Sophokles, * Ajax*

Background on Sophokles and the *Ajax*:
The events narrated in the *Ajax* occur in the tenth year of the Trojan War, after the action of the *Iliad*: Hektor is dead and Achilles has been slain by one of Paris’ arrows, but Odysseus has not yet come up with the idea of the wooden horse. The central conflict of the *Ajax* is over the arms of Achilles. After the “best of the Achaeans” dies, Agamemnon promises his armor to the bravest of the Greeks still at Troy. Both Odysseus and Ajax (Telemonian or Salaminian Ajax, not Locrian – or Lesser – Ajax) claim the brilliant god-made armor. The Achaean army votes to award the armor to Odysseus, a judgment which may have been influenced by bribery, and a decision which drives Ajax into a homicidal rage.

When the play opens, Ajax has just slaughtered an entire herd of sheep and cattle, believing the animals to be his fellow Greek soldiers on the beach at Troy. The revelation of his madness to others, particularly Odysseus, as well as his own self-realization and subsequent depression, lead Ajax to commit suicide. After his death, the Greek soldiers must decide what to do with his body, and, after a heated debate, a funeral is eventually held.

There is no known date for the performance of the *Ajax*. It seems to be among Sophokles’ early or middle works, likely staged after the 450s, but little else is known of its historical placement and initial reception. It certainly seems to be earlier than the *Philoktetes*. Ajax was from the island of Salamis; he was also closely connected with the island of Aegina. The Athenians had a special sanctuary devoted to him – called the Aiakeion – in the Agora, and he also served as one of the Eponymous Heroes, after whom the ten phylai (tribes) were named. The Athenian claim to Ajax thus carried political connotations and emphasized their domination of the two nearby islands.

Study questions and issues for discussion:

1. What is the role of Athena? How does she dictate action? How are we to interpret her actions with respect to Ajax? With respect to Odysseus?

2. How would Ajax’s suicide have been staged? When and where would we have seen his body? If you were Sophokles, how would you direct the suicide scene?

3. Greek society, and particularly Homeric society, is often characterized as a shame culture. Can we read Ajax’s suicide as a response to shame and/or a lack of honor? How does that color our interpretation of the subsequent debate regarding his body?

4. Given what we now know about warfare and PTSD, can we understand Ajax’s madness and actions as responses to a psychological crisis? How does Sophokles deal with the issue of madness? Does it have a stimulus, cure, or rational explanation? What is the role of the gods?

5. The protagonist dies half-way through the play (!). How do the repercussions of his actions affect the rest of the play? How does Ajax retain his fundamental presence in the subsequent narrative?