

## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

BOCKSBERGER (S.M.) **Telamonian Ajax: The Myth in Archaic and Classical Greece.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xviii + 278. £75. 9780198864769.  
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Ajax is a strange figure in Agamemnon's army. He has the reputation of being a first-class warrior, and yet he is curiously something of an 'also-ran' compared with some of his colleagues. In scholarly tradition, too, he has received less attention than some other heroes, and as Sophie Bocksberger notes in her introduction, hers is the first monograph fully devoted to Ajax and his reception in archaic and classical Greece. Luckily for Ajax, Bocksberger has written an excellent account of his origins and development in the wider context of Greek, and specifically Atheno-Aeginetan, politics. Bocksberger combines breadth and depth, considering the shifting relations between the Greek *poleis* which laid claim to Ajax through historical, geographical and artistic lenses, while offering close and sensitive readings of the texts in which Ajax features: many of these are fragmentary or complex, and demand careful interpretation, which she provides in three long but clearly signposted chapters. These are equipped with well-chosen maps and copious illustrations.

Chapter 1 explores Ajax in pre-Homeric tradition, through a discussion of how extant Homeric information hints at pre-Homeric traditions now somewhat lost to us as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey's* characterizations of heroes became canonical, supplanting variant, opposing traditions (75). A hallmark of Bocksberger's work is her systematic 'detective work' and this chapter untangles the relationship between Homer and the epic cycle to take us back to a pre-Homeric Ajax. Especially intriguing is Bocksberger's argument that an epic, but un-Homeric tradition in which Ajax is invulnerable can be seen as a kind of ghost tradition in the *Iliad* (42–47) in which he is never wounded, though often in the thick of combat; someone invulnerable is also an ideal person to retrieve Patroclus' body, as he does in the *Iliad*, just as he retrieves Achilles' body on vases and in non-Homeric epic. Bocksberger argues (25) that Ajax emerges in the late Bronze Age as a Salaminian hero, and that his lineage in Panhellenic, pre-Homeric tradition is Aeacid, like Achilles, with whom he has significantly close associations (32): Aegina claimed the Aeacids, so Ajax's original associations are with Salamis and Aegina. It is frequently noted that Ajax does not have as close a relationship with the gods as other main Iliadic heroes do, and that there are cases in the *Iliad* where Athena could have helped him but apparently chooses not to, suggesting that she is indifferent or even hostile to him (as she is, of course, in Sophocles' *Ajax*). Bocksberger connects these traditions with the earlier tradition in which he is invulnerable. As an invulnerable hero, Ajax might need less divine protection than some other heroes, but it is easy to see how a diminished reliance on the gods could slide into arrogance that brings divine retribution upon him (56–63). The lesser Ajax was also hated by Athena and Bocksberger argues that the two homonymous heroes share enough characteristics to have originally been one and the same (71–73).

In Chapter 2, Bocksberger explores Ajax's Aeginetan connections, combining close readings of the poems of Pindar and Bacchylides celebrating Aeginetan victors with the broader context of Aeginetan history and the geographical and political relationships between Aegina, Salamis and Athens to trace a gradual development of the character and deeds of Ajax from a non-Athenian perspective. Her approach is clear and methodical and well anchored in solid scholarship. The final chapter explores Ajax in Athens and the influence of history and politics influence on mythological narratives. In the Archaic era,

Athens' struggle to control Salamis made Ajax an attractive figure to claim as an Athenian ally, and in the post-Cleisthenic era, effort is made to co-opt him as a full Athenian hero in the context of Atheno-Aeginetan rivalry. However, after the eclipse of Cimon (a descendant of Ajax via his Philaid ancestry) and Aegina's surrender to Athens in 457, Ajax somewhat loses his political potency, and his decline is reflected in a diminished presence in vase painting. Particularly interesting is the discussion of Ajax in early democratic Athens, in which he can be read as both an aristocratic hero, as the ancestor of the Philaids, but also a democratic hero as the eponym of one of the tribes, and his Salaminian origins also connect him to 480's great victory. Bocksberger also offers worthwhile accounts of Ajax on Greek vases, a fascinating account of Ajax in the fragments of Aeschylus and, as a fitting ending to the book, a discussion of Sophocles' *Ajax* which, as she argues, encapsulates certain major characteristics of Ajax which her earlier chapters have traced.

In this short review it is impossible to do full justice to Bocksberger's excellent account, which is grounded in a fine command of previous scholarship, nuanced reading and an ability to see the bigger picture. The indignant, also-ran hero should be somewhat mollified at last.

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