his fellow citizens, but for the losers there was no warm welcome home. For them there was a hateful return, words of contempt, the hidden by-way. . .not for them the glad home-coming, the sweet laughter of the mothers. . .in back lanes they cower, out of their enemies sight. ( *Pythian Odes* 8.83-87) For some of them, failure was more than they could accept. In 492 B.C., in the course of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad, one Cleomedes of the small island of Astypalaea, won a boxing match against an opponent called Iccus, who came from Epidaurus. Unlike his mythical prototype Odysseus, however, he gave his opponent a mortal blow. Because of some irregularity in his fighting tactics, the judges annulled his victory. On his return home, he went into the local school, dislodged the pillar that held up the roof and so killed the children. Pursued by his fellow citizens throwing

stones, he took refuge in the temple of Athens, where he hid in a chest. Unable to open it, the Astypalaeans smashed it, only to find nothing inside. They sent to Delphi to ask what had happened to Cleomedes and received the astounding reply: Last of the heroes is Cleomedes of Astypalaea. / Honor him with sacrifice; he is no longer mortal. (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 6.9.8) They must have been happy to hear that he was the last, but, Pausanias tells us, since that time the Astypalaeans have been giving Cleomedes the honors of a hero. (6.9.8)

He has, of course, a mythic predecessor in Ajax, son of Telamon, who was also given the honors of a hero. And whose murderous reaction to defeat is the theme of Sophocles' tragedy *Ajax*. This is not the only mythical contest with a winner and a loser; in fact, such a theme is pervasive in Greek mythology, especially in the form of a competition between mortal and immortal. The mortal always loses, and pays a heavy price, like Marsyas, who challenged Apollo to a musical contest and lost his skin; Thamyras who challenged the Muses in song and lost his eyesight; or Arachne who took on Athena at spinning and ended up as a spider. Sometimes a hero challenges and defeats a semidivine creature: Heracles wrestles with Antaeus, son of Poseidon and Gaea, and chokes him to death. He is also victorious over the river Achelous, son of Oceanus and Tethys, winning the hand of Deianira, who brings about his death. And sometimes the mythical competitors are both human: Oenomaos, for example, races chariots with suitors for his daughter's hand and kills them when he wins, until Pelops puts an end to his victories with a combination of bribery and sabotage; Polydeuces defeats the giant Amycus, inventor of the boxing match, and deals him a mortal blow.

The wealth of such contests in Greek mythology (see Ingomar Weiler's book *Der Agon im Mythos* [Darmstadt, 1974]) which runs to over 300 pages of small print) is not a unique phenomenon. Contests in sport and music occur frequently in other mythologies; the motif "race won by deception," for example, turns up in myths from North and South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Florida, Indian tribes in North, Central and South America; in many African tribal stories; and in stories from the Bahamas, Jamaica, Japan, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Finland, Sweden, Lithuania, and Spain. But only in archaic and classical Greece do we find the pervasiveness, one could even say the dominance, of competition in all its forms, organized or not, over everyday life. It could be said, with very little exaggeration, that the Greeks of the free city-state era looked on life itself as an **agon**. For Eris, both the good one that Hesiod

praises and the bad one that Achilles, as he comes back to the Greek ranks to fight, wishes would vanish from the face of the earth, were at work not only in their everyday life but also in their political and intercity life.

Indeed, it may be that the fundamental reason for its prevalence was the organization, or rather the disorganization, of the Greek world. It was an unruly network of hundreds of independent city-states, each with its own constitution (158 of them were found worthy of discussion in the Aristotelian collection, according to Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 5.27), its own (usually disputed) frontiers, its own cults and often calendar each one so separate a world that one of the jokes in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. collection known as \_\_\_\_\_ (Phil gelos), preserving what must be a memory of much earlier times, has an idiot asking his father, Do they have a moon in other cities? The cities were constantly at war with one another. Peace, to quote Plato's Cretan lawgiver, is merely a name, for in fact all cities, by their very nature, are perpetually engaged in an undeclared war against each other. (*Laws* 626 A) In a passage in the *Republic* Plato explains this state of affairs as he describes what he calls the luxurious and feverish „\_\_\_\_\_ (p lis) as opposed to the ideal one he has just described, where the citizens avoid poverty and war by not begetting sons beyond their means to support them. (369 B-372 C) But the luxurious city will require personnel not needed in the temperate one poets, rhapsodes, actors, choral dancers, manufacturers, contractors, tutors, nurses wet and dry, beauticians, barbers, cooks, chefs and doctors, and the territory that was sufficient to feed the population will become too small: Then we shall have to cut off a section of our neighbor's land . . . and, next thing, go to war. (373 B-E)

Neighbor views with neighbor, said Hesiod (*Works and Days* 23): it was true of the Greek city-states. Good fences, wrote Robert Frost in *Mending Wall* 27 and 45, make good neighbors, but the Greek city-states did not have good fences. Their frontiers were porous, ill-defined often mountainous pasture land where shepherds from both sides met, like the two in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1132-1139), imaginary lines in the sea, like those that had Greeks and Turks threatening each other with naval action a few years ago.

