

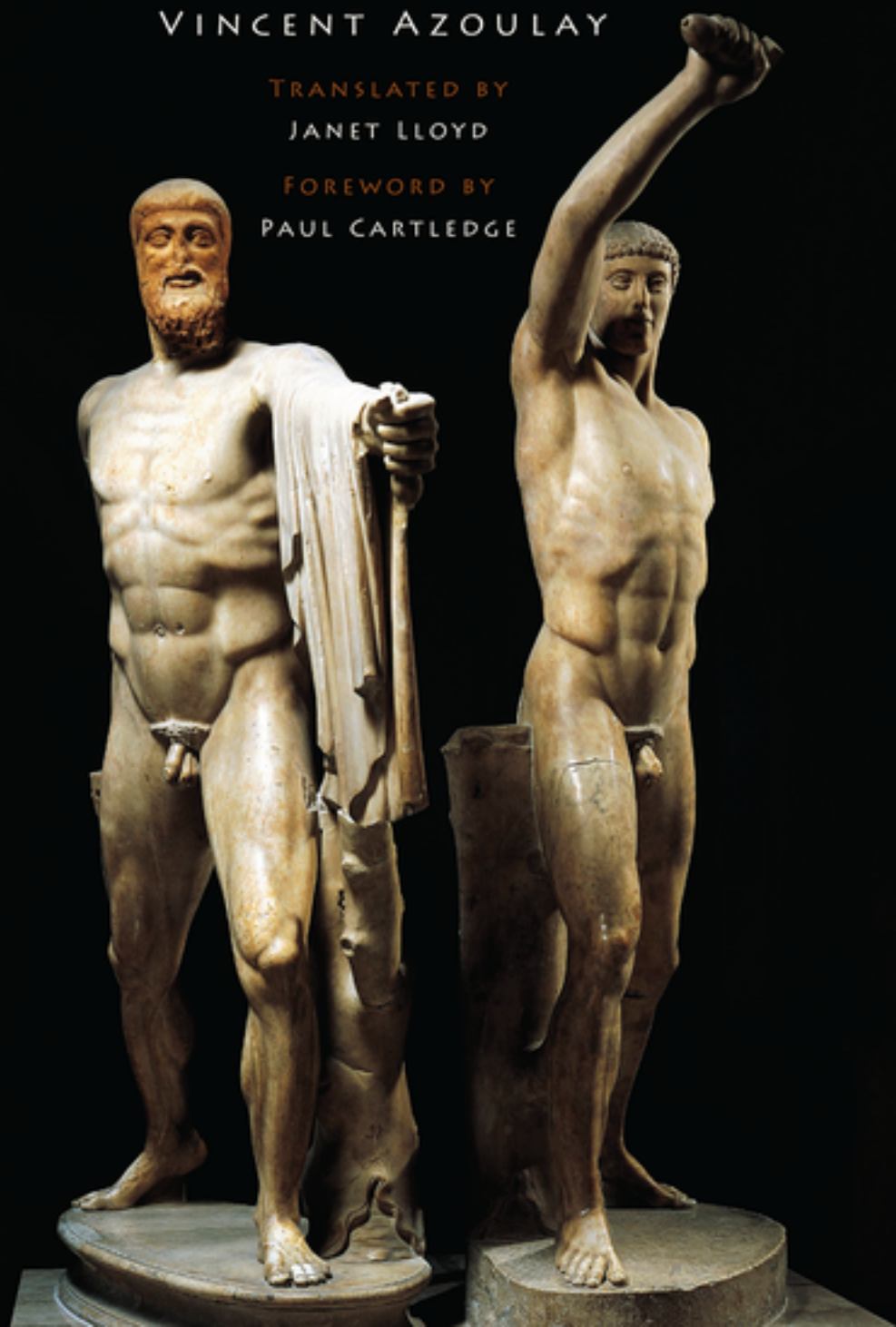
# THE TYRANT-SLAYERS OF ANCIENT ATHENS

A TALE OF TWO STATUES

VINCENT AZOULAY

TRANSLATED BY  
JANET LLOYD

FOREWORD BY  
PAUL CARTLEDGE



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## FOREWORD

‘Statues are not history in the sense of having significant pedagogical value. They are political symbols, which drift in and out of favour along with political and aesthetic tastes.’ This is not actually a quotation from the distinguished monograph which it is my privilege and pleasure to introduce here\*—but it might well have been. For from the Tyrant-Slayers (capital T), that is, the statues of the two so-called or alleged Athenian tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogiton, to the statue of Cecil Rhodes that today (dis)graces Oriel College, Oxford University, and that prompted Alex von Tunzelmann’s remark quoted above (*History Today*, March 2016, p. 7), there runs a thin red (or blue) line of revolution, reaction, and counter-reaction. They may or may not have pedagogical value, significant or otherwise, but they certainly do have massively significant iconographic value, and it is rather remarkable that the present work is the first proper book-length history of a key artefact of one of the Western world’s most critical political junctures, a transformative episode in the history of democracy itself.

