In or Out? Political Blame in Alcaeus

A fair amount of the surviving poetry of Alcaeus is concerned with Lesbian politics and the poet's own reaction to this turmoil (Page 1955, Kurke 1994). While Alcaeus' poetry has been used as a historical source of early 6th c. Lesbos, not much scholarship has been devoted to his language regarding a base unit of 'politics', i.e. the citizenry. This paper addresses the limited occurrences of the words δᾶμος and πολίται within the Alcaic corpus, particularly within frr. 70, 129, 130, and 348. I argue that Alcaeus' use of these words when referring to his fellow Mytilenians colors his presentation of Lesbos' political situation. Additionally, I argue that this presentation creates a city-wide in-group and out-group, which is rooted in Alcaeus' creation of his own social identity (Romney 2018, 2020).

The Greek word δᾶμος appears only twice within the surviving Alcaic fragments (frr. 70 and 129) while πολίται appears once (130), and never in the singular form. Although both words refer to the citizenry of a *polis*, the δᾶμος refers to the collective unit of citizens and is treated as a singular entity while the πολίται refers to a group of individual citizens who then constitute the δᾶμος. In both fragments in which it appears, δᾶμος is used in the accusative case as a direct object. In fr. 70, some god is leading the people into ruin (τις Ὀλυμπίων …, δᾶμον μὲν εἰς ἀυάταν ἄγων…). In fr. 129, Alcaeus and his *hetaireia* made an oath to rescue the people from their pains (δᾶμον ὑπὲξ ἀχέων ῥύεσθαι.) In both fragments, the δᾶμος is subjected to political turmoil caused by a tyrant and is a group that must be saved by Alcaeus' own faction.

I argue that Alcaeus' usage of δᾶμος frames the people of Mytilene as a passive entity that is plunged into turmoil, from which the poet claims it needs to be rescued. By contrast, the single occurrence of πολίται establishes a negative component of the Mytilenians. In fr. 130,

during the time of Alcaeus' exile, the πολίται is described as 'committing wrongs against each other' (τωνδέων τὼν [ἀ]λλαλοκάκων πολίταν). Unlike the collective unit they constitute, the individual citizens are active agents. This suggests that, while the δᾶμος is the unit in danger, the blame for the current political climate belongs to the πολίται.

This neat juxtaposition between the part and the whole is disrupted by fr. 348, in which an undefined third person plural subject placed Pittacus in the role of tyrant (Φιττακον πόλιος … ἐστάσαντο τύραννον). The Mytilenians gave control of the *polis* to Pittacus, although Alcaeus himself does not provide an explicit subject of this action. Thus, fr. 348 provides a worthwhile case study to compare Alcaeus' vocabulary, or lack thereof, regarding the Mytilenians. From this comparison, it is possible to gauge Alcaeus' own position in the city-wide in/out groups that he has created within his poetry. By examining this position, we can further understand the political bodies of archaic Lesbos as Alcaeus saw them.

Additionally, within the scope of this paper, I will begin preliminary comparisons between the poetry of Alcaeus with that of the Athenian Solon. In particular, I will read Alcaeus fr. 70 alongside Solon fr. 4, commonly referred to as the *Eunomia*. Scholars have studied the *Eunomia* for Solon's generic interplay and the complex relationship between the citizenry and *polis* featured within the fragment (Irwin 2005, Anhalt 1993). Unlike Alcaeus fr. 70, where the poet attributes the ruin of the δᾶμος to some god, Solon's *Eunomia* assigns blame onto the citizens themselves (αὐτοὶ δὲ φθείρειν μεγάλην πόλιν … ἀστοὶ βούλονται). By placing these tow fragments into conversation with one another, we can better understand the attribution of blame within the context of archaic political turmoil and how the poet's own social identity influences that placement of blame.

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