

Cleon, Pylos, and the Paphlagonian Pylaimenes

Why does Aristophanes choose to portray Cleon as a Paphlagonian slave as opposed to some other ethnic in *Knights*? Making a pun on *παφλάζειν*, “to boil over, to bluster,” and Cleon’s bombastic and blustering style of oratory (cf. the pun in *Eq.* 919, *Pax* 314) seems a sufficient explanation. But more can be said about the decision. David Lewis, for example, speculates that Aristophanes’ reason for choosing to call Cleon a Paphlagon “may owe something to knowledge of the greatest Paphlagonian of the day,” Artoxares, eunuch and kingmaker of Darius II, “rather than simply to the desire to find a suitable barbaric ethnic which will allow for a pun on the word *παφλάζειν*” (Lewis, 1977: 21). A. M. Bowie suggests, on the other hand, that the many chthonic associations of Paphlagonia, in particular as regards portals (*pylai*) to the underworld, may account for the choice (Bowie, 1993: 59–61).

Bowie’s intriguing interpretation suggests a way in which to understand the epithet “Paphlagonian,” in that it combines an association with the place in Asia Minor as well as a link with the root “pyl-,” in other words, an allusion to Cleon leading the Athenian victory at Pylos, and, undoubtedly, to his incessant boasting about it. Rather than the associations that Bowie makes with Paphlagonia, however, I suggest that there are other ways to understand Aristophanes’ decision to call Cleon a Paphlagon. First, Cleon can be compared to Pylaimenes, leader of the Paphlagonians in the Trojan catalogue of heroes (Hom. *Il.* 2.851). The hero Pylaimenes is not mentioned in the *Knights*, but the great prominence of Pylos (mentioned at 55, 76, 355, 702, 846, 1005, 1058–9, 1167, 1201)– even Athena is invoked as a fellow combatant *πυλαι-μάχος* (1172)– and the Paphlagonian-Cleon’s repeated boasts of leading the stunning military success at Pylos suggest an epic-like achievement. Of course, Cleon as the new Pylaimenes, a Trojan ally most famous for dying in battle (Hom. *Il.* 5.576) and later turning up

alive (Hom. *Il.* 13.643), is silly. Cleon is no Pylaimenes. Rather he is a ridiculous self-promoter whose pretensions to epic glory are transparently hollow.

In addition, Aristophanes may be using the epithet as an oblique reference to the claims of certain slave groups, including Paphlagonians, to descent from legendary heroes, such as Pylaimenes. The epitaph of the woodcutter Mannes, declaring he was, “best of Phrygians in wide Athens. He died in war” (ca. 431–21, IG i³.1361), and a fragment of Menander (fr. 359 K-A), in which Thracians call themselves Trojans, exemplify assertions of greatness and noble pedigree on the part of slaves, or former slaves. The epitaph of the Paphlagonian miner, Atotas (second half of 4th cen.) is of special interest for appreciating Aristophanes’ decision to call Cleon a Paphlagon. The epitaph boasts that Atotas came “from the race of Pylaimenes who died, conquered by the hand of Achilles” (IG ii².10051). By calling him the Paphlagonian, Aristophanes equates Cleon’s claims with those of slaves who claim special privilege and status in their own sub-cultures (cf. Forsdyke, 2012: *passim*) and thus renders Cleon’s heroic self-regard as laughable and absurd fantasy. At the end of the day, Cleon is no better than a slave claiming a fictitious pedigree.

Bibliography

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