

Living the Myth: History as Rhetoric in Delphic Paeans

In my paper I discuss the deployment of an historical event as a mythic episode within Greek cultic performance. Specifically, I consider two late 2nd c. BCE paeans to Apollo from Delphi, which incorporate Apollo's intervention on his sanctuary's behalf, against the Gallic invasion of 279/8 BCE. I argue that the poets embed this real-world event as a synecdoche, encouraging the audience to see the god's possessiveness towards his sanctuary as spilling out of myth, into history, to the benefit of his allies.

We are accustomed to myth as history, or something to be historicized; the Greeks, however, could also mythologize history. In both hymns, performed and written by Athenians for the Pythaiides festival, each author juxtaposes two important Delphic scenes: (1) the god's battle against the drakōn for the tripod, and (2) his repulsion of a barbarian horde bent on plunder. By associating the Gallic threat of 150 years earlier with the beginning of Apollo's concern for Delphi (a narrative reenacted and retold repeatedly through the festival year), the audience is encouraged to emplot other historical events upon this chronological axis; it is likely that they would recall that Apollo had earlier saved Delphi when the Persians invaded in the 5th c., and it seems possible that they could imagine the far more recent expulsions of Macedonians and Aetolians as something similar. These most recent events enabled Athens to gain control over the Amphictyony, followed thereafter by increased involvement in Delphic affairs, and the restoration of the long defunct Pythaiides festivals.

The paeans are about Apollo and Delphi, but they also devote significant space to Athens and its people—one hymn refers to the city as *ἄθραυστον* (unbroken), the other refers to it as the city of Kekrops, and *θεόκτιστον* (god-founded). In a time when Thebes and Corinth have both been annihilated, claims to great antiquity are significant. The autochthonous Athenians and the

Delphic sanctuary both locate their origins in the mythical past, and their endurance (due to the protection of the gods) suggests that they are obvious allies. It has been argued (Mikalson-1998) that Athens, militarily weak in the Hellenistic period, attempted to project cultural authority, in part through religious cult; the most visible manifestation of this effort could be seen in the city's complete control over and reorganization of Delian cult. With the Aetolians now out of the way, and Rome not interfering, Athens turned to Apollo's other great cult site, seeking to exert influence at the 'center' of the world.

In a pair of recent articles, Sarah Iles Johnston (2015a, 2015b) has argued that narrative performance in ritual context serves to momentarily enchants the audience, bringing the worlds of myth and history close together (just as the sacrificial altar and meal brings human and divine communities together). In these songs, however, authors and performers intentionally step over the dividing line and fuse divine myth and human history in a stronger way—history and myth do more than meet, they mingle. Additionally, history is *emplotted*, or *troped* in a particular way when it is embodied in narrative (White-1973), and there are rhetorical consequences to choosing myth as a medium—rather than concern for accuracy, effort is made to express some sort of truth that is meaningful to the audience. I suggest that the act of performing history as myth is a kind of rhetorical effort aimed at not just evoking the mythical past, or even visualizing the historical past, but persuading those present to view themselves and their own time as belonging to this continuous mythical narrative. The hymns express solidarity between myth and actual history, between Delphi, its god, and their ally Athens.

Bibliography

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