For once, the sadly abused term ‘icon’ is literally as well as figuratively apt as an evaluative descriptor for the two late Archaic/early Classical period Athenian Tyrant-Slayer statues. They are images or pictures not just of two persons but of a deed, and they are not just images or pictures but a commemorative monument, what the Greeks themselves from Herodotus onwards would label an *ergon* (literally ‘work’). Hence, unlike the resolutely stone Oxonian figure of Rhodes, both the original Athenian pair of statues and its replacement group were made of the copper alloy preferred for major public commissions and private dedications in the ancient Greek world of the time. It is only an accident of history that the surviving ancient exemplar, of the Roman imperial period (in the Farnese collection since 1586, now in the Naples Archaeological Museum, heavily restored), is of marble, not bronze. And whereas the Rhodes statue is located in a niche on the front of a building, the Tyrant-Slayers were freestanding, standing proud indeed in Athens’s main civic-political square, the sacred Agora (or Place of Assembly) within

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\* The French original, derived from Azoulay’s habilitation, is *Les Tyrannicides d’Athènes. Vie et mort de deux statues* (Paris: Seuil, 2014). Reviews in English include *BMCR* 2015.01.23 (Catherine M. Keesling) and *CR* 65.2 (2015) 612-13 (Robin Osborne). See also V. Azoulay, ‘The Tyrannicides of Athens, A Place of Political Memory’, <http://eutopiamagazine.eu/en/vincent-azoulay/columns/tyrannicides-athens-place-political-memory> (trans. Jennie Dorny and Raimés Combes).

sight of and in close mutual interconnection with the Acropolis and its multiple politico-religious associations.

*The Tyrant-Slayers of Ancient Athens* operates along three main historiographical dimensions: the mythopoetic, the political, and the sexual. But art-historians, historians of the manipulation of public space, and connoisseurs of reception-history will not be at all disappointed, either. Herodotus was perfectly well aware of the distinction between myth in the sense of traditional tale, true to fact or not, and history, the result of critical enquiry designed to sift fact from fiction or fancy and then explain an actual significant past. The Athenians, that is, most ordinary Athenians, were not and could not care less. For them, the story or myth of the Tyrant-Slayers was not simply true, in the sense that once upon a time Harmodius and Aristogiton had (in their convinced opinion) killed a tyrant, Hipparchus, but also culturally significant as one of the key, if not the key, foundation myths of their entire political system: democracy, people-power. How the possibly sordid and probably personal killing of actually the younger brother of the sole tyrant Hippias got transmuted and transmogrified into a heroic tale of liberationist derring-do is one aspect of the great story that Vincent Azoulay has to tell.

The idea of the justifiable assassination of a tyrant is hardly peculiar to ancient Greece, let alone ancient Athens; even their word *turannos* from which we derive ‘tyrant’ was probably a loan-word from their neighbours of Lydia in west-central Anatolia. (Randall D. Law’s *Terrorism: A History*, Polity Press, 2009, includes many, many other examples.) But the Greeks did make a pretty good job of it. Phalaris of Acragas in Sicily, Polycrates of the island-state of Samos, Dionysius I of Syracuse, Jason of Thessalian Pherae, Clearchus of Heraclea on the Black Sea—these are just some of the tyrants who got the assassin’s chop (or poison) between the mid-sixth and mid-fourth centuries B.C. So the killing of Hipparchus in 514 fits neatly into a pattern, apparently. But does it? Actually, as it requires the acuity of a Dr Azoulay to bring out in full, it did not and does not. It is precisely because of its unique or at least compellingly distinctive features that the deed of Harmodius and Aristogiton was handed down in a blaze of glory—or infamy.

