

THE LIFE OF AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus Unbound is an original work. Although it draws from history and from Aeschylus' plays, and although we found inspiration and borrowed a few vivid events from Edouard Schure, Mary Renault and Herodotus, the story of the relationship between Aeschylus and Dona, the priestess, is entirely ours. Nevertheless, we have endeavored to be true to history and to the few existing historical records of Aeschylus' life. What little is known is summarized below and on the Timeline (see reverse). -GW

- Aeschylus was born around 525 BC into a well established family of Eleusis. His father's name was Euphorion.
- According to the ancient writer Pausanias, "Aeschylus said that, when he was a stripling, he fell asleep in a field while he was watching the grapes, and that Dionysus appeared to him and bade him write tragedy; and as soon as it was day, for he wished to obey the god, he tried and found that he versified with the greatest ease. Such was the tale he told."
Periegesis, I, XX, 3 - I, XXI, 3
- The Athenian drama competitions originally consisted of dithyrambos that were still more choral than dramatic, with only one actor. Aeschylus turned the dithyrambos into drama by adding a second actor to interact with the first. Thus he is considered the Father of Drama. In total, Aeschylus wrote approximately ninety plays, the titles of about eighty of which are known. Only seven survive:
 - *The Persians* (produced in 472 BC),
 - *Seven against Thebes* (467 BC),
 - *The Suppliant Maidens* (463 BC),
 - *Prometheus Bound* (c.460 BC?) and
 - *The Oresteia* (458 BC) which includes *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. Aeschylus acted in and oversaw every detail of his productions.
- Aeschylus was accused of impiety before the court of Areopagos. It was alleged that in his plays he had revealed the Eleusinian mysteries. It is even said that his life was threatened while on the stage, and that he only saved himself by taking refuge at the altar of Dionysus.
- He died in Sicily at the age of 69. Legend has it that Aeschylus met his death when an eagle mistook his bald head for a rock and dropped a turtle on it. Aeschylus' self-authored epitaph: "Beneath this stone lies Aeschylus, son of Euphorion, the Athenian, who perished in the wheat-bearing land of Gela; of his noble prowess the grove of Marathon can speak, or the long-haired Persian who knows it well."

WAS AESCHYLUS AN INITIATE IN THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS?

(Because of the nature of his defense in court, ancient and modern authorities disagree as to whether Aeschylus was an initiate in the Eleusinian Mysteries.
Aeschylus Unbound Attempts to reconcile these differences.)

"AESCHYLUS: Demeter, mistress, nourisher of my soul, [Nurse and mother of my art] O make me worthy of thy mystic rites!"
– Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, line 886 (405 BC)

"Of what he is doing a man might be ignorant, as for instance people say 'it slipped out of their mouths as they were speaking', or 'they did not know it was a secret', as Aeschylus said of the mysteries." – Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)

"Æschylus . . . divulged the mysteries on the stage, [and] being tried in the Areopagus, was absolved on his showing that he had not been initiated."
– Saint Clement of Alexandria (2nd Century AD)

"Aeschylus, a native of Eleusis, prays to its patron goddess. He had probably himself been initiated; and Fritzsche guesses these lines to have been the opening lines of his play the *Eleusinoi*." – William Charles Green (1832-1914),
footnote to Aristophanes' *Frogs*, line 886

"One remarkable account partly acquits Aeschylus of the charge that he had betrayed some of the secrets of the Mysteries, because he had actually not been initiated into the Eleusian Mysteries. It was never a matter of portraying something that he could have acquired from temple secrets, . . . He was actually a relative stranger to them. In fact the story goes that at Syracuse, in Sicily, he had acquired knowledge of secrets appertaining to the emergence of the human ego."
– Rudolf Steiner, *The Mission of Art*, 12 May 1910

"The Areiopagos accused him of holding subversive ideas on religion that were dangerous to the security of the State. The Eumolpides [priests] were indignant with him for betraying one of the profoundest secrets of Eleusinian initiation – namely, that the nature of the gods may to some extent be modified by human will and that it might be possible for Zeus himself to be replaced by another god or constrained to undergo transformation. The poet was summoned before the chief judges of Athens and severely reprimanded. The scholiast even goes so far as to claim that he would have been forced, as was Socrates, to drink the hemlock, had not the Eumolpides, in order to save him, resorted to lying and asserted that he was not an initiate. However it be, from that day onward the author of *Prometheus Bound* was stamped with an indelible sign, alike glorious and formidable. He had become the Titan-hearted Initiate."

– Edouard Schure, *Genesis of Tragedy*, 1936