

6.2. Herodotus / The Tyranny at Corinth

The Greek tyrant—an extraconstitutional ruler supported by the people—often had the role of modernizing of the state to take into account the new facts of economic and social advance, while leaving the constitutional structure unaltered. When his work was done there was no longer need for him, and it was a rare tyranny that lasted beyond the second generation. Power in the modernized state went back into the hands of an aristocracy expanded to include the leading men of the business classes.

The early tyrants provided endless anecdotes on how they seized power, maintained it, and effected their reforms. Here, the tyranny founded at Corinth in the seventh century is by Cypselus and carried on by his son Periander.

Hdt. 5.92. Source: Herodotus. *The History*. Trans. George Rawlinson. New York: Dutton, 1862.

Such was the address of the Spartans. The greater number of the allies listened without being persuaded. None however broke silence, but Sosicles the Corinthian, who exclaimed:

“Surely the heaven will soon be below, and the earth above, and men will henceforth live in the sea, and fish take their place upon the dry land, since you, Lacedaemonians, propose to put down free governments in the cities of Greece, and to set up tyrannies in their stead. There is nothing in the whole world so unjust, nothing so bloody, as a tyranny. If, however, it seems to you a desirable thing to have the cities under despotic rule, begin by putting a tyrant over yourselves, and then establish despots in the other states. While you continue yourselves, as you have always been, unacquainted with tyranny, and take such excellent care that Sparta may not suffer from it, to act as you are now doing is to treat your allies unworthily. If you knew what tyranny was as well as ourselves, you would be better advised than you now are in regard to it. The government at Corinth was once an oligarchy—a single race, called Bacchiadae, who intermarried only among themselves, held the management of affairs. Now it happened that Amphion, one of these, had a daughter, named Labda, who was lame, and whom therefore none of the Bacchiadae would consent to marry; so she was taken to wife by Aetion, son of Echebrates, a man of the township of Petra, who was, however, by descent of the race of the Lapithae, and of the house of Caeneus. Aetion, as he had no child either by this wife, or by any other, went to Delphi to consult the oracle concerning the matter. Scarcely had he entered the temple when the priestess saluted him in these words:

*No one honours thee now, Aetion, worthy of honour;
Labda shall soon be a mother—her offspring a rock, that
will one day Fall on the kingly race, and right the city of
Corinth.*

By some chance this address of the oracle to Aetion came to the ears of the Bacchiadae, who till then had been unable to perceive the meaning of another earlier prophecy which likewise bore upon Corinth, and pointed to the same event as Aetion’s prediction. It was the following:

*When mid the rocks an eagle shall bear a carnivorous
lion, Mighty and fierce, he shall loosen the limbs of many
beneath them—Brood ye well upon this, all ye Corinthian
people, Ye who dwell by fair Peirene, and beetling Corinth.*

“The Bacchiadae had possessed this oracle for some time, but they were quite at a loss to know what it meant until they heard the response given to Aetion; then however they at once perceived its meaning, since the two agreed so well together. Nevertheless, though the bearing of the first prophecy was now clear to them, they remained quiet, intending to put to death the child which Aetion was expecting. As soon, therefore, as his wife was delivered, they sent ten of their number to the township where Aetion lived, with orders to make away with the baby.

“So the men came to Petra, and went into Aetion’s house, and there asked if they might see the child; and Labda, who knew nothing of their purpose, but thought their inquiries arose from a kindly feeling towards her husband, brought the child, and laid him in the arms of one of them. Now they had agreed by the way that whoever first got hold of the child should dash it against the ground. It happened, however, by a providential chance, that the babe, just as Labda put him into the man’s arms, smiled in his face. The man saw the smile, and was touched with pity, so that he could not kill it; he therefore passed it on to his next neighbour, who gave it to a third; and so it went through all the ten without anyone choosing to be the murderer. The mother received her child back, and the men went out of the house, and stood near the door, and there blamed and reproached one another; chiefly however accusing the man who had first had the child in his arms, because he had not done as had been agreed upon. At last, after much time had been thus spent, they resolved to go into the house again and all take part in the murder. But it was fated that evil should come upon Corinth from the progeny of Aetion, and so it chanced that Labda, as she stood near the door, heard all that the men said to one another, and fearful of their changing their mind, and returning to destroy her baby, she carried him off and hid him in what seemed to her the most unlikely place to be suspected, a cypsel or corn-bin. She knew that if they came back to look for the child, they would search all her house; and so indeed they did, but not finding the child after looking everywhere, they thought it best to go away, and declare to those by whom they had been sent that they had done their bidding. And thus they reported on their return home.

“Aetion’s son grew up, and, in remembrance of the danger from which he had escaped, was named Cypselus, after the corn-bin. When he reached to man’s estate, he went to Delphi, and on consulting the oracle, received a response which was two-sided. It was the following:

*See there comes to my dwelling a man much favour’d of
fortune, Cypselus, son of Aetion, and king of the glorious
Corinth,—He and his children too, but not his children’s
children.*

Such was the oracle; and Cypselus put so much faith in it that he forthwith made his attempt, and thereby became master of Corinth. Having thus got the tyranny, he showed himself a

harsh ruler—many of the Corinthians he drove into banishment, many he deprived of their fortunes, and a still greater number of their lives. His reign lasted thirty years, and was prosperous to its close; insomuch that he left the government to Periander, his son. This prince at the beginning of his reign was of a milder temper than his father; but after he corresponded by means of messengers with Thrasybulus, tyrant of Miletus, he became even more sanguinary.

“On one occasion he sent a herald to ask Thrasybulus what mode of government it was safest to set up in order to rule with honour. Thrasybulus led the messenger without the city, and took him into a field of corn, through which he began to walk, while he asked him again and again concerning his coming from Corinth, ever as he went breaking off and throwing away all such ears of corn as overtopped the rest. In this way he went through the whole field, and destroyed all the best and richest part of the crop; then, without a word, he sent the messenger back. On the return of the man to Corinth, Periander was eager to know what Thrasybulus had counselled, but the messenger reported that he had said nothing; and he wondered that Periander had sent him to so strange a man, who seemed to have lost his senses, since he did nothing but destroy his own property. And upon this he told how Thrasybulus had behaved at the interview. Periander, perceiving what the action meant, and knowing that Thrasybulus advised the destruction of all the leading citizens, treated his subjects from this time forward with

the very greatest cruelty. Where Cypselus had spared any, and had neither put them to death nor banished them, Periander completed what his father had left unfinished.

“One day he stripped all the women of Corinth stark naked, for the sake of his own wife Melissa. He had sent messengers into Thesprotia to consult the oracle of the dead upon the Acheron concerning a pledge which had been given into his charge by a stranger, and Melissa appeared, but refused to speak or tell where the pledge was. ‘She was chill,’ she said, ‘having no clothes; the garments buried with her were of no manner of use, since they had not been burnt. And this should be her token to Periander, that what she said was true—the oven was cold when he baked his loaves in it.’ When this message was brought him, Periander knew the token for he had had intercourse with the dead body of Melissa; wherefore he straightway made proclamation, that all the wives of the Corinthians should go forth to the temple of Hera. So the women appalled themselves in their bravest, and went forth, as if to a festival. Then, with the help of his guards, whom he had placed for the purpose, he stripped them one and all, making no difference between the free women and the slaves; and, taking their clothes to a pit, he called on the name of Melissa, and burnt the whole heap. This done, he sent a second time to the oracle, and Melissa’s ghost told him where he would find the stranger’s pledge. Such, Lacedaemonians, is tyranny, and such are the deeds which spring from it...”