The commissioning and creation of a commemorative bronze sculpture-group from the hand of Antenor, probably within a decade of the deed, were the first outward and visible signs of an unusual inward and spiritual reaction. The toss can be argued—and is brilliantly by Azoulay—over when and how and where this first Tyrant-Slayers statue-group was erected. What is not in doubt is that some twenty-five to thirty years later, during the Graeco-Persian Wars recorded by Herodotus, it was stolen amid the rape and pillage of Athens in 480 B.C., either on the direct orders of Persian Great King Xerxes or with his subsequent blessing, and removed to one of his great capitals, Susa in Elam in west-central Iran. There it was somehow preserved for upwards of a century and

a half before being returned, or perhaps one should say ‘restituted’, either by Alexander the Great of Macedon or by one of his successor kings, Antiochos I or Seleucos I. So keenly was the loss felt that a replacement group was immediately commissioned by the liberated democratic Athenians and set up—or perhaps better ‘consecrated’—on the Agora in 477/476. It is this group, not the former, that exercised its iconographic magic over the coming decades, centuries, and indeed millennia. Not the least of the persuasively original features of this book is the claim that it was the example of the Tyrant-Slayers’ iconography that led to the rage in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds for commemorating or worshipping supposed heroes or rulers with public statues—a rage that has taken on quite another meaning in our iconoclastic era of symbolic tyrant-toppling. Goodbye Lenin and Mao, indeed.

*Demokratia*, whenever the term was first coined, is a compound of *kratos*, power or strength or grip, and *demos*, ‘People.’ The latter, however, is formally ambiguous and so ambivalent: it could mean either the People as a whole; that is, all the politically empowered citizen people, or the masses, the poor, lower-class, non-élite majority of the citizens. Harmodius and Aristogiton were Athenians, and citizens, but by no stretch of the imagination were they or could they easily be conceived to have been ordinary, poor, lower-class citizens. *Au contraire*. So, how come an ordinary poor Athenian might be persuaded enthusiastically to embrace the new-fangled notion that they were democratic champions, on the side of the masses and prepared to put their sword where their mouth was? It was a massive sleight of mythopoetic hand that worked, but why? One reason, as Azoulay properly emphasises, was that the Athenians needed somehow or other to hide the most uncomfortable fact of all about the assassination of Hipparchus; namely that—whatever its motivation—it did not actually end the tyranny of Hippias. That was as a matter of historical fact terminated, not by direct action of any Athenian or Athenians but—horrors—by a force of invading Spartans, with whom the tyrant family had once been on good terms, and with whom the Athenians collectively from about the time of the commission of the replacement Tyrant-Slayers group were not on good terms at all. Better, much better, to place in the liberationist frame posh élites who were at least locals, and thus to enhance the democratic hall of fame with human, all too human, icons. Another reason was the currency of the ‘Harmodius-song’: an élite creation of the upper-class symposium in origin, it credited the murderous pair with rendering Athens ‘isonomous’; that is, bestowing upon the city the ineffable quality of *isonomia*, or equality under the laws. That was precisely the term fastened upon by early pro-democratic ideologues to characterize their—actually brand-new—regime of *demokratia*.

Whatever its motivation—here was another reason for the democratic Athenians to draw an increasingly thick and heavy veil over the real dynamics and mechanics of the murder of Hipparchus. At least that is so if we are to credit



one of the earliest extant versions that has come down to us, in the hypercritical history of Thucydides (*c.* 400 B.C.), who uses the episode precisely as a case-study in the fallibility of popular understandings of key past events. For him, not only was Hipparchus not a ruling tyrant, and therefore Harmodius and the older Aristogiton were not properly speaking ‘Tyrant’-slayers, but it was not at all to achieve liberation from tyranny for all Athenians that they committed their deed—and moreover committed it, sacrilegiously, under cover of the single most important politico-religious festival of the Athenian year, the Great or City Panathenaea, honouring the birthday of the city’s patron-goddess, Athena Polias. Rather, though not related by birth or marriage, Harmodius and Aristogiton were, Thucydides implied but did not state outright, intimately connected as lovers. And the slaying of Harmodius was the outcome of a complicated inter-family quarrel involving a woman, Harmodius’ sister, as well as the three males.

