Public Records vs Public Memory
A study of the Peisistratid Tyranny through the public archives and comparing them to the memories of the Athenian public

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A study of the Peisistratid Tyranny through the public archives and comparing them to the memories of the Athenian public. The aim of this paper is to discuss what the public archives of archaic Athens preserve about the years of the Peisistratid Tyranny and compare it to what the Athenian public remember about the Peisistratid Tyranny and the events of the period. Firstly, the ancient evidence that is extant will be discussed and it will be considered where this evidence came from, whether it is epigraphical, literary or archaeological. Secondly, what is a preservation of a public record and what is a public memory will be distinguished and compared to see which is closer to what might have happened.

"Ἡν ἐγὼ ἐπὶ πλέον διηγησάμενος ἀποφανῶ οὐτέ τοὺς ἄλλους οὔτε αὐτούς Ἀθηναίους περὶ σφετέρων τυρράνων οὐδὲ περὶ τοῦ γενομένου ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν λέγοντας.

(... And by relating this at some length I shall prove that neither the Hellenes at large nor even the Athenians themselves give an accurate account about their own tyrants or this incident...)¹

In this digression from his narrative of the Peisistratid Tyranny, Thoukydides criticised the record keeping of the Athenians as inaccurate and of poor quality. Thoukydides indicated that he intended to prove (ἀποφανῶ) that this was the case, and that he needed to correct commonly held views about the Peisistratid Tyranny.

¹ Thoukydides 6.54.1 (trans by P. Frost), London, 1867 [Loeb Edition].
The Peisistratidai played a major role in the politics of Athens for half a century between 561/0 BC and 511/0 BC, in which time Athens was radically transformed with a series of public works that beautified the public spaces of Athens. They also were responsible for the purification of the ancient Ionian cult on the island of Delos in the Aegean. However, the contribution made by the Peisistratid Tyranny was poorly recorded by the Athenians of their time and the majority of the evidence surviving dates from the fifth century and portrays the tyranny in a negative way. It ignores how the tyranny contributed to the development of Athens.

The Public Memory

The concept of tradition in these accounts of the early history of Athens can be thought of as what the Athenians believed had happened in the historical past, not necessarily what had happened. The addition of myth in these accounts was a way to embellish these accounts by adding finer details to make the accounts more vivid even though they were not part of the story, or enhancing details that were given little attention in the original account. These two concepts form the basis of what I have called the public memory.

The public memory is the telling and re-telling of the events of the historical past that employed tradition and myth to create the stories that were handed down through the generations by way of oral tradition. These may include personal, first hand accounts of those who were involved with the events of the time or had lived at the time they occurred. However, each generation added their own personal touches to these stories changing them by distorting or altering the facts to suit their own purposes.

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2 For evidence of Peisistratos’ purification of the island of Delos see Thoukydides 3.104 and Herodotos 1.64. Thoukydides only mentioned this in conjunction with the purification of Delos in 426/5 BC and the re-establishment of the Delian Games which was conducted by Nikias. Unfortunately we do not have a precise date for the Peisistratid purification of Delos but it might be as early as 545 BC based on Herodotos. See C. R. Long, “Greeks, Carians, and the Purification of Delos”, AJA 62 (1958), pp. 297–306 and more recently R. Brock, “Thucydides and the Athenian Purification of Delos”, Mnemosyne 49 (1996), pp. 321–7 for discussions on the purification of Delos by Peisistratos.


The Public Record

Apart from the public memory, there is also another body of evidence: the public record.5 The public records were records kept by the state which were predominantly inscriptions that were either commemorative or political/legal. Commemorative inscriptions were things like offering thanks to a particular deity or commemorating the lives of great men. Political or legal inscriptions were things like an amendment to the constitution or the exacting of a new law.

Considering the impact that the Persian Wars had upon archaic Athens, did any records survive the great conflagration of 480 BC? A small amount of inscriptive evidence dating prior to 480 BC that survived the destruction of Athens demonstrates at least that the Athenians attempted to recover the city’s recorded history either prior to the Persian attack on Athens or in the salvage operation after the Greek victory at Salamis.6

There is also inscriptive evidence that has survived from the fifth century which might give an insight into what preceded them. A notable example is the Athenian Archon List dating to the late fifth century; was there an earlier list which the new list was copied from, which was either disposed of or lost at a later stage.7

Another very important piece of evidence from the archaic period was the kyrbeis. The kyrbeis was a wooden frame that contained a series of axles upon which wooden

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5 Stroud (1978) referred to this evidence as “state documents” but I have chosen to call them public records.

