

Why Did Athenians Trust Demagogues? The Power of Being *Pithanotatos*

Even recent studies on Athenian demagogues by Hershkowitz (2018), Rhodes (2016), and Mann (2007) have not settled a long-debated question: what about these politicians allowed them to rise to and maintain power? Among the answers are their business acumen (Andrewes 1962), their rhetorical skill (Ar. *Pol.* 1305a12-13), and their adoption of *philia* (“family/friendship”) conventions with common Athenians (Connor 1971). In all of these cases, though, the focus is on what the demagogues themselves did, and not on how non-elite Athenians received and interpreted their practices or approaches. This paper focuses on the use in several authors of the word *pithanos*, used to describe a quality, attributed to demagogues, of persuasiveness or credibility in the eyes of common Athenians. Its use may imply a personal sense of favorable, even friendly evaluation of demagogues by common Athenians, even when the authors who employed the term may have intended it pejoratively.

Forms of *pithanos*, when describing people and their communications during the years of the Peloponnesian War, refer almost exclusively to demagogues. Thucydides twice uses the superlative *pithanotatos* (“most persuasive/credible”) to refer to common Athenians’ perception of the first and most famous of the demagogues, Cleon (3.36.6, 4.21.3). Thucydides employs the same term to describe the impact on common Syracusans of Athenagoras, a Syracusan demagogue (6.35.2). The Sausage-Seller in *Knights* uses *pithanotat’* (“highly persuasive/credible things”) to describe Paphlagon’s (representing Cleon) communications with the Athenian *boule* (628-29). And *pithanos* is used at Eur. *Or.* 906 to describe the demagogic orator Tyndareus hires. Pericles, on the contrary, is introduced at Thuc. 1.139.4 as Athens’ “most capable in both speaking (*legein*) and acting,” is described similarly elsewhere (as are other elite politicians) and is never referred to as *pithanos*.

Pithanos can mean “persuasive,” sometimes with a hint of deceptive manipulation (e.g., Eur. *Thy.* fr. 392, and Pl. *Apol.* 17a3), and it is quite possible that that is the connotation that Thucydides, Aristophanes, and Euripides had in mind when using it for demagogues. However, its regular use in these authors suggests that it may have been a term that the authors picked up from common Athenians, who may have meant it in a more complimentary way. Herodotus uses the term to express the believability of stories for which there is no independent verification (1.214.21, 2.123.2, 3.3.2, 3.9.6, 3.9.7, 4.95.20), and that flavor of the term could easily be applied to demagogues. Unlike Pericles and other politicians of more prestigious provenance, one of the common markers of demagogues is their families’ fairly recent rise to prominence (Davies 1981). Their personal standings did not give them immediate credibility; they needed to strike people as being worthy of trust. Such credibility might have come in part through effective speaking in the assembly, but, as Finley (1962) noted, demagogues were not particularly unusual in speaking effectively.

Part of their credibility may have come from acting like friends to common Athenians. One way to do this is through interacting with such Athenians in close proximity, as Cleon (or Paphlagon) is depicted as doing at Ar. *Eq.* 852-54, *Vesp.* 1033-34, and *Pax* 756-57, and as a demagogic Odysseus is portrayed as doing at Eur. *IA* 528-29. Another is through making clear their likeness to common Athenians, as exemplified through the claim at Ar. *Eq.* 217-219 that being *agoraios* (“fitting in in the marketplace”) is a prerequisite for success as a demagogue, and Menelaus’ claim that Odysseus has a natural affinity with the masses (*IA* 526).

There was a fair amount of bias against demagogues apparent in the works of such authors as Thucydides, Euripides, and Aristophanes. But in their choices of terms like *pithanos* to describe these politicians, along with the patterns of interaction in which they portrayed

demagogues engaging, they seem to be revealing one of the factors in demagogues' success with their underclass constituency: they found ways to make themselves perceived as credible, when their backgrounds did not do it for them. This may be one more reflection of the success of their varied efforts to get many members of Athenian underclasses to think of them as friends, whom those underclasses supported because of that feeling of attachment.

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