

Chapter 5

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Theognis and the Ambivalence of Aristocracy

In his school-thesis presented in 1864, Friedrich Nietzsche formulated the following view on the poet Theognis of Megara:

“Theognis appears as a finely formed nobleman who has fallen on bad times, with the passion of a nobleman such as his time loved, full of fatal hatred toward the upward striving masses, tossed about by a sad fate that wore him down and made him milder in many respects. He is a characteristic image of that old, ingenious somewhat spoiled and no longer firmly rooted blood nobility, placed at the boundary of an old and a new era, a distorted Janus-head, since what is past seems so beautiful and enviable, that which is coming seems disgusting and repulsive; a typical head for all those noble figures who represent the aristocracy prior to a popular revolution and who struggle for the existence of the class of nobles as for their individual existence.”

Nietzsche’s work on Theognis was a considerable achievement. It presupposed expert knowledge, not just of Classics and Greek Literature, but also of Codicology, and it

certainly helped to build the reputation of the then merely twenty-year old scholar. His work on Theognis considerably facilitated Nietzsche's later academic career.¹

If we now take stock of the extensive research on Theognis of Megara today, more than one and a half centuries later, there is not much left of Nietzsche's certainties.² For us, Theognis of Megara remains an elusive figure. Known to us through a large collection of poems called *Theognidea*, about fourteen hundred verses in all, he is nonetheless an obscure historical person. There are many vexed problems concerning the author's identity, place, and date. To start with his birth place: there is a lively debate among the ancients about whether the poet came from Nisaian Megara or from Megara Hyblaia, a Megarian colony in Sicily.³ Plato considers Theognis to be a citizen from Sicilian Megara (*Leg.* 629a-630c). Second, the date: ancient traditions date Theognis to the mid-sixth century BCE. On internal evidence, the *Theognidea* can be dated to the period 640 to 479 BCE. On the one hand, some verses in the corpus seem to portray a political constellation in the city of Megara that is analogous to the situation prevailing before the rise to power of the tyrant Theagenes – an episode that is dated roughly to the years 640-630 BCE (Thgn. 87-90; cf. 1082; 1084). On the other hand, some verses seem to refer to events as late as the Persian invasion in 479 BCE. The poet states that he fears “the Median army's aggression” and “the mindless, people-destroying strife of the Greeks”, who may not be able to protect the city (Thgn. 773-788). Obviously, the *Theognidea* are something more than “the life's work of one single poet”.⁴

Moreover, the reconstruction of the history of Megara at the time of the evolution of Theognidean poetry is most difficult. Our knowledge of the historical events that occurred during the seventh and sixth centuries invariably comes from later sources. The meagre evidence is mainly preserved in three authors: Aristotle, Plutarch, and Pausanias. The fourth- or third-century BCE writers of local histories – Praxion, Dieuchidas, Hereas, and

1 For Nietzsche's Valediktionsschrift, presented to the Landesschule Pforta in Saxony-Anhalt in 1864, see F. Nietzsche, *De Theognide Megarensi*. Nietzsche on Theognis of Megara. Biling. ed., trans. R.M. Kerr: www.thenietzschechannel.com (last accessed on March 3, 2018).

2 Cf. Selle 2008 for a comprehensive overview of research on the *Theognidea*. The contributions in Figueira and Nagy (eds.) 1985 deal with central aspects of the corpus. Cf. also Von der Lahr 1992.

3 Cobb-Stevens, Figueira, and Nagy 1985: 2-3; Gavrilov 2000; Selle 2008: 27-36; 246-253.

4 Cobb-Stevens, Figueira, and Nagy 1985: 1; Selle 2008: 21-27; 229-246.

Heragoras – were mainly concerned with Megara’s earliest history and the foundation of its institutions. The few surviving fragments of their *Megarika* seem to suggest that their works did not even sum up to a sustained historical narrative of the sixth and fifth centuries. As a consequence, we are left with Plutarch’s narrative about Megara in the *Greek Questions* which probably derives from Aristotle’s lost *Constitution of the Megarians* (Plut. *Mor.* 295d).

