

Texts on Athenian Autochthony

Athenian Citizenship Law of 451 BCE (from Plutarch *Life of Pericles* 37.1–5). *The Citizenship Law was passed at the height of Athenian power in the Aegean and restricted citizenship to children born of two Athenian citizen parents. This passage is the fullest description of the law and its details.* (MLG)

After the community put the remaining generals and leaders on trial for their conduct in the war,¹ there was clearly no one left who had the requisite authority or required dignity for such leadership. They longed for Pericles and called him to the speaker's platform and to accept the generalship. Pericles at the time was lying depressed at home because of his sorrow, but he was persuaded by Alcibiades and the rest of his friends to come forward.² After the people had apologized for their foolish behavior toward him, he once again took up public affairs and was elected general. He then asked that the law about children with only one Athenian parent be repealed. Although he himself had introduced this law, he now did not want his name and family line to be completely wiped out through lack of descendants. [3] The following circumstances surrounded the law. Many years earlier when Pericles was at the height of his political power and had legitimate children (as was said), he proposed a law that only children born from two Athenian parents were to be Athenian.

¹ Plutarch inserts the note on the Citizenship Law into his description of events in 429 BCE.

² Perikles lost both of his citizen-sons in the plague.

It happened that the king of Egypt sent forty thousands measures of grain as a gift and it was necessary to divide it up among the citizens. Many private lawsuits sprang up from this law against illegitimate citizens, who had till then escaped notice or been overlooked. Very many suffered from the prosecuting informers. [4] As a result of the scrutiny, a little less than five thousand were convicted and sold into slavery; fourteen thousand and forty were judged Athenian citizens and remained in the polity. [5] And so it was terrible that a law, which had powerfully affected so many, be repealed by the very man who proposed it. However, the present misfortune of Pericles' family, seeming a sort of penalty for his contempt and arrogance, moved the Athenians to pity. Since they considered that he was suffering retribution and that his request was only human, they allowed him to enroll his illegitimate son in the *phratry* and give him his name.³ And it was this son who later won a naval victory against the Peloponnesians at Arginusae and whom the people put to death along with his fellow generals.

Euripides *Ion* 57-75, 260-272, 585-594, 1295-1305, 1569-1594 (5th century BCE).

Euripides' Ion tells the story of the reunion of Creusa, princess of Athens and descendant of Erectheus/Erichthonious,⁴ the autochthon (born from the earth), with her

³ Scholars debate whether the exception was made only for Perikles' son or if the law was suspended for others as well.

⁴ There is much confusion in Athenian mythology about these figures. By 412 BCE, the genealogy has settled: Erichthonious is the first autochthon, while his descendant Erechtheus is

lost son by Apollo, Ion. The play's numerous plot twists are enabled by the focus on the Athenians' autochthonous birth and xenophobia. (RFK)

57–75. Hermes: Creusa, the one who bore him, was married to Xuthus under the following circumstances: a wave of war crashed over Athens and the Chalcidians, who hold sway in Euboea. Xuthus was deemed worthy of being Creusa's husband through his efforts in the war even though he was foreign born, an Achaean, the son of Zeus' son Aeolus. Now, although they have planted many a seed in their marriage bed, Xuthus and Creusa have long been childless. For this reason, they have come to the oracle of Apollo, longing for children. Little do they know that Apollo Loxias it was who had driven them to this fate, nor has he been unaware of them, so it seems. For when they enter the oracle, Apollo will give Xuthus this child [Ion], claiming that it is Xuthus's natural born son. Later, Apollo will arrange for Creusa, the child's true mother, to recognize that the boy entering her household is, in fact, the child she bore to Loxias. Everyone will win! Loxias' rape will remain concealed and the boy will receive his proper birthright. Apollo will also ensure that the boy, the founder of Asian lands, will be called Ion throughout Greece.

king of Athens and father of Creusa. Erichthonius is half man, half serpent—common among autochthons and similar to the non-Athenian autochthon Cecrops. It is Erechtheus who fight the battle against Poseidon's son and is killed by Poseidon on the spot on the Acropolis now marked by the Erechtheum.

Creusa and Ion meet in the temple, where Creusa has gone to pray concerning her lost child and where Ion works as an attendant.

260–272. Creusa: Creusa is my name, Erechtheus, my father, the city of Athens, my fatherland.

Ion: You amaze me, lady. You live in a famous city and are born from noble ancestry.

Creusa: I am fortunate in this regard, stranger, but in nothing more.

Ion: By the gods, tell me truly, as the story is told among mortals...

Creusa: What is it, stranger, that you want to learn? Ask it.

Ion: Did your ancestors really sprout from the earth?

Creusa: Erichthonius did, yes; not that my race benefits me at all.

Ion: And did Athena really take him up from the earth?

Creusa: Yes and right into her virgin hands; she didn't give birth to him.

Ion: And then she gave him, as paintings usually show...

Creusa: ...to the daughters of Kekrops to keep safe and hidden.

289–296. Ion: Who of the Athenians married you, lady?

Creusa: He isn't a citizen, but an import⁵ from another land.

Ion: Who is he? He must be of noble race.

Creusa: Xuthus, born of Aeolus and descended from Zeus.

⁵ The Greek term ἐπιπράξις, is typically used for mercenaries and emphasizes the view of

Creusa that she is a war prize.

Ion: And how did this foreigner get to marry someone as well-born as you?

Creusa: There is a city in Euboea, which is near Athens...

Ion: Separated by only a watery boundary, they say.

Creusa: Well, he attacked this city as an ally of the Cecropidae.⁶

Ion: He came as a mercenary and was then married to you?

Creusa: Yes. He took me as a war-won dowry and a spear-prize.