The great games, from the **ag nes** at Olympia, founded in the eighth century B.C., through those at Delphi, Nemea and the Isthmus, provided a safety valve for this perpetual tension; not only were the cities pitted against each other there in peaceful competition, but for the duration of the games an

\_\_\_\_\_ (**ekecheira**), a cessation of hostilities, made travel to and from the games possible and provided a breathing space and a meeting place that might promote peaceful solutions.

This intercivic rivalry was paralleled by the city's internal rivalries, the **stasis** of the free male population that took the form of struggles for power, pride of place, and material gain. The struggle for supremacy between aristocratic factions was the plague of city life in the archaic period. We have glimpses of its ferocity in the poems of Alcaeus of Lesbos his harsh condemnation of Myrsilus, Melanchrus, and Pittacus; the oath sworn either to die and lie clothed in earth or else to kill them and rescue the people from their sorrows; the storehouse of weapons a great hall gleaming with bronze. . . bright helmets. . . greaves. . . corslets. . . swords. . . all ready for civil war. (140) In Theognis we can hear the sorrow of the exile, the lament of the defeated, as he hears the voice of the bird that tells me to plough in season (1197-1199) but remembers that other men possess my fields. . . it is not for me that the mules draw the yoke of the plough, (1200-1202) and his cry for vengeance on the men who took my possessions by force and hold them still. . . May I drink their dark blood. . ." (345-349) There were other internal city rivalries too—regional ones, for example, like the contention between the men of the coast, of the hills, and of the plains that paved the way for Pisistratus' seizure of power in Athens.

In many cities too these rivalries ended with the establishment of a tyranny, which usually only for the lifetime of the tyrant, put an end to the **stasis** of the factions. In Athens, in one of the ironies of history, the revival of factional **stasis** among the aristocrats after the fall of the tyranny led to the establishment of a democratic regime, as Cleisthenes, facing overwhelming strength marshaled by his rival, called the people to his side, promising popular sovereignty. The result was the establishment of a form of *polis* government that, over the course of its long career of some 180 years, attained stability by steadily reducing the role of competition in political life. Election to office by popular vote gave the candidate only one year in office; he could be reelected only after a long interval. This was only one of the measures taken to prevent the accumulation of experience, popularity, and power in one individual that might promote the formation of a faction. Halfway through the fifth century B.C., election as the method of choosing magistrates was replaced by sortition from select lists. But popular election with the right to reelection *was* instituted for one office, that of the generals of the ten tribal units in which Athenian male citizens were enrolled. This was an office for which talent and experience were essential and a good man was not lightly to be

discarded. Nevertheless, in the first years of the young democracy the fear that one man might attain a dangerous preeminence was still a force to be reckoned with; command of the Athenian hoplite army that went out to face the Persians at Marathon in 490 B.C passed from one of the ten generals to another every day. It sounds like a recipe for military disaster, but in this case the other generals passed up their chance to attack the Persians until Miltiades, the most experienced among them, assumed command. Later in the century the one-day-one-general system was abandoned as Athens' military operations became more diversified and increasingly naval; generals were sent out in command of separate forces.

Inhibiting though this system sounds, it still did not preclude the emergence of a leader who would dominate and direct policy; he could do so through constant or frequent reelection to the board of generals, and it was in this office that first Cimon and later Pericles became leaders of the democracy. But they were still subject to the popular will; even Pericles, in the next to last year of his life, failed to win reelection to the office from which he had directed Athenian policy for decades.

