

A Chronology of Aeschylus' Life and Times

c.525 Born into a prominent aristocratic family in Athens

510 Final expulsion from Athens of the sixth-century tyrants
and the first movements towards democracy

c.500 Begins his career as a dramatist

490 Fights at Marathon against the first Persian invasion (King Darius)

484 First victory in the dramatic competitions

480–79 Fights, or is present, at the battle of Salamis, and perhaps
of Plataea, against the second Persian invasion (King Xerxes)

470s Athens heads an anti-Persian alliance of Greek city-states
which eventually becomes regarded as her 'empire'

Aeschylus visits Sicily, by invitation—an indication of his
already established fame

472 Victorious with *Persians*, in a disconnected trilogy

469–8 Sophocles may have been victorious over Aeschylus in one of these
years; his dramatic career had begun perhaps a year or two earlier

467 Victorious with *Seven*, in a connected trilogy on the Oedipus-myth

460s Further major democratic advances and reforms at Athens

c.463 Victorious with *Suppliants*, in a connected trilogy on the Danaid-myth

458 Victorious with the *Oresteia*

456 Dies at Gela in Sicily

455 Euripides' dramatic career begins

PERSIANS

The play is a historical tragedy, set in the year 480. The scene is the Persian court, near the tomb of its previous king Darius. The Chorus of elderly counsellors anxiously await news from Greece, where Darius' son Xerxes has gone with a huge army and navy to compel its subjection—just as Darius had attempted ten years before, only to fail at the battle of Marathon (490). Anxiety is confirmed by a dream which the Queen, Darius' widow and Xerxes' mother, reports to the counsellors. They advise propitiatory offerings to the gods, and in particular to the dead Darius to secure his favourable intervention. The Queen agrees, but first enquires about the Athenians who have always been the Persians' greatest enemy among the Greeks.

A Messenger brings a lengthy description of Xerxes' defeat in the great sea battle of Salamis. There has been huge loss of Persian ships and crews, and the land army has been almost destroyed by natural disasters during its retreat; but Xerxes himself is alive and will soon return. Amid lamentation the Queen nevertheless prepares her offerings to the dead Darius; in fact, his ghost is 'raised', in the hope he may explain the catastrophe and advise how to prevent worse; it is, he reveals, due to the young, rash, and arrogant Xerxes' desire for aggrandizement, who defied natural and divine law in bridging the Hellespont so that his army might march from Asia into Europe, disregarded his father's own example as a safe king, but also committed sacrilege in Greece. Before Darius goes, he advises the Queen to console and counsel her son at his return, and to be ready with fine and proper clothing for him, since he has been reduced to unkingly rags.

Thus the play's end is prepared, for it is all continuous lamentation, first by the Chorus alone, then shared with Xerxes; he has entered on foot, is unattended, and, as Darius foretold, now wears rags. Their joint laments become wilder and wilder until they stop abruptly.