Xuthus is told by the oracles that Ion is his son and announces to Ion that he will return to Athens and become his heir.

585–594. Ion (to Xuthus): Matters don't look the same from far off as they do seen close up. I welcome the fate that led me to find out you're my father. But, father, listen to what's on my mind. It's said that the famous Athenians are autochthonous, born from the earth, not an immigrant race. Thus I'll be showing up there with two black marks against me. First, my father is a foreigner. Second, I'm a bastard by birth.

When she learns that Xuthus intends to bring Ion (whom she believes is Xuthus' son by a foreign woman) home, Creusa tries to murder Ion to prevent him from inheriting the Athenian kingship.

1295–1305. Creusa: You were intending to live in my house, taking it from me by force.

⁶ Cecropidae = descendants of Cecrops. It is another way of naming the Athenians.

Ion: So you were trying to kill me in fear of what I intended?

Creusa: Why wouldn't I kill you unless this wasn't your intent?

Ion: Are you jealous because you are childless and my father found me?

Creusa: Are you trying to steal the house of those without children?

Ion: Look, my father is giving me his land.

Creusa: How does the race of Aeolus have a share with the race of Pallas?⁷

Ion: He earned your house by arms, not words.

Creusa: The mercenary is nothing but an inhabitant, a colonist, of the land.

Ion: And there is no share in my father's land for me?

Creusa: His spear and shield—that's the full extent of your share of *this* land.

After Ion attempts to murder Creusa in turn and the situation has reached an absurd peak, Ion and Creusa recognize their relationship through tokens left with him when she abandoned him at birth. Athena descends to further put things right.

1569–1594. Athena: But now listen to what I have to say, so that I may bring this business to an end and fulfill the god's oracles, which is why I harnessed my chariot.

Creusa, you are to take this child with you to Cecrops' land and establish him on the

⁷ Inheritance is by birth only, thus Creusa asks by what right Ion, whom she does not know is her son, inherits the land of *her* ancestors from someone not related to her family by birth. Further, the phrase "to have a share in" implies citizenship, which based on the Citizenship Law of 451 BCE, was from two citizen parents only.

royal throne. As a descendant of Erechtheus, he has a right to rule over my land, and his fame will spread throughout Greece. His sons—four from the one root—will give their names to the land and to the native tribes of the land, the inhabitants of my cliff. The first-born will be Geleon, then the second <...> the Hopletes and the Argades, and the Aegicores, named after my aegis, will constitute a single tribe. Then in due course of time the children of these four will found communities on the islands of the Cyclades and the coastal mainland, whose might will support my land. They will also colonize opposite sides of the straits on the two continents, Asia and Europe. They will be named Ionians, after your son here, and they will win great renown. You and Xuthus will have children together: Dorus, whose descendants, the Dorians, will be celebrated throughout the land of Pelops. The second son, Achaeus, will be king of the coastland near Rhion; and a people named after him will be marked with his name.

Plato *Menexenus* 237e–238b, 238e–239a (4th century BCE). *Plato's version of an Athenian funeral oration emphasizes the Athenian focus on their unusual origin. The theory of autochthony expands to include not only the descendants of Erichthonius, but also any Athenian. Plato explicitly links Athenian autochthony to Athenian customs/culture.* (MLG)

237b–238b. I begin with their excellence of birth: The origin of their ancestors was not foreign. That origin revealed that their descendants were not immigrants come into this land from elsewhere, but were born from the soil and were living and dwelling truly in

their fatherland. They were not nursed by a stepmother like other peoples, but by their mother, that is, the land where they live. They now lie dead in the very native lands that bore them, nourished them, and received them. It is most just to praise this mother first. In this way the men's excellence of birth also happens to be praised.

It is appropriate that the land be praised not only by us, but also by all mankind. This is the case for many reasons, but first and foremost because this land is dear to the gods. This fact is confirmed in the stories of how the gods contended for the land and how they judge her. How could a land praised by the gods not justly be praised by absolutely all mankind? A further praise for this land would be the following: At that time when the rest of the world was producing animals both wild and tame, this land of ours did not produce nor was it inhabited by wild beasts. Instead she chose from among all living creatures to give birth to man, an animal that surpasses the rest in intelligence and alone esteems justice and the gods.

A powerful proof can be found in the following story: The land herself gave birth to our ancestors and the ancestors of those buried here. This is because every child receives suitable nourishment from whoever gave birth to it, and by this fact a woman can be proved a true mother or not. If a mother has no fount of nourishment for the child, then she may have only pretended the child is hers. In this very way our land and mother provides sufficient proof that she has given birth to humans. She alone at that time was the first to produce nourishment for humans in the form of wheat and barley. It is through these fruits that humans are best nourished because, in fact, the earth herself bore this human animal. Proofs of this sort should be more acceptable in the case of a

land even than of a woman because the land does not imitate a woman in conception and birth, rather the woman imitates the land. Nor was the land stingy with this fruit, but distributed it to the rest of humanity. After this, she brought forth for her descendants the olive, a help for toils. After rearing and caring for her children up to the time of their youthful prime, she supplied gods to be leaders and teachers for them. The names of the gods we must pass over in this speech - we know them in any case. They ordered our lives not only with regards to our daily routines (they first taught us arts and skills), but they also taught us the procurement and use of weapons for the defense of the land.

238e–239a. The cause of our form of government lies in our equality of birth. Other communities are composed of an irregular and diverse people. As a result, their governments are irregular, both tyrannies and oligarchies. Thus, the inhabitants consider some slaves and some masters. But we in our community are all brothers from a single mother and think it is unworthy to be slaves and masters to one another. Instead, our natural equality of birth compels us to seek equality in law and to give way to no one except in reputation for excellence and intelligence.