Yet all these precautions against the danger of a successful winner of the competition for popularity were still not thought sufficient, and the Athenians instituted a competition to deal with the danger an unpopularity contest, ostracism. Any citizen could propose it, and if 6,000 citizens felt worried enough to vote against someone they thought a potential danger, the winner was exiled from Athens for ten years. By these and similar measures, the Athenians cured the deadly force of Hesiod's evil *ris*. Though they fought many wars against external foes, they never again, except for the struggle against a regime imposed by the enemy after the surrender in 404 B.C., fought against each other. They heeded the warning that Aeschylus, earlier in 458, a time of dangerous crisis that seemed to threaten violence, had given them in the *Eumenides*, where Athena appeals to the Furies: Do not inflict / your bloody stimulus to twist the inward hearts / of young men . . . nor engraft. . . / among my citizens that spirit of war / that turns their battle fury inward on themselves / . . . No, let our wars rage outward . . . (858-864) And the Furies, later won over, echo her words: This my prayer: Civil war / fattening on men's ruin shall / not thunder in our city . . . (976-978) (translated by Richmond Lattimore)

But in the civil life of the city, Hesiod's other *Eris*, the peaceful emulation that brings men to competition that advances the economy and the arts, was given carte blanche and full scope. Like Olympia and the sites of the other great festivals, Athens had its festival that brought visitors and competitors from

all over the Greek world, the great Panathenaea, celebrated every fourth year, in midsummer, in the first month of the Attic calendar. It featured the usual five athletic events, for which first and second prizes were awarded not symbolic crowns but Panathenaic amphoras filled with olive oil from the groves sacred to Athena fifty for the winner and ten for the runner-up in the foot race and in the same proportion but in differing amounts for the others. There were monetary prizes too: 100 drachmas and an ox for the winning team in the Pyrrhic dance; 300 drachmas cash and 200 drachmas for a victory feast to the crew that won the boat race at Piraeus. There were also musical contests; the winner at singing to the harp received a gilded crown worth 1,000 drachmas and 500 drachmas in cash; the victorious singer to the flute, however, got a 300-drachma crown and 100 drachmas in cash. There was a famous contest, dating back to the days of Pisistratus, for rhapsodes reciting Homer, the event for which Ion of Ephesus, who had already won a prize at Epidaurus, came to Athens, where he passed an uncomfortable half an hour conversing with Socrates. There were also horse races, with jars of olive oil for first and second arrivals at the post; four-horse and two-horse chariot races, single riders on foals and full-grown horses as well as horses equipped for battle, and a contest for throwing the javelin from horseback.

Three months after the Panathenaea there were more games, participation limited to Athenian citizens, the Theseia. They had the usual track events, with a distinctly military flavor. In winter there was the rural Dionysia, a popular festival at which there was a contest that called for the participants to jump up onto a blown-up and greased goatskin and try to stand there. In the next month another Dionysiac festival took place, the Lenaea, at which some tragedies and comedies were performed (among them Aristophanes *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, and *Frogs*). In the following month, at the Anthesteria, there was a drinking contest; at the sound of the trumpet the participants started to drain their cups and the first to finish got the prize, a full wineskin or a cake (this is the contest Dicaeopolis wins in the *Acharnians*). This was followed in the next month by the Greater Dionysia, the occasion for the performance of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; of many of the comedies of Aristophanes, Eupolis, and Cratinus. We do not know the nature of the prizes first, second, and third but it is generally assumed that they were cash payments. There was also, from the mid fifth century B.C. on, a prize for best actor. That same festival saw, on the opening day, a contest of ten dithyrambic choruses, men and boys, representing the ten Athenian tribes; this was obviously an event calculated to generate strong popular enthusiasm. The winning \_\_\_\_\_ (**choreg s**), the

wealthy citizen who financed the training of his tribe's victorious team of dancers in this event, was given the right to set up his trophy, a tripod, on a monument in what Pausanias calls The Street of the Tripods. (Description of Greece 1.20.1) One of them, that of Lysicrates for a victory in 334 B.C., is still standing; its proud inscription reads: Lysicrates son of Lysitheides, of the deme of Cicynna, was choregos. The tribe Akamantis was victorious in the boys' contest. Theon was the flute player. Lysiades the Athenian trained the chorus. Euainetos was the archon. The frieze on the monument shows Dionysus captured by pirates but rescued by satyrs who throw the pirates into the sea, where they are changed into dolphins probably the theme of the victorious dithyramb. The next month saw only one competition, but it was an exciting one cavalry manoeuvres, including the \_\_\_\_\_ ( **anthippas** ), an exercise described by Xenophon, in which tribal contingents rode against each other in mock warfare before the city council seated in a grandstand. (*The Cavalry Commander* 1.20) The following month offered a contest of choirs of men and boys singing hymns to Apollo, and also, from 429 B.C. onwards, the relay torch race on horseback in honor of the Thracian goddess Bendis, an event that the guests in the house of Cephalus in Plato's *Republic* stay in order to see, but they never get there. We hear also of other torch races, on foot and on horseback at the festivals of Prometheus and of Hephaestus and also at the Panathenaea.

