

Myrsilus is Dead: Alcaeus and Lydian Hegemony

The Mytilene of Alcaeus was a tangled web of factional alliances punctuated by the risings and fallings of autocratic rulers. The literary record depicts an unlikely series of exiles and returns to power by these figures. We have created what appears to be an intelligible timeline: the Penthilidae are removed by Megacles and Smerdis, Melanchrus is deposed by Pittacus and the brothers of Alcaeus, Myrsilus is exiled but somehow returns to power with the help of Mnamon, and Pittacus joins Myrsilus in power, but becomes tyrant (Aristotle uses the term *aisymnetes*) when Myrsilus has died. Few of these figures can be identified even vaguely, and there is little compelling textual evidence for any link in this chain of events.

The figure of Myrsilus is the most confusing, not least because the name is associated with the Lydian king Candaules by Herodotus (1.7), who tells us that Candaules was called Myrsilus by the Greeks. Linguistic records suggest that Candaules is most likely a pre-Lydian royal title rather than a personal name (Dale 2011). Myrsilus is an attested Lydian name (Asheri, et al. 2007), but Herodotus is under the impression that it is a Greek or hellenized variant. This confusion suggests that Herodotus' sources employ the name Myrsilus in an ambiguous way. Dale considers two possible conclusions about the identity of Myrsilus of Mytilene: (a) that Myrsilus was the heir to an indigenous royal family of neo-Hittite Lesbians, or (b) that the name Myrsilus is an autocratic title borrowed from Anatolia and applied by Alcaeus to both Melanchrus and Pittacus, in turn.

This paper will explore the idea that the name Myrsilus appears in the fragments of Alcaeus not as a specific person, nor as a generic term for a ruler, but as a title for the king of Lydia. References to Lesbians making alliances with Myrsilus can be explained as factional contestants who have allied themselves with the powerful kingdom on the mainland. This

explains the confusion evident in Herodotus' discussion of the identity of Candaules. I discuss the overwhelming textual evidence for Lydian influence over the island. I closely analyze the exilic fragments of Alcaeus, arguing that they depict factions in or out of favor with a pro-Lydian aristocracy, and his "ship of state" fragments, arguing that they relate to the security of Lesbian autonomy in the shadow of the powerful Lydian empire.

Bibliography

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