

## Thalassocracy and Tyranny: The Case of Minos

In the archaic period the development and implementation of a sea-based power seems to have afforded its holders the exclusive title of supreme kings. Within the whole host of epic monarchs, only Minos and Agamemnon are dubbed *basileutatos*, “the most kingly” ([Hesiod] *Fragm.* 144 M-W=[Pl.], *Minos* 320d and *Il.* 9.69, respectively). By contrast, the notion of thalassocracy in the course of the fifth BCE features an ideological and political shift toward tyranny. The figure of Minos, in particular, comes to embody traits typical of a tyrant. Claims to this effect have been advanced, but they either do not offer specific arguments (Morris 1992, 352; Irwin 2007) or propose models that would have been foreign to a fifth-century BCE construct of the tyrannical figure (Calame 1990, 220). This paper sets out to pinpoint precise references to, and underlying motives for, a tyrant-like portrayal of Minos.

Bacchylides’ Ode 17 envisions Minos at the height of his maritime power aboard a ship en route to Crete transporting Athenian youths, amongst which Theseus. Minos’ attempt to violate the maiden Euryboia and his outrageous attitude toward Theseus who stands up in her defense precisely conform to the behavioral template of eastern tyrants as it will be outlined in Herodotus’ *Histories* (Hdt. 3.80.3-5). Minos even challenges his rival to fetch the golden ring he tosses in the sea anticipating that Theseus would drown in the attempt. Poseidon, the patron deity of the sea, however, undermines both his expectations and confidence by allowing his son Theseus to resurface victorious from the ocean’s depths. The episode thus heralds a transfer of supremacy over the sea from Minos to Theseus, likely here the representative of the Athenian sea power, which had just begun to spearhead the Delian League in the years prior to the ode’s composition.

Herodotus draws a direct connection between thalassocracy and tyranny at 3.122.2, wherein the historian compares Minos to Polycrates of Samos, one of the foremost examples of Greek tyrant in his eyes. In spite of questioning Minos' historicity, Herodotus manufactures for the Cretan king a tyrannical biography that closely matches Polycrates' life: both islanders and thalassocrats, they overcame the rivalry of family members (Hdt. 1.173.2; 3.39.2), reaped a series of important successes in war (Hdt. 1.171.3; 3.39.3), and lost their lives disgracefully in foreign lands (Hdt. 7.170.1; 3.125.1, 3). While constructing Minos' *tyrannikos bios*, Herodotus still reminds his readership of Minos' royal status: Minos vied with his brother Sarpedon for the *basileia* of Crete (Hdt. 1.173.2). As delineated by Herodotus, Minos' trajectory from monarch to tyrant may well be thought to represent a close precedent for the Athenian democracy, itself later accused of degenerating into a tyranny (Thuc. 2.63.2; 3.37.2) due to the city's conduct in establishing its maritime empire.

First introduced as a foil to the Athenian sea power at the helm of the Delian League in Bacchylides' ode, Minos' tyrannical thalassocracy during the second half of the fifth century seems to be reshaped into a compelling yet ominous model for the Athenian *archē*. One cannot help but think that Herodotus would have appreciated knowing that the imperialistic dreams of Athens would come to an end with an expedition to Sicily, the same island where Minos met his demise.

## Bibliography

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