The Athenian year was rich, as Pericles proudly claimed in his Funeral Speech (Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.38.1), in occasions to participate in, as performer or spectator, the good **ris** praised by Hesiod, the emulation, the contest that leads not to harm but to the enrichment of life. But though the democratic process abolished the struggle for power and preeminence that was the curse of aristocratic and oligarchic regimes, there was one area of activity in Athens in which rivalry, even hostility, could have full play, often with damaging consequences for the loser. It was the law court, the Heliaea, where large, sometimes huge, juries heard plea and counterplea and chose the winning side.

The Athenians were a litigious lot, ready to go to court at the drop of a hat. The anonymous writer affectionately known as the Old Oligarch (sometimes referred to as pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians*) says that the Athenians handle more public and private lawsuits and judicial investigations than the whole of the rest of mankind. (3.2) In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, when Strepsiades is shown a map in the Socratic school and has Athens located for him, he protests: That's not Athens. I don't see any jurors on the bench. (208) Trials were strictly regulated, like athletic events; in the usual type of civil case each

side made two speeches, in the order prosecutor-defendant, prosecutor-defendant, all of them timed by a water clock. There was no judge to rule on legal points, to sustain or overrule objections; the trial was a simple oratorical contest, an **agon**, a competition to win the sympathy and support of the jury. The speeches, of course, were mostly written by professionals for clients and many of them have come down to us, but always as single speeches, either for the prosecution or for the defense. The only samples we have of the four-speech format are the *Tetralogies* of Antiphon (if indeed they are Antiphon's) which are clearly not records of actual trials but rather rhetorical models for students. But they give some ideas of what an Athenian court case may have been like; above all, they give us a sense of that rhetorical training in agonistic speech which Athenian democracy made essential for the man who wished to play his part in the political life of the city or to defend or prosecute in court. The training, taught by the so-called sophists, great and minor, was **eristic** Protagoras (c.480-c.421 B.C.) is credited with a book called \_\_\_\_\_ ( **Techneristikon** ) and he certainly introduced and developed the technique of \_\_\_\_\_ ( **antilogia** ), the writing and delivery of two speeches, each defending opposite sides of a hypothetical case.

This agonistic cast of thought became characteristic of the generation that was influenced by Sophistic teaching. It pervades Euripidean tragedy, where time after time two sides of an issue are debated before a judge in set speeches of more or less equal length Hecuba and the Thracian king Polymester before Agamemnon in the *Hecuba*, Helen and Hecuba before Menelaus in the *Trojan Women*, Tyndareus and Orestes before the same judge in the *Orestes*. In Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War Cleon (3.37-40) and Diodotus (3.42-48) put the case for and against slaughtering the rebellious Mytilenaeans to the Athenian assembly; the Plataeans make their plea for mercy (3.53-59) and the Thebans theirs for retaliation (3.61-67) before the Spartan judges; Nicias (6.9-14) and Alcibiades (6.16-18) debate the issue of the expedition to Sicily before the Athenian assembly. At Melos, Thucydides dispenses with individual speakers and, as if they were characters in a drama, assigns speeches to Athenians and Melians (5.85-113) in which the doctrine of power as its own justification is developed and proclaimed by the Athenians in its classic form.

Jacob Burckhardt, writing over a hundred years ago, was right to emphasize the element in ancient Greek culture that he called *das Agonale*. But he was wrong when he saw it as characteristic only of the archaic age, of the whole period from the end of the Dorian invasion until almost the end of the 6<sup>th</sup>

century, the time, that is, that one could, in a certain sense, call the Greek Middle Ages. For it was their national characteristic as long as they were a free people. Both in the arts and in politics it was the driving force of the constant experimentation, of the restless competitive energy that transformed the Dionysiac dithyramb into tragedy and comedy, that, starting with statues of a male youth that aped the Egyptian model left leg advanced, arms straight down by the sides relaxed and adapted the figure's stance to produce, in a few generations, the mobile grace of the Kritios boy.

This competitive spirit had its roots in the disparate nature of their political organization, the cities all vying for territory, for predominance. This perpetual instability of the Greek world was a marked contrast with the great empires of the east, ruled from a powerful center by kings presiding over river civilizations that could survive only by cooperation, by firm control of the large-scale operation of irrigation, the regulation of great rivers. This divisiveness of the Greek political scene was the germ of their greatness; it was also the reason for their eventual loss of independence. Even against the Persian invasion they could not unite; the Thebans fought, and fought well, on the side of the Persians. The Peloponnesian War left the Greeks so weakened that Macedon was able to become the predominant power in the area; their disunity made them unable to prevent its rise and their final reluctant stand was made too late. Their rise and fall were governed by the operation of the two goddesses the good and the bad Eris.