Somewhat recalling the relationship of Patroclus to Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, where the sexual dimension if any was only discreetly hinted at, but classical Athenians unhesitatingly took them to be lover and beloved, so Thucydides’ coy implication of a sexual relationship between Aristogiton and Harmodius was explicitly embraced in popular legend as one of full-on *paederastia*, literally sexual desire (*eros*) for a sub-adult boy (*pais*). ‘Greek love’ is a highly complex topic, in practice and concept in antiquity no less than in today’s scholarly discussion. Azoulay’s sensitive handling of this aspect of the story is not the least of his book’s many virtues. But it is just one part of what may come as a surprise to some readers, but is now wholly in accord with one of the most powerful contemporary movements in Classical scholarship, the determined focus on how the ancient world has been ‘received’—that is, understood, reconfigured, re-purposed—since the Renaissance. The nuanced Epilogue, by no means an afterthought, is devoted precisely to the ‘rebirth’ of the Tyrant-Slayers statue group in the West since the sixteenth century.

So far I have only barely hinted at what is probably, appropriately, the most contentious—and stimulating—of Azoulay’s contentions. The Athenian Agora was, in the most literal, physical sense, a public space. To that Azoulay wishes to add—following Jurgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press, 1989, German original 1962)—a notional, conceptual space, a space of conflicting constructions, metaphorical and metaphysical rather than material. For Azoulay, the Tyrant-Slayers statue group participated vigorously in both spaces. Transforming the transgressive deed of bloody homicide into a site of ideally harmonious collective memory did not happen easily or without resistance. Being neither a funerary monument nor honorific effigies, the statue group hovers uneasily between several interpretative registers and thus causes major embarrassment—to both modern and ancient interpreters alike. Finally, the group is visually striking, thanks to its erotic complementarity that could

evoke sexual desire no less than political ambition. In short, for thematic, functional, and visual reasons, this is a piece of monumental sculpture with an inexhaustible capacity to create discourses and trigger controversies. Long may that, and they, continue.

*Paul Cartledge*  
*Clare College, Cambridge*



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As with books, so with statues: whether engraved in marble or printed on glossy paper, the name of the author tends to eclipse the collective efforts that underlie the birth of a work. So let me here name the good fairies who bent over the cradle of these Tyrannicides: first and foremost the members of the jury who, on the basis of the present, then unpublished, book, assessed my habilitation to become a Director of Research. François Lissarrague sponsored the entire undertaking: his humanity, humour, and way of bringing Greek images back to life have for many years provided me with an example at once daunting and inspiring. I also benefited from Pauline Schmitt Pantel's ruthless reading of my text, and the wise comments of Pascal Payen and François Hartog, both of them very concerned that the dialogue between Antiquity and the social sciences should continue unabated. The trenchant remarks of Francis Prost on both archaeological and historical matters enabled me to improve my manuscript at several decisive junctures. As for John Ma, 'the statue man', I can hardly express the magnitude of my debt to his joyful erudition and his astute reflections on honorific statues—reflections that were the starting-point for the present project.

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# **The Tyrant-Slayers of Ancient Athens**



## Introduction

### THE COUNTRY

My son, I am in chains, my son, I am your mother!  
I stretch out my arms to you from the depths of my prison.

### HARMODIUS

What! Strike him down, at night, as he returns home!  
What! Before this black night, before these endless seas!  
Strike him with a dagger, in this black and gloomy emptiness  
Amid such darkness and immensity!

### CONSCIENCE

You can kill this man with a clear conscience.

Victor Hugo, 'The Sea Shore', *Les Châtiments*

Athens, mid-July 514 B.C.: Hipparchus, one of the sons of the tyrant Pisistratus, was plunged in deep thought. 'In the night before the Panathenaea he thought that a tall and goodly man stood over him uttering these riddling verses':

Bear an unbearable lot; O lion, be strong for the bearing:  
No man on earth doth wrong (*adikōn*) but at last shall suffer requital.

These enigmatic verses reported by the historian Herodotus (5.56), in the condensed manner peculiar to dreams, convey the dark legend of the tyranny, as it crystallised after the fall of the tyrants, in the fifth century: theirs was a crushing rule, both unjust and doomed to disappear. Crushing, so Hipparchus is likened to a lion, thereby suggesting that the Pisistratids ruled Athens as lions rule over other animals<sup>1</sup>; unjust since, unlike a king, who is subject to the laws,<sup>2</sup> a tyrant wields a power that is illegitimate and is characterised by injustice (*adikia*) and excess (*hubris*).<sup>3</sup> And it is, furthermore, unstable, in that the faults of the tyrant lead inexorably to his undoing, in accordance with a mechanism explored so often on the Athenian tragic stage. For there is a prophetic dimension to Hipparchus' dream: the son of Pisistratus is doomed to an ineluctable death.

