

Chapter Title: Introduction

Chapter Author(s): Heather L. Reid and John Serrati

Book Title: Ageless Arete

Book Subtitle: Selected Essays from the 6th Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Hellenic Heritage of Sicily and Southern Italy

Book Editor(s): Heather L. Reid, John Serrati

Published by: Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2w8kbh9.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ageless Arete*

Heather L. Reid & John Serrati

Introduction

Aretē is a crucial concept in ancient Greek culture that defies simple translation. In general, it indicates excellence—especially of human beings, but also of animals, institutions, even objects. It is linked to important concepts such as glory, justice, truth and harmony, and it influences important activities such as religion, athletics, politics, and education. This collection demonstrates the elasticity of *aretē* as well as its importance in ancient Greek and Roman culture, from its prehistorical etymological roots to its mystification in pre-Christian theology and even its manifestation in the career of a modern archaeologist. Leaving aside Plato and Aristotle, to whom a companion volume has been dedicated,¹ these essays explore *aretē* in Presocratic philosophy, classical oratory, epinician poetry, tragic drama, ancient Sicilian history, gender theory, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Neoplatonic thought.

From its etymological inception, *aretē* is linked with goodness and glory, but its nature and acquisition are constantly contested. To some, *aretē* is a matter of divine inheritance, as demonstrated by heroes like Heracles, and therefore a birthright of social elites that was used to justify traditional hierarchies. To others, *aretē* is an achievement distinct from social advantages, but still expected to advantage society. Very often it is linked with *agōn* (struggle), whether military, athletic, dramatic, political, or spiritual.² Even Homeric heroes, who possess *aretē* almost by definition, struggle “to always be the best” (*aien aristeuein*).³ Ancient Greek athletics are plausibly interpreted as an emulation (*mimēsis*)⁴ of heroic feats, one

¹ *Arete in Plato and Aristotle*, eds Ryan M. Brown and Jay R. Elliott (Siracusa: Parnassos Press, 2022).

² An earlier volume in this series is devoted to the topic: *Conflict and Competition: Agōn in Western Greece*, eds H. Reid, J. Serrati, and T. Sorg (Sioux City: Parnassos, 2020).

³ Homer, *Iliad* 6.308, 11.784.

⁴ The topic of another volume in this series: *The Many Faces of Mimēsis*, eds Heather L Reid and Jeremy DeLong (Sioux City: Parnassos, 2018). On

aimed at reproducing the heroes' *aretē*.⁵ To be sure, the epinician poets who celebrated athletic victory connected athletes and heroes using the thread of *aretē*—even when the victor in question merely owned the winning horses. This shows that *aretē* encompassed more than success in agonistic struggle; Pindar also attributes *aretē* to himself based upon his poetic success. Dramatists, in fact, attribute it to all kinds of characters—including female ones—a phenomenon that may reflect the philosophical idea that *aretē* is a property of the soul rather than the body.

Philosophers typically use '*aretē*' to indicate moral character or virtue, and they take it to be something essential for happiness and the good life. For Plato and Aristotle, it not only distinguished excellent individuals from their less-worthy peers, it distinguished human beings from other animals.⁶ *Aretē* is often considered by philosophers to be the essential characteristic of good leaders, and politicians of all kinds were keen to claim it, but precious few historical people are widely recognized as having demonstrated it. It does not help that philosophical schools from the Presocratics to the Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, and Neoplatonists agreed that *aretē* was a major component of the good life, but they had such starkly different ideas about its acquisition, nature, and role that they debated the matter without consensus throughout antiquity.

As Kenneth Dover pointed out nearly half a century ago, however, only a tiny percentage of people in ancient Greece would have studied or even regularly engaged with philosophy. For the majority, therefore, *aretē* represented more concrete ideas than those

athletics as *mimēsis* of heroic *athla*, see Gregory Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 0§4.

⁵ On athletics as a *mimēsis* of heroic *aretē*, see Heather L. Reid, "Performing Virtue: Athletic *Mimēsis* in Platonic Education," in *Politics and Performance in Western Greece*, eds H. Reid, D. Tanasi, and S. Kimbell (Sioux City: Parnassos, 2017), 260-71.

