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Abstract

The story of the Cretan seer and poet Epimenides, supposed to have lived for more than 150 years between the seventh and sixth centuries, is full of fancy tales that are hard to make profit from a historical perspective. Instead of exploring the subject from a Cretan perspective of the archaic period, however, these tales can be investigated from a late archaic and Classical Athenian perspective, within a tradition of semiotic analysis, through a study of the use of historical characters that has led to the invention of traditions such as that of the Seven Sages. Epimenides appears in several key Athenian episodes of the sixth and fifth centuries, the Cylonian affair and the Great Plague, and in Peloponnesian politics. In the popular traditions and historiography of the Classical period, the intervention of the Cretan seer was used to transmit propaganda, to mediate diplomatic alliance or to frame religious rituals. A study on Epimenides illustrates how mythography was used as a means to mediate social action and to record history in Classical Greece. The involvement of a seer in Greek politics of the sixth and fifth centuries also questions the popular notion that rational thinking had then overcome superstition and magical mediation in the rule of the Classical city.

Report

When considering the *polis*, scholars have often set rationality —or Reason— at the core of their description. Although such an idea goes back to Antiquity, the topic has been raised a good number of times in

past scholarship. Aristotle not only considered man as a 'political animal' (*zôon politikon*) (*Pol*. 1.1253a 3), meant by nature to live in cities, but also as a creature endowed with reason (*logon echon*) (*Nic. Eth.* 1098a [1.13]), capable of rational behavior and having the ability to make balanced choices or to carry out soundly formulated projects. In modern times, the *polis* has often been apprehended as a highly rational entity, theoretically planned in all its aspects right from its creation, as Athena leaped out from Zeus's head fully grown and armed. Nowhere else than in the French scholarship of the last decades has the idea of a 'city of reason' been so popular, beginning with Jean-Pierre Vernant's seminal essay (1962, translated in 1982). Vernant traced how the Greek world was progressively transformed over the centuries, from the Mycenaean monarchy to the democratic *polis*, with the decline of the mythical thought in favor of a rational thinking. Emphasizing the importance of the outbreak of the Milesian thought as an intellectual sixth-century revolution, Vernant assimilated the development of the Greek city with the rise of rationality and sciences.

Vernant's main idea of a radical alterity of the Greek *polis* in comparison to the Mycenaean palaces and ancient Near East empires remains a milestone in contemporary scholarship. However, before asserting the rationality of the Greek city, we should take into consideration all the implications of such a model for the development of the Greek city. In my last book (Duplouy 2019), I discuss how the archaic Greek city can be reconsidered far away from any theoretical model, by offering an answer to the three following questions: How the citizen community was delineated? How to be accepted by the other members of the community as a worthy citizen? And how to perpetuate such a community in a constant flux over the centuries? These questions allow to write archaic history by focusing on society, considering the *polis* as a community of insiders struggling to define, enforce and transmit common behaviors, not as the product of a rational thought nor as a deliberately planned entity defined though any kind of charter.

Here come into consideration the tales related to the Cretan seer and poet

Epimenides, for two main reasons related to my general topic. The first one is the relation between the involvement of a seer in the Athenian politics of the sixth and fifth centuries, at a time for which, according to Vernant, rational thinking —and not superstition and magical mediation— was supposed to rule the city. For Vernant (1982: 70), Epimenides represented the "very model of the inspired shaman or *theios aner*" who appeared at a moment of crisis, when the Greeks were beginning to question their old system of values. The second reason is related to my third question (How Greek cities were perpetuated?), because the intrusion of the Cretan Epimenides in Athens is related to a break in the Athenian community, i.e. the Cylonian affair, which posed a major threat to the cohesion of the city. Not only an isolated and disregarded topic in itself, the tales related to Epimenides can throw new light on some important aspects of the archaic and Classical city of Athens.

An extensive literature is associated with the name of Epimenides and, more precisely, with the so called 'Epimenides' paradox', which is an illustration of the 'Liar's paradox'. According to Epimenides, "all Cretans are liars" (*Crètes aei pseustai*), but he himself was a Cretan. So, either he was lying and the statement will be untruth, or he was not lying and the statement can be dismissed as false. This logical paradox, in which a binary truth value leads to a contradiction, has been discussed for centuries since Antiquity. From a historical perspective, however, this is not the most interesting episode in the Epimenidean tales.

The tales related to Epimenides, supposed to have lived for more than 150 years between the seventh and sixth century, are full of improbable stories and unverifiable facts mostly recounted by late authors. Epimenides was also sometimes considered as one of the Seven Sages (Diog. Laert. 1.42), leading to his association with an epochal moment of Greek history. Contrarily to philosophers, it has always been hard for historians to make sense of these stories. Very few studies, indeed, have engaged into a discussion of the character. In 1901 the Belgian scholar Hubert Demoulin dedicated a book to the Cretan seer, but his approach was both biographical and positivistic, and has long been disregarded as outdated.

