

Sea-storms and Aristocratic Instruction in Alcaeus

By adapting earlier nautical imagery, Alcaeus generates a focused political discourse which addresses the realities of the declining aristocracy in early sixth century Mytilene. The poet, through the repeated image of the ship of state/faction struggling in a storm, presents his political opponent, the tyrant, as the agitated sea, thus as wild, savage and treacherous, and the members of the *hetaireia* as the crew, called upon to display a wide range of civic virtues. In Alcaeus, the sea becomes a potent literary matrix for political and gnomic advice given, as often in archaic Greece, in the symposion, itself imagined as taking place at sea (fr. 58). It has been argued that the symposion is a social microcosm of its own, an escape from the quotidian world, and hence “the so-called ship of state passages” need to be reread in the light of sympotic practices and be stripped of their political meaning (e.g., W. Slater, *HSCP* 80: 161-70). But the view of a detached symposion has been credibly challenged on the grounds of its egalitarian structure and its overwhelmingly political rhetoric, both of which place it squarely within the polis, not apart from it (e.g., S. Corner, *CQ* 60: 352-80). In fr. 73, for example, especially in the light of Heraclitus’ statement that Alcaeus “overuses” the sea-storm as a metaphor for the evils of tyranny (*Alleg. Hom.* 5), the reference to a disintegrating ship in a sympotic context must be another instance of political exhortation to perseverance rather than a jest with sexual overtones. Here, as elsewhere in Alcaeus’ poetry, sea language seems to have been harnessed in the service of his *hetaireia*, in practical terms meaning the overthrowing of tyranny and the reestablishment of his faction in its privileged place. Although in the end neither was achieved, Alcaeus’ islander audience must have felt quite at home with his nautical instructions, which, ironically, were concerned more with things on land than at sea.