⁶ E.g., Plato, *Republic* 4.427e-28b, 442b-d; Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1.1095b-3.1109a, 4.1120b-5.1133b, 8.1155a-1159a, 1162a-9.1173a.

provided by ethical theory.⁷ For example, though dramatists and philosophers characterized women as capable of possessing and displaying *aretē*, in practice the term was closely associated with masculinity. Not only was *aretē* linked to reason, which many ancient Greeks believed to be the exclusive purview of men, it was viewed as the opposite of audacity and rashness, qualities more associated with femininity. Demosthenes, for example, deems luxurious lifestyles effeminate and lacking in *aretē*. In practice as opposed to theory, therefore, *aretē* was tied to a man's *sōphrosynē*, discipline, and self-control.⁸

In the everyday language of comedy, political speeches, and epitaphs, meanwhile, *aretē* was associated with martial courage of the type specifically found in hoplite combat.⁹ This association also had elitist overtones. In his Funeral Oration, Pericles claimed that, while their enemies engage in rigorous training, the superiority of the Athenians lay in their manliness (*andreia*).¹⁰ The allusion to elites is obvious since it suggests that *aretē* is only to be found in the hoplite phalanx, service in which was confined to a city's economic elites.¹¹ Although *aretē* was also associated with loyalty, justice, dutifulness, piety, generosity, and gratitude, it would have been difficult to obtain public recognition for it without the means and opportunity to display martial courage as a hoplite. Tellingly, the Funeral Oration hardly mentions maritime supremacy, an erasure

⁷ Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 60.

⁸ Demosthenes 21.133, 160-66; see Joseph Roisman, "The Rhetoric of Courage in the Athenian Orators," in *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity*, eds Ralph M. Rosen and Ineke Sluiter (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 127-32, 139.

⁹ For examples, see respectively: Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1034-42; Lycurgus 104-8, *Inscriptiones Graecae* 1³.1179, 2.2339, 2².6859; *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 50.248, 52.209, 60.1925.

¹⁰ Thucydides 2.39.1.

¹¹ Not only were these the only citizens who could afford the expensive armor and weapons, but property qualifications excluded those of the lower classes from service as a hoplite.

at odds with the reality that Athens' navy safeguarded the city's wealth, power, and democracy.¹² Pericles goes on to say that sailors, who came almost exclusively from the lowest class of citizens, could only gain *aretē* from noble deaths in combat.

More evidence for the linking of *aretē* with elite status and hoplite service can be found in Athenian civic ritual. Aeschines relates how, at the commencement of the Great Dionysia, the sons of men who had died fighting as hoplites were paraded into the theater and presented with a set of hoplite armor. They were then given seats of honor in the theater for the tragic performances.¹³ Within tragedy itself, mentions of hoplite warfare significantly outnumber references to naval combat. Even Aeschylus's *Persians*, with its detailed scene recounting the Battle of Salamis, focuses on the deeds of marine hoplites.¹⁴ Young male elites were similarly inspired to imitate the *aretē* of their fathers by public war memorials, which mostly commemorated hoplites despite the undoubtedly greater number of naval casualties. Only the former, it seems, possessed *aretē* worthy of honor by the state.

Finally, the social hierarchy between elites who were seen to possess *aretē* and those below them is made clear by the art which

¹² Thucydides 2.34-46. The emphasis on hoplites at the expense of the navy is echoed by many others, i.e. Demosthenes 21.162-65; Isocrates, *Orations* 4.116; Plato, *Laws* 705-6; Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* 1.7; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.5.19; see Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, 60, 67-68, 164-66; Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 25-27, 212-14; David M. Pritchard, "Thetes, Hoplites, and the Athenian Imaginary," in *Ancient History in a Modern University: The Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome*, eds Tom W. Hillard et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 121-27). On Plato and the navy, see Mark Ralkowski's article in the companion volume, "Plato and the Navy: Thalassocracy, *Aretē*, and the Corruption of Desire," in *Arete in Plato and Aristotle*, eds Ryan M. Brown and Jay R. Elliott (Siracusa: Parnassos, 2022), 191-216.