6 The initial focus of the Persians’ destruction of Athens was the torching of the Akropolis once the Persians had gained access to the Akropolis, for this see Herodotos 8.51–7. Thoukydides 1.89 stated that the fortification walls and many of the buildings in the city were in ruins when the Athenians returned to the city as the rest of Athens was torched by Mardonios when the Persians abandoned Athens early in 479 BC, for this see Herodotos 9.13. Thoukydides 1.93 stated that many of the ruined buildings were demolished and the stone reused in the new fortifications as well as sculpture and pillars from tombs. Out of this destruction the Athenians did restore and preserve aspects of the city’s history as we shall see. The inscriptions known to date to this period that survived the destruction are IG I² 761 (Dedication of Peisistratos, Son of Hippia c.521 BC); IG I³ 501 (Epigram celebrating an Athenian Victory over Boiotia and Khalkis c. 506 BC); IG I³ 784 (Dedication of Kallimakhos 490 BC).

7 The fragments of the Archon List that have survived come from a list compiled in the late fifth century see R. Meiggs and D. M. Lewis, A Selection of Greek historical inscriptions to the end of the fifth century BC (Oxford, 1969), no. 6, pp. 9–12. Frost in Eadie & Ober (1985), p. 67 and Stroud (1978), pp. 24–7 both argue that an old Archon List existed because it was continually added to with each archonship otherwise how would the Athenians known the names of Archons that were in office in the early part of the Seventh Century BC? An older work but still useful is T. J. Cadoux, “The Athenian Archons from Kreon to Hypsichides”, JHS 68 (1948), pp. 70–123.
These wooden tablets were inscribed with the laws of Solon. In his *Life of Solon*, Ploutarkhos stated that whilst in Athens, he viewed what was left of the *kyrbeis* in the Prytaneion, an indication that it had survived the conflagration of 480 BC but had suffered wear and tear over a number of centuries requiring it to be housed within the Prytaneion to protect it.9

Apart from the survival of archaeological and inscriptive evidence, there is also a body of literary evidence that has survived in fragmentary form. This evidence known as *Atthides* (*Atthis* in the singular form) were chronicles of which none have survived complete but citations survive in other literary works hence the survival of fragments. We cannot be sure in what depth these writers, for example Hellanikos, Androton, Eratosthenes, Pherekydes and Philokhoros to name a few, described the events in their *Atthides*, but they must have obtained their information from somewhere, earlier *Atthides* or other records like inscriptions. The best example of a near complete *Atthis* is Aristotle’s *Athenaion Politeia*.10

Taking the public memory and public record into perspective, our aim is to discover whether public records are in fact the bare bones of an historical event which the public memory has attempted to flesh out by employing tradition and myth to fill in the gaps and link together. The case study that will be used to test these ideas is the murder of Hipparkhos in 514/3 BC. This is one of the most significant events of the late 6th century BC, which ultimately changed the course of Athenian history.

**Who was Hipparkhos?**

Hipparkhos was a member of the Peisistratid family, the second son whom his father Peisistratos had fathered by his Athenian wife (name unknown). He was one of four known sons of Peisistratos.11 The family tree of Hipparkhos was quite well known because Thoukydides stated that amongst the dedications on the Akropolis a pillar (ἡ στήλη) was erected and the inscription contained the family tree of the Peisistratidai; the reason being that it commemorated the injustices committed by the tyrants.12

Unfortunately, while the inscription has not survived into modern times, though it survived the Persian Wars. The one point is that Thoukydides interpreted the inscription as commemorating the cruelty of the tyranny, possibly erected shortly after the expulsion of Hippias in 511/0 BC.13 The problem is that Thoukydides only mentioned that the family tree was inscribed on the pillar and does not mention anything else

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8 Ploutarkhos, *Solon* 25.
9 Ploutarkhos, *Solon* 25.
12 Thoukydides 6.55.1: “... ἡ ἑν τῇ Ἀθηναίων ἀκροπόλει σταθεῖσα ...” It would appear that Thoukydides was convinced that this was the only explanation for the pillar inscription.
13 Thoukydides 6.55.1: “... ἡ στήλη περὶ τῆς τῶν τυράννων ἀδικίας ...”
about the inscription, leaving us to consider whether Thoukydides’ interpretation of the pillar was correct.

