

Memory and Forgetfulness in Alcaeus

Remembrance of things past is a motif in archaic monody, but nowhere is it more prominent than in the poetry of Alcaeus (35% of the verbs appear in past tense). His poetry reflects, to a great extent, the civic unrest in Mytilene at a period when tyrants are replacing the aristocrats, who stake their claim to political dominance on the basis of their distinguished lineage. While memory is a fundamental tool for aristocratic self-definition in general, Alcaeus, in addition to its typical uses, adopts a twisted version of it in order to define his political opponents. Thus memory (*mnemosyne*) and its negation (*lethe*) are charged in his corpus with antithetical values, depending on the person they refer to. On the aristocratic side, memory has a positive resonance, since it generates a pressing call to save “the ship of state” and justify the traditional superiority of aristocracy (fr. 6); it even transforms the banquet-hall into an idealized, Golden Age-like environment permeated by the valor of the aristocratic warrior (fr. 140). But forgetfulness has its positive uses as well: strife within the *hetaireia* must be forgotten, not only for the sake of sympotic *euprosyne* (fr. 73) but, more important, for the effectiveness of the struggle against tyranny (fr. 70). On the other hand, when *mnemosyne* and *lethe* apply to Pittacus, the tyrant of Mytilene, they mischievously assume negative connotations: he remembers the things he ought to forget (low-born ways, bad associations, excessive drinking of unmixed wine; fr. 72) while he forgets things he ought to remember (his oaths to Alcaeus’ *hetaireia*; fr. 129). Thus Alcaeus’ references to the past often advocate not only the need for political restoration but also for the punishment of wrong-doers. It is not accidental that Alcaeus contains so many hortatory subjunctives.