Upon awaking, Hipparchus, disturbed, summoned the experts in dream interpretation. They duly warned him of the doom-laden nature of his dream, but he nevertheless decided to ignore this and pursue his normal occupations. Typical tyrant, you may say: the very embodiment of the *hubris* so characteristic of those



who, over-confidently, simply dismiss the warnings sent by the gods. But over and above that moral interpretation, Herodotus' account testifies to the tragic origins of history: just as, in the theatre, the tyrant has to die when the day and the hour come, for he cannot escape the implacable fatality dictated by the gods.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, Hipparchus really had no choice. On this July morning in 514, the atmosphere was festive, for the Athenians were preparing to celebrate the Great Panathenaea, which occurred only once every four years and inaugurated the civic and religious year. Hipparchus could not, on any pretext, fail to take part in these festivities that his father Pisistratus has totally reorganised, rendering them ever more illustrious.<sup>5</sup> Besides, Hipparchus' elder brother Hippias was already at work, outside the Ceramicus—the potters' and craftsmen's quarter—surrounded by his bodyguards. He was organising the great procession that linked the Acropolis—the religious heart of the city. Everything had to be perfect on this day that celebrated the unity of the Athenians clustered around their guardian deity, Athena.

This was the precise moment that two Athenians, Harmodius and Aristogiton, had chosen for their attempt to assassinate the tyrants. Thucydides, the only writer to describe the episode in detail, tells the story as follows (6.57):

Harmodius and Aristogiton, who were ready with their daggers, stepped forward to put their scheme into effect. But when they saw one of their accomplices talking familiarly with Hippias, who was accessible to all, they took fright, thinking that they had been informed upon and would in a moment be arrested. So, wishing first to take vengeance, if they could, upon the one who had aggrieved them and because of whom they were risking all, they rushed, just as they were, within the gates and came upon Hipparchus at the place called Leocoreion. And at once, falling upon him recklessly and as men will in extreme wrath, the one inflamed by jealousy, the other by insult, they smote and slew him. Aristogiton, indeed, escaped the guards for the moment, as the crowd ran together, but afterwards was caught and handled in no gentle manner; but Harmodius perished on the spot.

So Hipparchus died, along with his attackers, leaving the city rife with disturbances and unrest. Was this the end to the tyranny? Certainly not, as both Herodotus and Thucydides agree. Hippias continued to rule, and it was not until four years later, in 510 B.C., that Athens was finally liberated from the rule of the Pisistratids: at the instigation of the Alcmaeonid family, the Spartans launched a military expedition that forced Hippias into exile (5.62.2–63.1). And it was a further two years before this political upheaval found institutional expression, in 508–507 B.C.: at this point, thanks to the Alcmaeonid Cleisthenes, a series of reforms was introduced, deeply modifying the political organisation of the city and laying the foundations for the democracy that flourished over the course of the fifth century.

From being simply a sudden reversal or *peripeteia* (to use a term associated with tragedy), in the collective memory of the Athenians, the murder of Hipparchus progressively became the very symbol of the struggle against tyranny and the fight for liberty. In the fifth century, Harmodius and Aristogiton were fêted as the tyrannicides,<sup>6</sup> not only in private banquets, through the intermediary of a song composed to glorify them, but also within the greater public space, thanks to the annual sacrifices that were organised by one of the city's most prestigious magistrates. Above all, they were granted the exceptional privilege of being represented in Athens' main square, the Agora, in the form of statues, as the liberators of their country. Two statuary groups of their images were successively erected there. The first, sculpted by Antenor, appeared at some point that is hard to determine, between the exile of Hippias, in 510, and the capture of the city by the Persians, in 480; a second group, sculpted by Critius and Nesiotes, was set up in 477–476, to replace the bronzes produced by Antenor, which Xerxes had carried off to adorn one of his royal capitals.

The present work is devoted to the chequered history of those two monuments. The statues of Harmodius and Aristogiton are indeed monuments in the strongest sense of the term—firstly as *Monumenta* in the etymological sense: funerary figures erected in memory of the murderers of Hipparchus; secondly as artistic monuments, for the group produced by Critius and Nesiotes is generally recognised as marking the advent of the Classical style of art<sup>7</sup>; and finally, as political monuments, to the extent that the statues of the Tyrannicides became one of the symbols of Athenian civic identity and remained so throughout the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