These notices may be combined with the bits and pieces on Megara and its tyrant Theagenes in Aristotle’s *Politics*. Aristotle regards Theagenes as one of those tyrants who took advantage of a political and military office in the aristocratic community, to seize control of the polis. He characterizes him, in typical fifth- and fourth-century terminology, as a *prostatēs*, who used the people’s hatred of the wealthy to gain the support of the masses (*Pol.* 1305a7–14; *Rhet.* 1357b31–37). This hatred manifested itself, according to Plutarch, in several episodes of riotous behavior. After he had seized power, Theagenes is said to have mounted a spectacular action to seize the flocks of the wealthy. He had the animals captured and slaughtered (Arist. *Pol.* 1305a24–27). Both the exact details of this report and the general questions concerning the economic, social, and political issues, which lay behind these events, are much debated.⁵ Modern interpretations assume that the economic situation of the lower classes seriously deteriorated in this period because new market opportunities generated a new “ideology of gain”, and the members of the elite therefore sought to increase their personal profits at the expense of the poor.⁶ As there is no evidence other than Aristotle’s brief report, any interpretation of these events must necessarily entail some degree of speculation. Everything we know about the structural problems of the economies of Archaic city-states, and of the mentality of their elites, suggests that here, too, an individual aristocrat made use of the temporary support of the dissatisfied *dēmos* to enhance his own power. He did so at the expense of his peers, when

⁵ Okin 1985; Figueira 1985: 113–115; Selle 2008: 228–246. Cf. the (less than satisfactory) treatment of Megara’s history by Legon 1981, and now the overview by Legon 2004.

⁶ Cf. now Forsdyke (2005: 74), who, referring to Plutarch, convincingly argues, “that the connection between riotous behavior and democracy is a construction of fourth-century anti-democratic ideology and that it is extremely unlikely that there was a democracy in sixth-century Megara.” Cf. on the concept of ‘ideology of gain’ again Forsdyke 2005: 74 and 87, referring to Morris 2002: 36.

they pursued their own interests all too recklessly, and thereby destabilized the internal order of the community.⁷

The main methodological problem is to establish a relationship between the historical tradition of Megara, the information contained in Aristotle and Plutarch, and the content of the *Theognidea*. The standard approach has been to combine individual sections of the *Theognidea* with the few attested data in order to create a sort of political-literary biography of Theognis, who was the author of at least some part of the original and authentic core of the corpus. In the face of the mass of problems that result from the unsolved issues of authorship of the text, place and date, this approach is no longer feasible from a methodological point of view. Moreover, there is no reference to Theognis or the *Theognidea* in either the surviving bits of the Megarian local historical tradition or in Aristotle or Plutarch.

The absence of any comment on the *Theognidea* in these texts corresponds to the general lack of direct historical allusions in the poems. First, the main actors on the political stage, like Theagenes the tyrant, are not actually mentioned by name in the *Theognidea*. Second, there are no toponyms of the Megarid at all. Third, there are no references to subdivisions of the citizen body: the tribes, *kōmai*, and *hekatostues* – all of which are known to have existed in Megara – are never mentioned in the poems. In comparison with the evidence of Solonian Athens, this situation is particularly perplexing and indeed frustrating. Moreover, the verses of Theognis are not composed in the native poetic diction of Megarian Doric, but rather in the Ionic dialect, “a format which was suitable for transforming all sorts of local traditions and for addressing a pan-Hellenic audience”. One possible explanation could be, as Gregory Nagy put it, that all “local idiosyncrasies” in the poems were deliberately shaded over by the poet to make certain that the man from Megara became in fact “famous by all men” (Thgn. 237-254).⁸ As a consequence, we can only draw the conclusion that the poems do not constitute a suitable basis for a reconstruction of the history of archaic Nisaian Megara. They do not offer any

7 Cf. on Theagenes' tyranny Stein-Hölkeskamp 2009: 107-108.

8 Nagy 1985: 34-35: “The surviving corpus of Theognidean poetry represents Megarian traditions that have evolved into a form suitable for pan-Hellenic audiences.” Cf. also Figueira 1985: 113-114, 121-127.

information about the circumstances of the tyrant Theagenes' seizure of power, or about the concrete institutional set up of the system established in the wake of his fall.

In my following remarks, however, I want to show that this does not mean that the *Theognidea* are completely useless for illuminating archaic Megara. In my opinion, the texts do offer some information on the social and political structures of the polis, and, as it were, the collective mentality of its inhabitants. In order to remain on the safe side methodologically, I will concentrate on all verses addressed to Kyrnos, and the unsigned verses contained within the Kyrnos blocks. It seems at least plausible that these blocks were in their entirety excerpted from Theognis' elegies.⁹ I start from the assumption that the political system of sixth-century Megara was not so different from that of other Archaic poleis at this time: a relatively small group of wealthy families controlled public affairs through rotating public offices and a council. Recent research on the history of Archaic polis societies has highlighted the importance of competition within the elites.¹⁰ And that is exactly what I am going to argue: I want to examine the passages of the *Theognidea* mentioned before in order to first establish the concrete fields of action in which members of the elite competed with each other. Next, I want to explore what sort of prizes or profits they hoped to win and which strategies they applied to stand their own ground, outstrip their competitors, and, if possible, improve their position.