One clue is the style of the dedication; Thoukydides noted it was a pillar (ἡ στήλη). One very famous pillar inscription dating to 490/89 BC is the dedication to Kallimakhos, Polemarch of Athens in that year who died heroically at the Battle of Marathon.¹⁴ Kallimakhos’ stele was a short pillar topped off with an Ionic capital and upon this sat a statuette.¹⁵ Although we have no description of the Peisistratid pillar, it may have been of similar design as it was technically a dedication. When it was dedicated is another problem. Thoukydides does leave a tantalising clue that it would appear that the dedication was erected together with the extension to the altar of Pythian Apollo built by Hippias’ son Peisistratos the Younger.¹⁶

The evidence that survived in the archaeological record gives indirect evidence about the time of the murder of Hipparkhos. However, some details about the event were recorded in the public record and preserved. Firstly, it would state those responsible being Harmodios and Aristogeiton, who in an assassination attempt upon Hipparkhos’ older brother, the tyrant Hippias, bungled the operation and took the life of Hipparkhos by attacking him and stabbing him multiple times.¹⁷ Secondly, the time and place of the crime which occurred during the course of the Great Panathenaia festival and the place was the Leokorion, an ancient monument in the Agora precinct.¹⁸

The evidence from the public memory although it attempts to fill the details about the murder of Hipparkhos, it’s also problematic. Firstly, there is the problem of conflicting accounts within the sources. The problem has arisen because when people reported these events, they would report what they remembered, and in the case of Hipparkhos’ murder the confusion and panic it caused would have made this all the more probable. One problem is where Hippias was at the time of the murder. Thoukydides reported that Hippias was outside the city walls in the Kerameikos quarter directing the course of the Panathenaic procession.¹⁹ Contrary to Thoukydides, Aristotle reported that Hippias was on the Akropolis.²⁰ Both place Hipparkhos at the Leokorion in the Agora.²¹

Secondly, traditions arose from the tyranny that resonated in the public memory, for example a well known Athenian drinking song quoted by Athenaios.²² In this

¹⁴ Herodotos 6.114.
¹⁵ IG I³ 784. See also A. E. Raubitschek, Dedications from the Athenian Akropolis (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), no. 13, pp. 18–20 believed that if a figure of a winged woman belonged to this pillar it would either be Iris or Nike (Victory).
¹⁶ Thoukydides 6.54.7.
¹⁷ Thoukydides 6.57.3–4, Aristotle, Athenaion Politeia 19.3.
¹⁸ Thoukydides 6.57.3–4, Aristotle, Athenaion Politeia 19.3.
¹⁹ Thoukydides 6.57.1.
²⁰ Aristotle, Athenaion Politeia 19.3.
²¹ Thoukydides 6.57.3–4, Aristotle, Athenaion Politeia 19.3.
²² Athenaios, Deipnosophistai 695 a–b. See also Aristophanes, Akharnians 980 for the same quotation.
song Harmodios and Aristogeiton were glorified for slaying the tyrant and making Athens a place of equal rights.\(^{23}\) The distortion of historical facts in the drinking song would have an Athenian believe that Hipparkhos was the tyrant, and that his dramatic fall from grace brought quick and decisive political change to Athens. This interpretation of the events leading to the murder of Hipparkhos was seen as a triumph of good over evil without a real focus on the characters involved. Unfortunately for Hipparkhos, he was not given a voice in the story as he was both evil and vanquished.

This leads to the third point about how the Athenian public formed opinions about the tyranny, and how these opinions developed into what the public came to believe about the tyranny. The most important point here is how these opinions about the tyranny were formed, in particular focusing on the role of Aristogeiton. When Aristogeiton was hauled before Hippias, he denounced a number of men of high distinction for being co-conspirators.\(^{24}\) The impression is that Aristogeiton had a pivotal role in bringing down the tyranny by terrorising Hippias into ordering the mass execution of his supporters and thus weakening the stranglehold of the tyranny on Athens. The opinions that were formed and resonated about the tyranny were that it was an evil regime that needed to be done away with and that Aristogeiton represented the good heroic man sacrificing himself for the good of Athens.\(^{25}\) However, Aristogeiton’s motives were personal not political and his intention was to kill Hippias not to bring down the tyranny but to satisfy his hurt pride and that of his lover Harmodios.\(^{26}\)

The problems associated with the public memory and how the public actually remembered events and how they occurred are very important. The misinterpretation of the situation at the time would have led to gossip, rumours, lies and the distortion of the facts. Perhaps we cannot blame the Athenian public for this, but the panic caused the murder of Hipparkhos would certainly have led to opinions being formed and resonating in the minds of the Athenian public for generations.

The conclusion is that the public record was certainly the bare facts about the events of the historical past which the public memory attempted to flesh out. The murder of Hipparkhos is truly an intriguing example of how the story can be told and re-told over the generations, and how the facts can be distorted to suit the story that was being told rather than the real story. Closer examination of the evidence does reveal the flaws in both aspects as with the case study discussed.

\(^{23}\) Athenaios, Deipnosophistai 695 a: “Ἀρμόδιος καὶ Αριστογείτων, ὅτε τὸν τύραννον κτανέτην ἰσονόμους τ’ Ἀθήνας ἐπομόσατην.” (with variations in each verse).
\(^{24}\) Aristotle, Athenaios Politeia 18.4–6.
\(^{25}\) Athenaios, Deipnosophistai 695a–b.
\(^{26}\) Thukydides 6.59.1.
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