

The Gold Archive #1
THE RETURN OF
THE ARCHONS



By Brian J. Robb

THE GOLD ARCHIVE

THE RETURN OF THE ARCHONS

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OVERVIEW

Episode Title: *The Return of the Archons*

Teleplay: Boris Sobelman

Story: Gene Roddenberry

Director: Joseph Pevney

Original US Transmission Date: 9 February 1967

First UK airdate: 22 November 1969

Stardate: 3156.2

Running Time: 50m

UK Viewing Figures: 6.76 million

Regular Cast: William Shatner (Kirk), Leonard Nimoy (Spock), DeForest Kelley (McCoy), George Takei (Sulu), James Doohan (Scott), Nichelle Nichols (Uhura)

Guest Cast: Morgan Farley (Hacom), Brioni Farrell (Tula), Sid Haig (First Lawgiver), Christopher Held (Lindstrom), Jon Lormer (Tamar), Charles Macauley (Landru), Ralph Maurer (Bilar), Sean Morgan (O'Neil), David Ross (Galloway (credited "Guard")).

Uncredited Cast: William Blackburn (Hadley), Bobby Clark (Rioter), Frank da Vinci (Brent), Walker Edmiston (Third Lawgiver (voiceover)), Lars Hensen (Betan passerby), Jeannie Malone (yeoman), Eddie Paskey (Leslie), Barbara Webber (Dancer).

Antagonist: Landru

Responses:

‘Throughout, [this episode] has a loose, unpolished feeling, which means that it starts off interesting but loses steam as various subplots fail to add

together properly. Which isn't to say that the episode doesn't make enough sense by the end; more that you walk away feeling vaguely unsatisfied...'

[Zack Handlen, AV Club, 27 March 2009]

'The first of many episodes to show Kirk's superior skills as a computer destroyer.'

[Lance Parkin, *Beyond the Final Frontier* (2003)]

Chapter 2: Red Hour

One of the most intriguing, yet under-explored (in the episode itself), aspects of *The Return of the Archons* is the concept of the sanctioned chaos enshrined by the Red Hour or 'Festival'. Viewers learn little about the actual nature of Festival, other than the violence that ensues between the Red Hour of 6pm and the end of the event at 6am the following morning. The origins of Festival, whether there are any rules, and even how often it occurs are all left unexplored and unexplained. In terms of frequency, given the property damage alone, it would seem unlikely to be a daily occurrence. Perhaps it takes place once a month, or on an annual basis – the episode offers no evidence to reach a definitive conclusion. All that can be deduced is that Festival is a violent group event, primarily participated in by the younger population of Beta III, and that visitors from outside arrive to take part. The *Enterprise* landing party – mistaken for such visitors from 'the valley' – run into trouble when they appear to 'scorn' the Festival. Viewers are left to figure out exactly what the Red Hour and Festival might signify on their own.

The Return of the Archons' concept of sanctioned chaos had solid literary roots. The writers of the episode had myriad influences and inspirations in shaping Landru's world. They also deliberately, albeit lightly, drew upon a series of social issues from US and world history and from contemporary times, ranging from poverty and starvation to social and economic inequality, criminality and justice to questions about the surveillance society. Roddenberry, in particular, had a deep interest in history, both factual and the older myths and legends that form the basis of much storytelling, as well as much of **Star Trek**.

The Return of the Archons explores the oppression of a population and the effects of dictatorship upon a society. The underlying central conceit of the episode is rooted in a very old story, the Greek tale of Theseus and the

Minotaur¹. The myth relates that, in punishment for past misdeeds, Athens had to regularly supply seven boys and seven girls to Crete in the form of tributes, where they were thrown in the Labyrinth and devoured by the Minotaur, a mythical half-man, half-bull creature. This sacrificial act of a few people to secure the fates of the majority of the population would later be echoed in Spock's declaration in *The Wrath of Khan* (1982) that '[t]he needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few'. This suggests, in that specific case, that Spock's sacrifice is worthwhile, as it saves the *Enterprise* and all aboard, sacrificing one life for the survival of 'the many'. In terms of *The Return of the Archons*, one night of violence and suffering (for some of whom this no doubt involves death, although the episode actually shows no evidence of this) is justified in the longer period of peace, prosperity, contentment, and tranquillity that results for 'the many' across the rest of the year (assuming Festival is annual, as James Blish's novelisation² suggests).

Although it would actually be used as a title for an entirely different episode of **The Original Series**, the use of this type of superficial appeasement to keep a subjugated population in line could be referred to by the phrase 'bread and circuses'. In the later years of the Roman republic, and in a move that, with hindsight, seemed to define the decline of well-developed Roman civic virtue, handouts of grain (for bread making) to local poor populations were accompanied by huge (and hugely expensive) games, gladiatorial contests, and sporting spectacles. These games could last for days or sometimes even weeks, with many animals slaughtered (the deaths of humans in the games occurred far less often than popular fiction and sword-and-sandal movies might suggest³).

¹ Chisholm, Hugh, ed., 'Minotaur' in *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

² 'The Return of the Archons' in Blish, James, *Star Trek 9*, p127: 'It's all right now, child. For another year. It's over for another year,' says Reger.

³ McDaniel, Spencer, 'Misconceptions about Roman Gladiators'.

The phrase 'bread and circuses' (in Latin, *panem et circenses*) comes from the work of Roman poet and satirist Juvenal: in *Satire X* he identifies the need for bread and circuses as the only remaining responsibility of the new Roman population that has abandoned any practical political involvement that might challenge their rulers or change their living conditions:

'Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the People have abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions – everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses.'⁴

Although there are no direct analogues of the gladiatorial games in *The Return of the Archons* there can be no doubt that some of the population of Beta III must gain amusement or advantage from their activities during Festival while also gaining a violent outlet for all their built-up frustrations. Any potential resistance to Landru's rule (as embodied by Reger and Marplon and their 'cell') is duly suppressed, diverting the need for change into a syphoning off of the population's potential bloodlust, thereby satiating it.

