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Eupatridai

ALAIN DUPOLOY

The ruling elite and Archaic nobility of ATHENS is often designated by ancient and modern authors as the Eupatridai. According to PLUTARCH, in pre-Solonian Athens, access to public offices was restricted to the members of this exclusive OLIGARCHY. This conception, though widely accepted, is doubtful. An alternative definition of the Eupatridai rather draws on a historiographical approach of the concept. The word first appears towards the end of the sixth century BCE in a clearly anti-tyrannical context. It applies to a group of opponents to PEISISTRATOS and his sons. These “noble patriots” fight to protect their fatherland against the tyrants and, in the meantime, praise their noble ascendancy. By this time gentilician strategies – such as stating a genealogy – were actually widespread. Throughout the Classical period the term was individually applied only to the heirs of these opponents to Archaic TYRANNY. Simultaneously, the word also began to be used

generically, without any direct historical reference, as a common word denoting aristocracy, particularly in tragedy. It then entered the political thought of PLATO and ARISTOTLE, who applied it to a social description of their various constitutions. According to the philosophers, the Eupatridai were the warrior ruling aristocracy of ancient Athens, nine thousand years earlier or at the time of Theseus. Eventually the word became a synonym for noblemen (*eugeneis*) in any Greek city, even denoting the Roman patrician order.

A revival of this imagined social group, however, occurred in Hellenistic Athens in the religious context of the Pythaiads.

SEE ALSO: Aristocracy, Greek.

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