A close reading of the Kyrnos poems suggests that the members of the upper echelons of archaic Megarian society competed with each other on three different fields. The world of Theognis was characterized by a stiff competition for wealth, social recognition by their peers, and sheer power. Let us begin with wealth. Theognis' frequent claims that high and low have changed places indicate considerable social mobility, both upwards and downwards. The poet complains that "many base men are rich and noble men are poor" (Thgn. 315–318). In another poem he makes up a sort of balance sheet and draws a deplorable picture of the state of things in the city: "Kyrnos, this city is still a city, but the

9 Cf. on the authenticity of the Kyrnos poems Oost 1973; Patzer 1981: 198–202; Cobb-Stevens, Figueira, and Nagy 1985; Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989: 86–93; van Wees 2000: 52; Lane Fox 2000: 35–36; Selle 2008: 280–281.

10 Cf. on the elites of archaic poleis Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989; Donlan 1999; Duplouy 2006; Schmitz 2008; Stein-Hölkeskamp 2015: 186–206. Cf. on competition within elites in (ancient) societies in general Hölkeskamp 2014. The importance of competition in the *Theognidea* is also emphasized by van Wees 2000.

people are different, people who formerly knew neither justice nor law and lived outside this city like deer. And now they are noble, while those who were noble before are now base” (Thgn. 53-58). If the poet does not wildly exaggerate, some of the new rich were very poor shepherds or agricultural laborers living outside the urban center.¹¹ However, the concrete ways in which some individuals were able to acquire property, and how others lost their fortunes are far from clear. The poet’s lamentations “that others possess his flowering fields and his mules no longer pull the curved plough for him,” do not provide concrete information about the causes of this sort of loss, and the concomitant descent on the social ladder (Thgn. 1197-1202). Moreover, there are no general hints that fortunes were made or lost as a result of windfalls or agricultural disasters, and we do not hear of individuals who lost their wealth in trade or wasted it on conspicuous consumption. There are, however, many indications that property was won and lost as a result of civic violence and sheer deceit.¹² The poet claims that a great number of the citizens are driven by *hybris* and greed. They strive for wealth without limits, and even “a man who has the greatest wealth is still eager to double it” (Thgn. 227-232). They seize for themselves “prestige, success and wealth”, not even shrinking from “shameful or unjust acts” (Thgn. 28-32). The poet’s disapproval of this sort of shameless greed manifests itself in those passages in which he denounces this new ideology of gain on moral grounds:

“Whatever possession comes to a man from Zeus and is obtained with justice and without stain, is forever lasting. But if a man acquires it unjustly, inopportunistly, and with a greedy heart or seizes it wrongly by a false oath, for the moment he thinks he’s winning profit, but in the end it turns out badly and the will of the gods prevail.” (Thgn. 197-208)

As a consequence, he urges the addressee of a poem: “Prefer to live righteously with a few possessions than to become rich by the unjust acquisition of money. For in justice there is the sum of every excellence, and every man who is just, Kyrnos, is noble” (Thgn. 145-148). This well-meaning counsel is however counterbalanced by a spate of complaints

11 Van Wees 2000: 63. Theognis’ contemporary Anakreon tells us the story of the remarkable ascent of a certain Artemon to a rich man behaving like a member of the leisure class (F388 Page). Cf. Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989: 84.

12 Van Wees 2000: 62.

about the fate of those who have lost their property: “Poverty is the mother of helplessness”, and for a poor man “it is better to be dead than to live oppressed by grievous poverty” (Thgn. 181-182; cf. 373-400). Indeed, “to escape from it one should throw oneself to the monsters of the sea or down from lofty cliffs” (Thgn. 173-178). A man overwhelmed by poverty has to reckon with all sorts of setbacks in all walks of life. His inferior status makes him “powerless to say or accomplish anything, and his tongue is bound” (Thgn. 177-178; cf. 267-270).¹³ To sum up, the poet presents a society in which property was changing hands constantly, violence and deceit were widespread, and social mobility was extensive.