Clearly, these effigies deserve to be studied for their own sake, particularly since we are fortunate enough to have at our disposal an exceptionally massive collection of relevant documentation. There are, of course, archaeological sources: even though the original sculptures had disappeared by the end of Antiquity, a number of copies dating from the Roman period make it possible to reconstitute credible representations of the statues sculpted by Critius and Nesiotes; to these can be added the iconographic echoes of the sculpted group that were produced on a variety of materials such as ceremonial vases, an honorific throne, and even coins, and these attest to the popularity of the effigies as early as the fifth century. Epigraphical sources are also available: not only are there numerous decrees dating from the early Hellenistic period that refer explicitly to the statues of Harmodius and Aristogiton, but furthermore, archaeologists have discovered a fragmentary inscription that clearly relates to the monument by Critius and Nesiotes and that makes it possible to decipher the epigram carved on its base. Finally, we also possess numerous literary sources. Even if the historians and philosophers of the Classical period manifested no more than a limited interest in the statues of the Tyrannicides, the writers of comedy delighted in targeting the effigies of the two murderers;

meanwhile, the orators granted them a special place in their reflections on the evolution of civic honours. Even in the Roman period, authors both Greek and Roman continued to take an interest in the bronze sculptures of Harmodius and Aristogiton, which they regarded as among the symbols of the glorious past of Greece.

## The Question of Origins

This abundance of documentation has prompted a steady flow of studies ever since. In 1859, for instance, Karl Friederichs identified two famous marble statues exhibited in Naples as Roman copies of the Tyrannicides produced by Critius and Nesiotes.<sup>8</sup> For a whole century, discussions focussed on the formal aspect of the statues, describing their respective poses. On this subject, the pioneering works of Gisela Richter and Ernst Buschor<sup>9</sup> were completed and superseded by the scholarly work done by the Swedish archaeologist Sture Brunnsåker as having the last word on the matter.<sup>10</sup> This summing-up, published in 1955 and republished in the early 1970s with a number of additions, aimed to set the group produced by Critius and Nesiotes within the purest tradition of the *Kopieforschung* (literally, ‘copy research’) invented by Johann Joachim Winckelmann and, in order to get as close as possible to the lost original, Brunnsåker also took into consideration not only the copies of the Roman period, but also the reproductions of the statues that were to be found on other materials.

Ever since, the bibliographical flow of works on the Tyrannicides has regularly increased. Amid this torrent of specialist studies, two monographs stand out by reason of the scope of their subject and the subtlety of their analyses. In a short volume first published in 1981,<sup>11</sup> Michael Taylor used the image of the tyrannicides as a means to penetrate the political imaginary of Athens,<sup>12</sup> carefully sifting the contrasting reactions that this pair of murderers prompted. The originality of this work stems from the place devoted to iconography—in particular, the representations of Theseus adopting the postures of Harmodius or Aristogiton, which the author analyses for their own intrinsic interest rather than as a mine of information designed to help reconstruct the original statues. Nevertheless, the book does remain limited to a study of the fifth century alone and does not always take into account the chronological and narrative differences between the sources used to support the author’s thesis.

Three years later, the archaeologist Burkhardt Fehr devoted a brief monograph of his own (rapidly translated into French) to the Critius and Nesiotes pair.<sup>13</sup> Elaborating on the basic work by Sture Brunnsåker, this study shows how, by playing on the positioning of the statues, the sculptors managed to produce an image of the fundamental ideals of Athenian democracy: namely, self-discipline, equality, and solidarity.<sup>14</sup> Over and above this stylistic and

semantic analysis, Fehr furthermore (and this is one of the strong points of his demonstration) stresses the fact that between the reforms of Cleisthenes and the end of the Peloponnesian War, the meaning of the monument changed. Unfortunately, his enquiry breaks off abruptly at the end of the fifth century, resuming only in the mid-twentieth century at the point when the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes were manipulating the iconography of the Tyrannicides for propagandist purposes.<sup>15</sup>

All these works, in the manner of a magnifying glass, reflect the two dominant features of the historiography of the Tyrannicides: firstly, the obsession with the originals—even today many works remain clouded by purely formal matters, such as the pose of Harmodius<sup>16</sup> or the hypothetical aspect of the group sculpted by Antenor<sup>17</sup>; secondly, a quest for origins. Most of this research remains focussed on the early times of the statues and ignores the rest of their history.