While only a few papers deal with Epimenides, a major conference was organized in Naples in 1999 and subsequently published (Federico & Visconti 2001). Although offering very interesting developments of the tales, it still distinguishes between the life, the work, and the fate of Epimenides, without always imbricating the different parts of the tradition into a unified historical approach.

Instead of exploring the subject from a Cretan or a literary perspective, the Epimenidean tales can be investigated from an Athenian perspective. Besides being a legendary figure, Epimenides also occupies a prominent role in the Athenian historiography of the Classical period. These tales can be enlightened through a tradition of semiotic analysis, on the model offered by Claude Calame's enquiry on Theseus (1990). Adopting the approach of Hans-Joachim Gehrke's *intentionale Geschichte* (2010), folk-tales can also be considered as truly historical accounts, not so much perhaps of what they describe, but mostly of the situations in which these tales were inserted or recorded with profit for the narrator or the audience. In this sense, without any positivistic echo, the Epimenidean tales can be investigated against the history and archaeology of archaic and Classical Athens.

A chronological aporia should first be settled. Epimenides is supposed to have slept for several decades in a Cretan cave, eventually awaking with the gift of prophecy. This tradition was supposed to explain both Epimenides' supernatural power and his alleged long life, having him intervene in chronologically-distant events. Such tradition also probably arose from an early misunderstanding of chronological charts. According to Plutarch (*Sol*. 12), Epimenides purified Athens from the pollution once brought by the Alcmeonidai in the killing of the Cylonians. Whereas Cylon's Olympic victory is set to the 35th Olympiad and therefore regularly dated to 640 and his subsequent attempted coup to 632, Epimenides is not supposed to have purified the city before Solon's time. Chronographic enquiries (Lévy 1978, Giuliani 1999) have however convincingly demonstrated that the Cylonian events, both the victory and the coup, should be downdated to the early sixth century, immediately

before Solon's archonship (594/3). In this sense, Epimenides' sleep conveniently joined the dots between two periods once supposed to have been distant by decades.

While the slaughtering of Cylon's supporters in the early sixth century cannot be securely related —not only for chronological reasons— to the recently discovered Phaleron Delta necropolis with its mass grave of the third quarter of the seventh century containing eighty handcuffed skeletons, the Cylonian affair has certainly long been a burden to the Alcmeonidai. It has been raised against Cleisthenes in 508/7 and again in 432 against Pericles. It is supposed that, after the trial of the Alcmeonidai, Epimenides was called to Athens to perform a purification. This episode was probably an aspect in the Alcmeonid defense, for the problem of *miasma* was supposedly solved. Accordingly, one can also consider how excessive is the alleged shift from myth to reason, when considering that Cleisthenes, the so-called 'Grand architect' of the new democratic Athens, and Pericles, the promoter of the city as the 'School of Hellas', actually referred to the mediation of a Cretan 'inspired shaman' in order to absolve their family from a hereditary sin.

Another implication of Epimenides in Athenian affairs occurred during a time of 'plague' (*loimos*), involving a certain Nicias son of Niceratos. The latter was sent to Crete to bring back the Cretan seer in order to purify the city and put an end to the disorder. Although Diogenes Laertius (1.110) sets this intervention during the 46th Olympiad, i.e. in the early sixth century (596/5-593/4), such dating might be simply related to a Solonian time to which Epimenides and other Seven Sages were tightly associated. Various details however point to a topicality of the tale in the late fifth century, when Athens was struggling with the disastrous consequences of the Great Plague. Moreover, the homonymous general Nicias son of Niceratos, one of the prominent politicians of the Peloponnesian War, was reputed amongst his contemporaries and in later traditions for being a most religious man, not only from a truly citizen perspective —which commands every citizen to be religious—, but in a 'superstitious' way, being always reluctant to take any decision without good omens and

seers' advices. Beyond the mere homonymy, the tale strikingly fits into the context of Athenian events of the late fifth century, when Nicias conducted the second Athenian purification of the island of Delos in the wake of the Great Plague. Again, Epimenides and Nicias are far from being related to an allegedly rational Classical Athenian city.

A last example from the Epimenidean tales will illustrate how 'serious' political matters could be expressed in a way that may appear to us utterly anecdotical, but which actually reveals how such affairs were conveyed in Classical Greece. According to divergent traditions, Epimenides was said to originate from Knossos or from Phaistos, and his tomb was reportedly located in Argos or in Sparta. How to make sense of these disagreements? One possible explanation is related to the long-lasting quarrel between Argos and Sparta, whose respective allies in Crete were Knossos and Phaistos, and to Argos' fluctuating relationships between Sparta and Athens in the Peloponnesian politics of the fifth century.

In sum, in popular traditions and historiography of the Classical period, the intervention of the Cretan seer was used to transmit propaganda, to mediate diplomatic alliance or to frame religious rituals. A study on Epimenides can enlighten Athenian and Peloponnesian politics, religious topography and rituals. It can also illustrate how mythography was used as a means to mediate social action and to record history in Classical Greece. Eventually, it gives the opportunity to look at Greek history of the late archaic and Classical periods from an original perspective, far away from the shadows of rational thinking supposed to have ruled Greek ancient cities.

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