This atmosphere of instability and insecurity, which is evoked in these poems, was generated by the reckless striving for personal profit. This becomes particularly evident in those passages in which the poet describes the consequences for social life. Let us begin with the symposium, the drinking parties that defined and determined membership in the elite and internal ranking within this group.¹⁴ As property and social status were in permanent flux, there were no clearly defined closed circles that were part of these groups of symposiasts, or were excluded from them. Whoever had the necessary wealth to lead a life of leisure and to contribute his share to these social events was welcome to join. Whoever was not able to fulfill these preconditions was rapidly marginalized and unable to keep his place on the convivial couches. Frustrated losers, who were avoided by their former *hetairoi*, and who did not have access to the circles of prosperous drinking-mates, reacted by trying to formulate new criteria of elite membership and insisted on the prevalence of moral excellence and reliability over vile wealth. To drink with the *kakoi*, as they repeatedly affirm, perverts the meaning of socializing among friends, as the nouveau-riches drinking mates “are your comrades at the mixing bowls, but not when the enterprise is serious” (Thgn. 33-36; 115-116; cf. 641-644). The poet advises those whose membership is jeopardized to be careful and flexible. Naturally, it was important for young men to have access to the circles of the elite. However, during symposia it was prudent to behave with a combination of caution and mistrust. Therefore, the poet gives them the

¹³ Cobb-Stevens 1985: 160-161, 169-171; van Wees 2000: 65-66.

¹⁴ Cf. the contributions in Murray (ed.) 1983; Slater (ed.) 1991 for the symposium in Archaic Greece. Cf. also Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989: 112-116; Schmitt-Pantel: 2011; Wecowski 2014.

following advice, “You should get invited to dinner and sit beside a man who knows every kind of skill. Do not seek the company of base men, but always cling to the noble. Drink and dine with them, and be pleasing to those whose power is great” (Thgn. 563-566). One should steer clear of “a man, who is a friend in words but not in deeds” (Thgn. 979-982). Socializing with the *kakoi* does not bring profit: “For the base have an insatiable desire; if you make one mistake, the friendship shown by all former acts is wasted. Only the noble enjoy to the highest degree the treatment they have received, they remember the good things, and they are grateful thereafter” (Thgn. 101-112).¹⁵

It is not only the most ambivalent statements about adequate and prudent behavior during a symposium which indicate the precarious character of access to elite networks. Moreover, the poet’s disapproval of associations between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ manifests itself in his critique concerning intermarriage between the established families of the elite and the new rich. In archaic Megarian society, social climbers are assimilated into the elite through marriage, a practice denounced at length in several of the Kyrnos poems: “A noble man does not mind marrying the base daughter of a base father if the latter gives him a lot of money, and a woman does not refuse to be the wife of a base man who is rich, but she wants a wealthy man instead of one who is noble” (Thgn. 183-192; cf. 193-196; cf. 1109-1114). However, such statements should not be read as a rearguard action of an aristocracy of birth. In general, references to noble birth do not play an important role in archaic poetry, and, as Hans van Wees has rightly emphasized, Theognis discusses only marriage and procreation in his own generation, and does not criticize the demise of hereditary noble birth as a traditional generation-spanning criterion of in- and exclusion.¹⁶ Therefore, the elite of archaic Megara, as reflected in the *Theognidea*, was not an aristocracy in the classical Aristotelian sense, in which the established privileges of individual families were based on descent.

In summary: the poems attributed to a Theognis of Megara do not allow us to draw comprehensive and detailed conclusions about the social and political order of archaic Megara. Against the backdrop of the methodological reservations mentioned above, they

15 Cf. for the importance of friendship in the poems Konstan 1997: 50; van Wees 2000: 53-57.

16 Van Wees 2000: 52-53; 63-66. Cf. on marriage alliances Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989: 117-119; 225; Stein-Hölkeskamp 1997: 29-32 and van Wees 2000: 61-63.

just permit a cursory glimpse of a polis community in a state of flux: membership in the elite as such, and access to power and influence are the objects of a permanent, stiff competition between ambitious, as well as unscrupulous, individuals fighting for resources and reputation. The authenticity of concrete episodes, such as the one about the rise and fall of Theagenes, can neither be ascertained nor disproved by any part of the poems. However, the general image of the ambitious tyrant, who by means of some extraordinary action manages to emerge as winner from the eternal rivalries for a short period of time, is not at all inconsistent with the general impression of the mentality of the Megarian elite, as conveyed by the poems.

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