Athena's One-Day Limit in Sophocles' Aias

It is Aias himself, and not Athena, who is the prime mover of his downfall. It is the result of his deep-rooted belief in his own superiority. He is so thoroughly convinced that he, and only he, was entitled to the arms of Achilles that he cannot imagine that others do not share this conviction. In his view, there must have been 'electoral fraud', perpetrated by the Atreids, and so, during the night, he tries to take revenge by killing them.1)

This nocturnal attack was not instigated by Athena, nor was she involved—as she is in epic poetry—in the decision to award the arms to Odysseus. The goddess merely thwarts his attempt at revenge,2) but she does so in such a cruel way that his life is totally ruined. She not only strikes him with the madness that triggers his onslaught on the cattle, she also sees to it that the army comes to know what he was actually planning to do. In this way Aias becomes the laughing stock of the Greeks and the object of their hatred; his τιμή has gone for good and suicide is his only way out.

Tekmessa (485-524) tries to prevent this, by reminding him of his obligations to his parents, to his son and to herself, and of the charis between them: he received it from her and he now must reciprocate by staying alive. But, however moving her appeal and however justified her claim, she does not explain what kind of a life he could possibly lead after what happened during the night. Neither she nor the Chorus offer any real alternative to suicide.

Afterwards it is Kalchas who explains the reason of Athena's anger. Again it is due to Aias' deep-rooted belief in his own superiority: he has explicitly rejected the help of the gods, first the gods in general and later on Athena herself. But Kalchas

---

1) In my view Sophocles makes it clear that in fact there has been no fraud. See van Erp Taalman Kip 1996, 524-31. Von Fritz rightly says: “Er kann sich das Geschehene nur aus Neid und Bösheit erklären” (1962, 248).
2) Tyler (1974, 26) observes that there would have been no grounds for suicide if the attack had succeeded. That may be true, but we may assume that in that case Aias would have been lynched by the army. He would have been doomed all the same.
not only reveals the origin of this anger, he also makes known when it will end: the next day it will be over. He instructs Teukros to make sure that Aias does not leave his hut for the duration of this one day, if he wants to see him alive again.

ἐλᾷ γὰρ αὐτὸν τὴνδ᾿ ἔθ᾿ ἡμέραν μόνην
diās Αθάνας μήνις,… (756-7)

'for the wrath of divine Athena will continue to pursue him for one more day,…’3)

Aias has earned the implacable hatred of the goddess,

アルバム εἶπεν ἐστι τῇδ᾿ ἔθ᾿ ἡμέρας, τὸχ᾿ ἄν
genomēb αὐτῶν σιὼν θεῷ σωτήροι. (778-9)

'but if he survives this day, we may well save him with the help of the deity.'

Why this one day? The answers to this question have been manifold, but I have yet to come across a really satisfying explanation. Wilamowitz (1917, 53), as one might expect, stresses the purely dramatic function: the message about Kalchas’ prophecy prompts a desperate search for Aias. This gets the action going again and the exit of Tekmessa and the Chorus clears the stage for Aias’ suicide. Gardiner (1987, 67-8) likewise concentrates mainly on this aspect of the question, but while it cannot be denied that Sophocles did want to clear the stage, it is hard to believe that he introduced for this reason a piece of information that actually has no meaning at all. Moreover, if we put ourselves in the dramatist’s place, we must also reckon with the spectators. As they listen to the messenger’s report, they do not know that the stage must be emptied, or why. It is only when Aias unexpectedly reappears, that this dramatic necessity becomes clear. Are they expected to realize, in retrospect, that the one-day limit has no intrinsic meaning whatsoever?

Most critics do, however, think that the one-day limit has an intrinsic meaning. Bowra (1944, 36) considers it an indication of Athena’s mercy and in the view of Jebb “…she has justly measured the offence and sets a corresponding limit to the chastisement” (1896, xii). Garvie does not believe that “a merciful Athena is giving Ajax the chance to escape death”, but, like Jebb, he does connect the one-day limit with the seriousness of the goddess’ anger. After arguing that Aias’ rejection

3) The reading of POxy. 1615 (τὴνδ᾿ ἔθ᾿ ἡμέραν μόνην instead of τῇδε θημέρα μόνη) has rightly been adopted by Kamerbeck, Stanford, Lloyd-Jones/Wilson and Garvie; Jebb did not know the papyrus. Without ἕτη it would seem as if until now Aias has not felt the wrath of Athena, while obviously he has. In 778 Lloyd-Jones/Wilson and Garvie (following Lobeck) read τῇδ᾿ ἔθ᾿ ἡμέρα instead of τῇδε θημέρα, but in this case ἕτη is less essential.