¹³ Aeschines 3.154.

¹⁴ Aeschylus, *Persians* 353-432. Later, the play spotlights an insignificant hoplite battle (446-71).

appears on Greek pottery. Here, the primary mortal figures are usually hoplites as well as men attending the *gymnasion* or the *symposion*, all aspects of Greek life associated with elites and, more importantly, with *aretē*. Excluded by the elite equation of *aretē* with manliness, hoplite service, and political leadership, non-elites could still pursue the philosophical versions of it, which became ever more private and spiritual. The Roman general expected to display *virtus* in battle and public leadership was counterbalanced by the Neoplatonist whose struggle for *aretē* was almost completely internal. It is remarkable that we consider both kinds of character as virtuous today. Though its nature is still contested, *aretē* is an enduring—even ageless—concept which is not only vital for the understanding of antiquity, but also continues to have relevance in the modern world.

* * *

Laura Massetti opens the volume with an essay exploring the etymological connection among *aretē*, glory, and immortality, which reaches back before the Greek language itself. Starting from the expression “*ageless aretē*” in a Euripidean fragment, she shows how *aretē* was recognized as the means to achieve glory (*doxa*), which is immortalized through the enduring visibility of poetic celebration—a concept sometimes compared to the sun. The term ‘*aretē*’ also shares roots with the Vedic *ṛtá-* in notions of truth, justice, and harmony. In the next essay on virtue in Xenophanes, William Wians mines a variety of sympotic, athletic, religious, and epistemological fragments to identify the roots of the spiritual *aretē* that would come to be known in Plato and Aristotle. Considering the competitive context of Archaic poetry, Wians describes *aretē* as an intellectual piety cultivated through ceremony and expressed in the patient pursuit of wisdom.

In epinician poetry, *aretē* connects heroes and athletes, but its scope transcends athletic struggle and victory. Even failure can be part of athletic *aretē*, as Jonah Radding shows in his comparison of Bacchylides’s eleventh ode in honor of Alexidamus with the modern narrative of Olympic boxer Roy Jones Jr. Both athletes suffered unjust defeats, but accepted and overcame them in a way that

highlights the application of *aretē* beyond sport and worldly success. In the next essay, Patrick O'Sullivan shows how Pindar uses *aretē* to connect himself with his aristocratic patrons by emphasizing the athletic and intellectual qualities of his poetic activity. Through his own poetic *ponos*, Pindar provides musical compensation for the athlete's *aretē* that generates *kleos* for both of them. One of the biggest puzzles about *aretē* is how it can apply to heroes, athletes, poets, and even chariot owners, the latter of whom were counted as Olympic victors even though their contribution to the effort was merely financial. Gianna Stergiou's paper addresses this question by analyzing Pindar's use of '*ponos*,' the effort or labor linked with *aretē*. She shows that, in the aristocratic context, what matters is the voluntary effort to demonstrate *aretē*—an effort that involves athletes, sponsors, and poets alike.

Dramatic performance was another arena in which *aretē* was debated, if only through representation. By surveying the use of the term in extant Greek tragedy, Jacques Bromberg illustrates its continually contested nature. Not only is '*aretē*' surprisingly absent from Aeschylus's work, but it appears in surprising contexts and applies to surprising subjects in the works of Sophocles and Euripides. Understanding *aretē* in Greek tragedy, Bromberg shows, demands consideration of its metrical exigencies and political contexts alike.

Aretē was also an issue in oratorical performance, as the next pair of papers on Gorgias and Demosthenes demonstrate. The relationship among *aretē*, epistemology, and speech frames Jurgen Gatt's analysis of Gorgias's *Defense of Palamedes*, which argues that virtue can only be known by its possessor. In contrast with the world of heroic epic, *aretē* in the late 5th c. BCE was becoming less a matter of display and more a matter of *suneidēsis* (moral self-knowledge). Palamedes's failure to demonstrate his innocence signals the failure of *logos* generally to constitute and communicate *aretē*. Michał Bizoń argues next that the concept of *aretē* found in Demosthenes's *Erotic Discourse* betrays an Aristotelian orientation, despite its use of athletic imagery and explicit mention of Plato. Through an analysis of terminology and an interpretation of the *apobatic* race as

preparation for Athenian politics, Bizoń shows the *Discourse* to be more practical and less erotic than it first appears.

