

## Lies, Misdirection, and Gaslighting: On Establishing and Maintaining Tyranny at Athens

The most quoted passage in all of Herodotus (Connor 1987) is the story of how Pisistratus fooled the Athenians into believing that Athena herself supported him in his bid for Tyranny (Hdt. 1.60.1-5). He did so by dressing up a tall and beautiful girl, named Phye, in armor and having her stand beside him in a chariot as they entered the city. This episode has been interpreted as, among many others, Pisistratus adopting the iconographic motif of Herakles performing his toils assisted by Athena (Deacy 2007), an advent festival involving the ritual impersonation of Athena (Petridou 2015), an actual victory procession following the battle of Pallene (Blok 2000), or the inaugural procession of the Panathenaic Festival (Sinos 1993). Thus modern readers have generally tried to square our understanding of this episode, which Herodotus himself says is the “silliest scheme” he’s ever heard, within the fairly restrictive framework of Athenian mythology and iconography.

I argue here, however, that traditional, scholarly interpretations have failed to capture how the public deceptions deployed by Pisistratus, of which the Phye episode is only the most famous, actually operated from the standpoint of individual and group political psychology. As a result, historians of Archaic Athens have failed to appreciate the power that such lies and misdirection held for Pisistratus’ acquisition and maintenance of power. Building on Leon Festinger’s classic articulation of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), social psychologists have shown that both groups and individuals have to endure higher cognitive loads in order to process and come to accept as true claims they know to be false (Sherman and Gorkin 1980). Strikingly, those who overcome cognitive dissonance in order to accept claims once seen as false are more likely to vigorously defend their new attitudinal positions (McKimmie 2015). And most importantly, subjects who actively participate in public acts of deception through further

promulgation, even as they acknowledge the falsehood of their public commitments at the time, are far less likely to disavow such falsehoods than those who have been actually deceived (Flynn et al. 2017). In short, the performance of public lies by those seeking power, and the subsequent acceptance and re-performance of such lies by potential supporters, actually increases not only the stickiness of the lies themselves, but also the political loyalty of those collaborating in public deception.

Given this body of research, I show that the ancient accounts of Pisistratean tricks and lies were not simply ridiculous stories of ancient gullibility or religiosity, but early evidence for authoritarian manipulation of individual and group behavior in the service of autocratic power. As a result, we can and should situate the outlandish claims made by Pisistratus in the same tradition of obviously untrue, but nonetheless powerfully efficacious, claims made by men such as Nero, Hafez El-Assad, Mao Zedong, and Vladimir Putin (Svolik 2012).

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