## A Biographical Approach to the Tyrannicides

In contrast to earlier studies, the present enquiry aims for a long-term view. It undertakes to trace the Tyrannicide statues through several centuries, from their creation at the dawn of the Classical period down to their disappearance at the end of the Roman period. The fact that I talk of the birth, life, and death of the statues does not stem from a simple matter of style but is prompted by a reasoned decision that constitutes my second methodological gamble. For it seems to me that the effigies of Harmodius and Aristogiton gain from being regarded as like living organisms that pass through various states and, in the course of their lives, experience certain more and certain less active phases. In short, I hope to achieve a veritable biography of the effigies of Harmodius and Aristogiton.<sup>18</sup> Ever since Louis Gernet, we have been aware that, in the Greek world, objects could possess a prestigious ‘certificate of origins’<sup>19</sup> acquired through a series of trans-generational exchanges<sup>20</sup>; and in the course of the past thirty years, anthropologists have revealed how very interesting it is to engage in a wider study of ‘the social life of things’,<sup>21</sup> following their trajectory step by step in order to reconstitute their itineraries and study their careers.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the Tyrannicides, such a biographical approach seems to me to possess a double advantage, for it enables us both to rethink the relationships between images and politics in ancient Greece and to elude the static categories of the history of ancient art.

## A MONUMENTAL HISTORY OF POLITICS

By treating the statues of the Tyrannicides as real persons, one comes to regard them as monuments, in the sense already established by Michel Foucault.<sup>23</sup>

According to the author of *La Volonté de savoir*, a monument does not simply illustrate events, but itself marks an epoch: it is an active symbol, a historical fact in its own right which, far from illustrating some reality that is independent of it, actually ‘creates’ and makes history.<sup>24</sup> The fact is that, even if, unlike Pygmalion’s Galatea, the statues of Harmodius and Aristogiton did not move, they nevertheless affected the world, organising rituals, creating social relations, and even exerting a measure of power.<sup>25</sup> The power and agency possessed by statues: that is a biographical hypothesis that prompts reflection on the interactions of monuments and politics.

Let us set up a few markers in the establishment of those powerful interactions. At the start of the fifth century, the statues constituted one of the spearheads in a campaign of memorialisation launched against the Pisistratids, and then, following the Second Persian War, they became the very incarnation of the struggle against the Persians. In the years that followed, the Tyrannicides came to be symbolic figures in the internal struggles between democrats and the oligarchs, inspiring one group and provoking the hostility of the other. Following the oligarchic revolutions of the late fifth century, the statuary group in its own small way played its part in the reestablishment of a democratic consensus in an Athens that had been torn apart by discord (*stasis*). Then the life of the statues took a more peaceful turn: in the fourth century, the monument became a key element in the dialogue that took place between benefactors and the city, within the framework of the radical evolution of a system of honours. Following the death of Alexander, the Tyrannicides played their part in the establishment of a consensus between the new masters of the Mediterranean—initially the Hellenistic kings, then the representatives of Rome—whom the Athenians sought thereby to placate. Even in the high Roman imperial period, the effigies of Harmodius and Aristogiton still preserved a political force. In the eyes of the city’s élite members, the statue group remained a means of visually articulating the memory of Greek liberty and the reality of Roman domination.

But let us be clear about this: in thus tracing the trajectory of the Tyrannicides, it is not simply a matter of casting a cavalier look at the political history of Athens from some external angle. Let me repeat the point: the statues should not be considered simply to reflect politics that were being pursued elsewhere, in the Assembly, the council, or the law courts. The two statuary groups contributed actively to the construction of the political culture of Athens, by participating in the creation of a system of shared values surrounding the defence of the country and the necessary sacrifices to be made to secure its freedom.

Once this is realised, it becomes possible to rise above the debate initiated, in her day, by Nicole Loraux.<sup>26</sup> Adopting a deliberately polemical tone, she reproached anthropologist-historians of the Greek world for painting a picture of a city too irenic to be true, one from which all conflict could be evicted;

unless, that is, it was seen as a kind of inversion or a momentary lapse into savagery.<sup>27</sup> She targeted in particular the ‘flat society’ evoked by studies of painters and image-makers, for, according to her, iconographic studies had managed to promote a vision of a ‘ritualistic’ Athens, set apart from a time of battles and assemblies; and this ‘city of images’ thereby radically evacuated conflict despite the fact that this was such a ‘constitutive element in the Greek definition of politics’<sup>28</sup>.