The meaning of *aretē* could vary not only with different cultural contexts but also with different geographic ones. Heather Reid's essay on strigils in Sicily and Southern Italy combines history, philosophy, art, and archaeology to argue that these common grave-goods, often taken to signal an athlete's tomb, in fact are symbols of gymnastic *aretē*. She argues that *gymnasia* had specific religious, social, and civic functions that served to cultivate the virtues of Hellenic citizenship—a task especially important for the Greeks of Sicily and Southern Italy. Tim Sorg then shows the relationship between human and material *aretē* by examining the historical phenomenon of giving up excellent land in order to acquire excellent craftsmen in ancient Sicily. He argues that Syracuse gave away productive farm land because its local economy lacked skilled labor and it recognized that human *aretē* is necessary to secure the benefits of excellent resources.

The next two essays focus on *aretē* in the Roman context. John Serrati reveals the powerful role of women in the performance of *aretē* and *virtus* by men in ancient Greece and Rome. He focuses on the role of ritual lamentation in inciting men to express their virtue in battle, especially by avenging the death of a family member. Reflecting the interdependence of athlete and poet, masculine *aretē* relied in important ways upon the exhortation of women. In the next essay, Giuseppe Ficocelli locates the intersection of Greek *aretē* and Roman *virtus* in the Roman figure of Sextus Pompeius, who ruled Sicily between 43 and 36 BCE. The type of virtue exhibited by Sextus demanded not only courage and military prowess, but political qualities like justice, piety, and clemency. The ruler actively advertised his virtue on coins, combining Hellenic symbols and Sicilian motifs to challenge Roman rivals and achieve political popularity.

Stoics, Epicureans, and Cynics continued the philosophical debate on *aretē* well into Roman times—a debate conditioned not only by metaphysical disagreements but also by political practicalities. First, Wim Nijs examines the Epicurean virtue of *megalopsychia* through the writings of Philodemus of Gadara, a Late

Republican era philosopher who lived in the Bay of Naples. Nijs analyzes how Philodemus attempts to communicate Epicurean disdain for things like wealth, noble birth, and political achievement without stepping on the toes of his aristocratic patrons. Claudia Gianturco taps another philosopher from Gadara, the 2nd c. CE Cynic Oenomaus, to critically examine *aretē* in Stoic doctrine, in particular its relationship with determinism. By asserting the necessity of free will, the Cynic philosopher dismantles Chrysippus's notion of virtue and restores to human beings the responsibility for their own excellence—or lack thereof.

The concept of *aretē* probably reached its spiritual peak in the work of the Plotinus. Loredana Cardullo traces the semantic shift of the concept of *aretē* from its origins in epic heroism to its primarily religious dimension in Neoplatonism. In particular, she shows how the Neoplatonists made virtue an increasingly intellectual and ultimately theological idea, completely removed from physical activity and worldly concerns. In the next essay, Makoto Sekimura explains Neoplatonic *aretē* in detail by analyzing Plotinus's *On Beauty* and *On Virtues*. Starting from the paradox that human virtue entails becoming like a god—even though gods themselves lack virtue—Sekimura demystifies the relationship between the “civic” and “greater” virtues, as well as the link between virtue and beauty. For Neoplatonists, *aretē* became more of a dynamic process than a passive state.

The book concludes with A.M. Genova and Aura Piccioni's account of Paolo Orsi's *aretē*. Noting that the 19th c. archaeologist displayed the virtues characteristic of the culture he studied, they explain how political and historical challenges brought the best out of the great scholar of the Hellenic heritage of Sicily and Southern Italy. Orsi's example illustrates the resilience of the continuously contested but repeatedly recognized concept of *aretē*. Excellence, especially human excellence, is rightly a matter of debate. We hope that the essays in this collection, and the companion volume on Plato and Aristotle, will contribute to the ongoing discussion.