This breakdown in behaviour indulged by Landru's dictatorial rule and the arrival of the Red Hour seem to owe a debt to two classic works of literature: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Both were adapted for radio, television or film before **Star Trek** began airing⁵. Gene Roddenberry and the others involved in writing *The Return of the Archons* may have experienced these adaptations, but they would certainly have been aware of the novels.

Lord of the Flies follows the misadventures of a group of pre-adolescent

⁴ Juvenal, *Satire X* 10.77-81.

⁵ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was adapted in 1949 and 1953 on US radio and in 1953 on US television, while it was part of the **Sunday-Night Theatre** strand on BBC in the UK. *Lord of the Flies* was made into a movie in 1963.

children stranded on a remote island, the result of a plane crash which itself follows the mass evacuation of populations due to a nuclear war. Their attempts to build a functioning society quickly break down and the children turn violently on one another. In this case, there is no overall authority repressing these children, it is the very absence of authority – which the Festival on Beta III implies resides in Landru – that gives the children the freedom that sees them degenerate into savage behaviour.

Orwell's dystopia is set in 'Airstrip One', a future version of the British Isles (itself part of the larger socialist political entity of Oceania, made up of the Americas, the British Isles, the southern part of Africa, and Australasia), where a totalitarian state is apparently engaged in an endless war. The population is oppressed and the dictatorship is personified in the abstract figure of 'Big Brother', a symbol of the all-seeing surveillance state. He is assumed to be always watching the populace, just as the computer programmed by Landru sees all. When asked by Kirk what happened to Landru, resistance leader Marplon volunteers: 'He is here now. He sees. He hears.' Landru promises much, if only the population would accede to his will. Reger fills in the back story: 'There was war. Convulsions. The world was destroying itself. Landru was our leader. He saw the truth. He changed the world. He took us back, back to a simple time. A time of peace and tranquillity.'

The world of Beta III features a population that is watched at all times, a surveillance society. As Kirk and company prepare to hide from the Lawgivers, Tamar states: 'Landru will know. He will come.' When crewman Lieutenant O'Neil is absorbed to become one with 'the body', Reger is concerned he will reveal their hiding place: 'When he wakes, Landru will find us through him.' When McCoy is also absorbed, he says of Landru: 'He knows and he watches.' When Kirk and Spock encounter Marplon, he doesn't want to outline his plan because 'Landru ... will hear.'

What is never shown is how this omniscience on behalf of Landru is

achieved. There seem to be no cameras or microphones in buildings or on the town streets, unlike major conurbations of the 21st century, which are littered with CCTV surveillance equipment. Perhaps the surveillance is somehow biological; Reger says Landru will find the *Enterprise* crew 'through' O'Neil. Once someone is absorbed and made one with the body, is their consciousness somehow made subservient to that of Landru; can the machine literally 'see' through their eyes? Would O'Neil (and later McCoy) actually be walking, talking all-seeing biological surveillance devices in themselves, in service to Landru?

Reger speaks of 'others' who belong to a resistance movement, 'Those like you and me,' he says to Kirk, 'who resist Landru.' Spock dubs this an 'underground' and asks how they are organised. 'In threes. Myself, Tamar, who's dead now, and one other.' Reger does not know who this 'other' is (it turns out to be Marplon), as Tamar was his sole contact. The resistance cells may be made up of threes, but it appears that as a security measure, no more than any two of those three are in contact with each other. This structure seems to have been modelled after the clandestine cell structure of the French resistance during the Second World War⁶. This was designed to resist penetration by the authorities, whether military or political. Any individual cell member apprehended and interrogated would not be able to confirm the identities of anyone else in the wider movement beyond their own single contact in their individual cell. It is hardly surprising that this structure should occur to Sobelman and the others who worked on the teleplay; most of them were of an age to have experienced military life in the Second World War and to have been aware of such resistance activities as those practised in Nazi-occupied France. Reger cannot explain how he and others, like Tamar and Marplon, have escaped total control by Landru. 'Some of us escaped the directives,' is all he has to offer. 'Not many, but a few.' Whether the population were so seemingly blissful then as they are

⁶ Crowdy, Terry, *French Resistance Fighter: France's Secret Army*.

now, or whether this apparently brainwashed populace exists as a result of the machinations of the computer Landru is equally unclear. When the projection of Landru first appears before Kirk and Spock, he describes his world. 'You have come to a world without hate, without fear, without conflict. No war. No disease. No crime. None of the ancient evils. Landru seeks tranquillity. Peace for all. Universal good.' Little wonder the absorbed Sulu describes the planet as 'paradise' featuring 'the sweetest, friendliest people in the universe'. The new arrivals are identified by Landru as a threat, 'destroyers' who bring an 'infection'. The ways of the *Enterprise* crew threaten to pollute 'the body', they are invaders whom Landru threatens with absorption.

BIOGRAPHY

Brian J Robb is the *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestselling biographer of Leonardo Di Caprio, Keanu Reeves, Johnny Depp and Brad Pitt. He has also written books on silent cinema, the films of Philip K Dick, horror director Wes Craven, and classic comedy team Laurel and Hardy, the **Star Wars** movies, Superheroes, Gangsters, and Walt Disney, as well as science fiction television series **Star Trek** and **Doctor Who**, including the recent **Black Archive** on the Peter Davison story *Earthshock*. His illustrated books include *A History of Steampunk*. A former magazine and newspaper editor, he was co-founder of the Sci-Fi Bulletin website and lives near Edinburgh.