

"'Born from the Earth': The Political Uses of an Athenian Myth."

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1. Homer *Iliad* 546-555:

“And those who held Athens, the well-built citadel,
the people of great-hearted Erechtheus, whom once
Athena, the daughter of Zeus, nurtured,
and the wheat-bearing ploughland bore,
and [Athena] settled him in Athens, in her own rich temple.
And there the youths of the Athenians
worship him with bulls and sheep each year.
And Menestheus, the son of Peteos, was their leader
To whom no earthly man ever yet was equal
In ordering horses and shield-bearing men.”

2. Herodotus 7.161

“For in vain we would have acquired the greatest fleet of the Greeks if we, although being Athenians, were to yield the leadership to the Syracusans. For we supply the oldest race (ἀρχαιότατον ἔθνος) and we alone are the only Greeks never to have changed our dwelling place (μοῦνοι ἐόντες οὐ μετανάσται Ἑλλήνων). Even the epic poet Homer affirmed that we supplied the best man at stationing the troops who went to Troy.”

3. Isocrates *Panegyricus* 23-25:

“For it is agreed that our city is the oldest and the greatest and the most famous among men... For we inhabit this land neither having displaced other men, nor having seized an uninhabited land nor gathering together a mixed bunch from many peoples. Rather we have been born so nobly and legitimately that the land from which we were born we continue to hold for all time since we are born from the earth itself. And we are able to address the city with the same names as we address our closest kin. For it is proper for us alone of the Greeks to call our same nurse both fatherland and mother.”

4. Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.2

“It appears that the land now called Greece was not securely inhabited long ago. Rather there were lots of changes of residence in earlier times and each group left behind his own land readily when they were compelled by those who were more numerous. For there were no markets, nor did men mix with one another without

fear either on land or on the sea. Each one made use of his resources in so far as to have sufficient to live, and they did not have a surplus of possessions. Nor did they cultivate the land, since it was unclear if someone else, attacking (for everything was unwallled) would carry the crop off. Since they believed that they would acquire sufficient livelihood anywhere, they picked up and migrated without difficulty. And on account of this fact, they were neither strong in the size of their cities nor in any other resource. The best land was especially subject to changes of inhabitants – namely the land now called Thessaly and Boeotia and the majority of the Peloponnesus except Arcadia, and all the rest whichever was the best. For on account of the excellence of the land, power became greater for some and caused civil strife, from which they perished, and at the same time they were more liable to be plotted against by other groups. The same men always inhabited Attica, since it was free from migrations for the most part due to the poverty of the soil. The growth of Athens not similarly to other parts of Greece is not the most insignificant illustration of this argument. For of those from the rest of Greece who were in exile due to war or civil unrest, the most able came to Athens on the ground that it was secure. These men became citizens right away and they made the city bigger already in olden times in the number of men. The result was that later on they sent out colonies to Ionia since the land of Attica was not sufficient.”

5. Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.36

“I will begin first with our ancestors. For it is just and fitting for this occasion to give this honor of remembrance to them. For the same men have always occupied this land and they handed it down, in succession, to those who came after them as a free land on account of their virtue.”

6. Plato *Menexenus* 237b-239a

“The ancestry of these men is not from immigrant stock nor does it reveal these men to be resident non-citizens in this land, [born] from those having come from elsewhere. Rather these men are born from the earth itself (αὐτόχθονας) and they truly dwell and live in their fatherland...Other cities are composed of unequal men from all sorts of places, and therefore their political systems are unequal, being both tyrannies and oligarchies. But we...are all brothers born from the one mother, and we do not think we should be slaves or masters of one another. Rather our equality of birth by nature compels us to seek democracy (literally “equality before the law”) according to the law, and to yield to one another in no other way than in our reputation for virtue and intelligence.”