

Emerald and Gold: Polycrates' Ring in Asclepiades AP 12.163

εὔρεν Ἔρως τί καλῶ μίξει καλόν, οὐχὶ μάραγδον  
χρυσῶ, †ὃ μήτ' ἀνθεῖ, μήτε γένοιτ' ἐν ἴσῳ, †  
οὐδ' ἐλέφαντ' ἐβένῳ, λευκῶ μέλαν, ἀλλὰ Κλέανδρον  
Εὐβιότῳ, πειθοῦς ἄνθεα καὶ φιλίης.

“Love has discovered what beauty to mix with beauty; not emerald  
with gold, which neither sparkles nor could ever be its equal,  
nor ivory with ebony, black with white, but Kleandros with  
Eubiotos, two blossoms of persuasion and friendship.”

The epigram above, AP 12.163, was written by the Hellenistic epigrammatist Asclepiades of Samos and features two lovers named Eubiotos and Kleandros. This couple serves as the climax to a priamel, which claims that Eros has united them instead of other pairs of beautiful things. One of these pairs is emerald and gold. Alexander Sens and Massimo Di Marco focus on the aesthetic contrast of these materials as a foil to the relationship between Eubiotos and Kleandros—their differences in luster and color highlight the contrasting similarity of Eubiotos and Kleandros' social status, age, and emotional investment in their relationship (Sens, 2011; Di Marco, 2003). What scholarship has not explored is whether the combination of emerald and gold might have had a deeper significance to the poet, one which would have suggested its inclusion in his priamel.

This paper argues that the addition of these two precious materials also hints at a famous piece of ancient jewelry. According to Herodotus, the most prized possession of the 6<sup>th</sup> century tyrant Polycrates of Samos was a golden ring with inlaid emerald. As the story goes, Polycrates cast this ring into the sea in order to solidify his political friendship with the Egyptian pharaoh Amasis II. Polycrates' ring was crafted by the sculptor Theodorus of Samos, whose reputation as a superbly skilled artisan added to the celebrity of the ring. Such a cultured reference would

express Asclepiades' pride in the history and craftsmanship of his homeland, and also enhance the relationship of Kleandros and Eubiotos. Hellenistic epigrammatists often put learned allusions in their poetry to show off their knowledge and to make their commissioners appear well-educated (Cairns 2016).

Samos would have been especially important to Asclepiades because he either personally experienced or was born to parents who had experienced the Samian diaspora in the middle of the fourth century. James Clifford argued that diaspora cultures preserve and recover their traditions when in antagonistic situations (Clifford, 1994). Thus, when the Athenians forced the Samians to abandon their homeland and physical connection to their history they also provided the ideal circumstances for the conscious preservation of that history. Moreover, Kathryn Gutzwiller has noted that Asclepiades was reportedly an associate of Duris, who was not only tyrant of Samos after the diaspora, but also a prominent historian (Gutzwiller, 1998). By virtue of this association, Asclepiades was exposed to people with a vested interest in rebuilding Samian life and recording the island's history. Given that Polycrates' reign was when Samos reached the height of its power, the story recorded by Herodotus would have been among those deemed worthy of remembrance by the Samians living in and recovering from the Samian diaspora.

The conclusion to the story of Polycrates' ring also presents a compelling case for why Asclepiades may have been inspired to refer to it in his priamel. Polycrates sacrificed his ring so he could humble himself and prove his fidelity to Amasis II, but that sacrifice was ultimately rejected by the gods and the ring was returned to him in the belly of a fish. Furthermore, the political alliance between Amasis and Polycrates was not necessarily an equal one and was a far cry from the mutual love and harmony shared by Eubiotos and Kleandros, making it a particularly effective foil to their relationship. While Eubiotos and Kleandros's *harmonia* would

have made them perfect candidates for Eros to join together, the two elements of a famous ring that led to the dissolution of guest-friendship and the public downfall of a prominent Samian would have been quite the opposite. It is no wonder why Eros, in his search for what beauty to mix with what, passed over emerald and gold.

#### Bibliography

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