

## Exile and the Wisdom of Alcaeus

In the fragments of Alcaeus we find many proverbial expressions. We know that he achieved a fair amount of recognition for his wisdom in antiquity, although it was his political rival Pittacus that made the lists of the Seven Sages. Aelius Aristides tells us of at least one Alcaic *gnōmē* (fragment 426) that was often borrowed by later writers; the ancient *scholia* preserve several more; and much of his advice survives, somewhat attenuated, through the lyric verses of Horace. Most of these proverbial expressions can stand alone; but if they are examined in the context of what we know about Alcaeus' status as an exile from Mytilene, additional layers of meaning come to light. This paper focuses on several of Alcaeus' most fragmentary gnomic utterances. I discuss the applicability of each *gnōmē* to the poet's conception of exile and to his definition of civic participation.

Fragment 112 offers much more evidence than what can be found in its single complete line ("warlike men are a city's tower"). The half-column of text which extends for nine lines above and 16 lines below this *gnōmē* includes partial words and phrases that may apply to the state of exile. This context could invert the *gnōmē*—making it a point not about the relative importance of walls and men (as Nicias reuses the line in Thucydides 7.77), but about the civic identity of men even when separated from their city walls (as Themistocles reuses the line in Herodotus 8.61).

Fragment 117, in lines 26-32, relates several bits of advice concerning association with prostitutes: "What one gives to a prostitute, one may as well throw into the waves of the grey sea," and "Whoever consorts with a prostitute . . . disgrace and destructive misery . . ." But specific language in the surrounding fragmentary lines suggests that we should read these

warnings in political, rather than sexual, terms. I discuss fragments 60 and 63 in relation to evidence that the prostitute in question is Pittacus.

Alcaeus has left us several patriotic sentiments, such as the honor of dying in war in fragment 400. This can be taken in the same civic-duty-reaffirming way as his disgruntlement at losing his shield in battle, or perhaps as a reminder that an exile is cut off from proper funeral rights, and from the basic right of burial in one's homeland. The poet's conclusions about poverty in fragment 360 have particular poignancy if read as the plight of one exiled from one's home, but fragment 364 brings in a greater political relevance by claiming that this sort of disenfranchisement, and its associated *amāchania*, threatens the entire public.

I discuss the commentary found in P.Oxy. 2506, which offers contradictory evidence about the poet's biography, but gives some clarity to the poet's expressions about his exile. Relying primarily on the work of Forsdyke (2005) and Dale (2011), I draw conclusions about how Alcaeus presents the nature of political participation as it is affected by successive periods of exile.

### Bibliography

- Dale, Alexander. 2011. "Alcaeus on the Career of Myrsilos: Greeks, Lydians, and Luwians at the East Aegean – West Anatolian Interface," *JHS* 131:15–24.
- Forsdyke, Sara. 2005. *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece*. Princeton.