The case of the Tyrannicides gives me a chance to respond at least partially to Loraux’s objection, at the same time somewhat shifting the debate. In the first place, given that the statues of Harmodius and Aristogiton celebrated the memory of a bloody uprising, it seems, at the very least, hard to regard them as a side-lining of conflict. A study of the images thus does not necessarily lead us to lose sight of the clashes that, in Greece as elsewhere, structured politics. But that is not all: the monument of the Tyrannicides also serves greatly to attenuate Nicole Loraux’s fundamental thesis, according to which the Athenians repressed conflict just as a psychiatric patient represses his own traumas. For, far from repressing *stasis*, the Athenians had contrived to provide it with a choice setting, right in the middle of the Agora, where it could be seen and recognised by one and all.<sup>29</sup> Besides, was it simply by chance that the group of statues became the cynosure of particular attention following the oligarchic revolutions of the late fifth century?<sup>30</sup> The fact was that, in the Athenian imaginary, there was a red—indeed blood-red—thread that linked the murder of Hipparchus with the bloody struggles that arose at the end of the Peloponnesian War: the Tyrannicides carried a seditious charge in a community where conflicts were not always repressed but instead tended to be flagrantly displayed as an integral dimension of the democratic political experience.

## STATUARY ABOVE AND BEYOND TRADITIONAL TYPOLOGIES

This biographical approach is also worthwhile because it reveals the way that statuary, in itself, functions. If, step by step, one traces the trajectory of the two statuary groups, it becomes impossible to regard them as inanimate blocks of bronze, the meaning of which is established, once and for all right from the start,<sup>31</sup> for the meaning of the Tyrannicides evolved at a number of points in the course of their several-centuries-long life. These successive ‘semantic changes’ (to adapt a term much favoured by linguists) prompt further elaboration of the history of statuary, which is often confined to watertight categories that, still today, are set out in a more or less fixed order: ‘religious statues and cultic reliefs; offerings; decorative sculpture; funerary sculpture; commemorative sculpture, honorific statuary and the rise of the portrait.’<sup>32</sup> The statues of Harmodius and Aristogiton, on the contrary, resist all forms of categorisation by reason of their fundamental indeterminacy. On one hand, they lack any striking visual particularities: far from being unique, the pose of Harmodius—which did so

much for the renown of the monument sculpted by Critius and Nesiotes—was freely inspired by representations of Apollo engaged in clashes between the gods and the giants, thereby testifying to the circulation of iconographic motifs between images of the gods and human statuary<sup>33</sup>; furthermore, as we shall see, it is not possible to assign a single function to the statues of the Tyrannicides, whether that function be votive, religious, funerary, or honorific. In fact, this fundamental uncertainty may well explain the widely divergent interpretations ascribed to them over the years. This case-study thus prompts one to introduce a measure of disorder into the kind of art history that is all too inclined to transform a luxuriant jungle into a French-style garden divided up by dead-straight paths.

It would be a mistake to regard this instance as no more than a simple exception that, however fascinating, is nevertheless insignificant. For what is true of the effigies of Harmodius and Aristogiton also applies, to a lesser degree, to ancient statuary in general. Recent research has questioned the sacrosanct distinction between ‘cultic statues’ and ‘votive statues’, stressing the porosity between those two categories.<sup>34</sup> Not only were the two sometimes designated by the same term,<sup>35</sup> but there was no stylistic criterion to differentiate between them at first sight.<sup>36</sup> In fact, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, divine images were sometimes recycled as honorific statues, given that there were no visual or textual indications that would serve to distinguish them.<sup>37</sup> Above all, statues were not always limited to one unique and well-determined function, as is shown by the famous *kouroi* and *korai* which, depending on the context, might possess a funerary role, a votive dimension, or even a religious character.<sup>38</sup> It sometimes even happened that the function of statues changed in the course of their existence, as in the case of the statue of Athena Hygieia, on the Acropolis: it began life, in the time of Pericles, as an offering, but was later associated with a pre-existing ritual that conferred a religious significance upon it.<sup>39</sup>

It was, without doubt, the context rather than their supposed intrinsic characteristics that decided the meaning and function of statues in the various stages of their lives.<sup>40</sup> The ‘context’: we should also be wary about this magical word that is so beloved by historians, the sole mention of which can serve instead of an explanation. On one hand, far from constituting a static background against which statues can stand out, a context should be regarded as dynamic and constantly changing, in perpetual interaction with the monument that it helps to define; on the other, the notion cannot be reduced to a few vague chronological or topographical elements, for it refers to a rich configuration that only a ‘thick description’ is able to convey by revealing a plurality of ‘layers of meaning’.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of the Tyrannicides, one must first take into account the positioning of the statues—not only their situation on the Agora, but also their place in relation to the monuments that surrounded them; their place