

Social Memory and Aeschylus' *Persae*

For Athenians in the year 472, the Persian invasions of 490 and 480 constituted the vivid and not-so-distant past. Since the threat of Persian invasion remained very real, the collective social memory of those events is instructive in considering how the Athenians looked forward. For in this era, Athenian hegemony was not yet established. The social memory of previous invasions is important: as a kind of 'meaningful history' that creates a 'usable past' (Assmann: 2001), social memory is intricately involved in how a community orients itself towards the future (Fentress & Wickham: 1992). Crucial to the study of social memory is the recognition that the past is recalled differently by different elements of a community at different times (and for different purposes). For Athenians in 472, the future was by no means clear, and it is likely that there were different attitudes about the lingering threat of Persian invasion.

Aeschylus' *Persae* provides an interesting document for the study of social memory, as it draws on (or constructs) the respective memories of both Athens and Persia: the play, which was performed in Athens and for a (largely) Athenian audience, nonetheless portrays the events of recent history through the eyes of the Persian opponent. This paper investigates the complicated representation of social memory in the play, and argues that the drama's dual perspective leads to tension. The Persians, for example, are overly optimistic vis-à-vis both the future and the past; Xerxes' expedition is recalled in grand terms prior to the news of defeat, while the deceased Darius is recalled as a godlike ruler under whose leadership Persia flourished (e.g. 652-6, 671, 709-11). The posthumous memory of Darius' success is so vivid that it is his counsel that is desperately sought from beyond the grave following the news of Xerxes' disastrous defeat at Salamis (619ff.).

But the fact that Darius becomes, for the Persians, the symbolic foil for the recklessness and failure of Xerxes reveals a chasm separating the respective social memories of Athens and Persia. For the Athenians, after all, the historical failure of Darius' expedition clashed with the Persians' appeal to his godlike status; Darius is no foil, but rather the precedent for Xerxes. The optimistic and selective social memory of the Persians may well have been striking for the audience, and the clash with their own social memory may very well have provoked a response: to observe the Persians and Darius speaking of 'remembering the Athenians' (e.g. 285, 287, 824), even as Xerxes repeats his father's folly, presents the possibility that the next Great King's court will be similarly myopic about the past. For an Athenian audience in 472, the suggestion

that Persian collective memory so quickly turned a blind eye to Darius' failure and was so optimistic in representing Xerxes' departure sounds an alarm: what is to prevent the same thing from happening in the future, and what if 470 held the prospect of a further invasion to mirror those of 490 and 480?

Bibliography

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