

### ATREID ANCESTORS IN ALKAIOS\*

**Abstract:** Alkaios refers to Pittakos as one who has ‘acquired an Atreid wife’ in fragment 70 Voigt. This paper looks at the connotations of that statement in the text of the Lesbian poet, and its significance for the history of the Greek idea of ancestral fault.

Greek ‘inherited guilt’ and ‘ancestral curses’ have continued to exercise a deep fascination on both ancient and modern audiences.<sup>1</sup> From Homer to Proclus, source material on the idea that children can be punished by the gods for the actions of their parents is varied, extensive and multifaceted. In addition to the obvious problems of definition, however, and ideological filters from centuries of involved Christian engagement with the significance of the pagan material, the intractable methodological difficulties inherent in following such concepts through so many periods, genres and institutional contexts have made a minefield out of the question. There has been no exhaustive study on the topic since 1904.<sup>2</sup> One of the recurrent difficulties faced by scholars trying to disentangle some aspect of the material has been in identifying the oldest attestations of the idea. ‘Inherited guilt’ has famously been called ‘the characteristic archaic doctrine’, and all serious attempts at coming to terms with the history of this concept have had to say something about the earliest documents at our disposal.<sup>3</sup> Working with the same sources, scholars have either seen ‘inherited guilt’ as a primitive survival from prehistory or as a post-Homeric development of the later Archaic period. Such arguments depend on how one defines the concept, of course, and some scholars have, consequently, called for greater precision in identifying and classifying the relevant material.<sup>4</sup>

However one decides to categorize the relevant sources, there can be no question that the development of the stories linked to the ‘inherited guilt’ and the ‘ancestral curses’ of the Atreids and the Labdacids is one of the fundamental issues at hand. Before the time of Aeschylus, there is no clear reference to this idea in extant sources. In an interesting exchange of papers, Martin West and Hugh Lloyd-Jones have sparred over the problematic nature of the pre-Classical evidence on the question, particularly on the dating of the Pisander scholion, and they have offered alternative explanations of the evidence. In the end, the matter remains unresolved.<sup>5</sup> This note is not the place to reopen that question. It proposes, more modestly, to bring attention to one piece of evidence that has, so far, not played its proper role in this research: the fragment 70V of Alkaios.

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<sup>1</sup> The English term ‘inherited guilt’ corresponds to no ancient emic category and it imposes, more significantly, a deep range of Christian associations upon the Greek material. I will only use the term ‘inherited guilt’ in reference to earlier scholarship. ‘Ancestral fault’ is a closer rendering of the major terms of reference actually used in antiquity in reference to delayed generational punishment, such as πατρός ἀτασθαλία (Thgn. 736), ὑπερβασίη πατέρων (Thgn. 740), παλαιγενής παρβασία (Aesch., *Suppl.* 265), παλαιαὶ ἀμαρτίαι (Aesch., *Ag.* 1197), τὰ ἐκ προτέρων ἀπλακήματα (Aesch., *Eum.* 933), ἄτη πατέρων (Eur., *Electr.* 1306–07), τὰ τῶν τεκόντων σφάλματα (Eur., *Fr.* 980), γονέος ἀμαρτίας (Hdt. 1.91), τὰ τῶν προγόνων ἀμαρτήματα (Ps.-Lys. 6.20), ἀδίκημα προγόνων

(Plat., *Resp.* 364C), παλαιὰ ἀδικήματα (Pl., *Leg.* 854B), προγονικὸν ἀμάρτημα (Schol. ad Eur., *Hipp.* 833) or τὰ τῶν πατέρων ἀδικήματα (Schol. ad Hes., *Op.* 284). I will use ‘ancestral fault’ instead of ‘inherited guilt’ in the following discussion as a general descriptive term for the notion of delayed generational punishment.

<sup>2</sup> Glotz (1904), cf. Durkheim (1905). Contributions to research on the topic since the seminal work of Glotz include Vallois (1914); Kakridis (1929) 141–68; Dodds (1951) 28–63; Moulinier (1952) 228–41; Lloyd-Jones (1962); (1983); (2002); Gantz (1982); Parker (1983) 199–206; West (1999); Holland (2003); Sewell-Rutter (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Dodds (1951) 33; cf. Kraus (1977); Lloyd-Jones (1983) 170.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Moulinier (1952); Gantz (1982); Parker (1983); West (1999).

<sup>5</sup> West (1999); Lloyd-Jones (2002).

The text can be quoted in full:

...  
 Π[ ]...χ...[  
 π.[.]τωι τάδ' εἶπην ὀδ.υ..[  
 ἀθύρει πεδέχων συμποσίω.[  
 βάρμος, φιλώνων πεδ' ἀλεμ[άτων  
 εὐωχήμενος αὐτοισιν ἔπα[  
 κῆνος δὲ παώθεις Ἀτρεΐδα[.].[  
 δαπτέτω πόλιν ὡς καὶ πεδὰ Μυρσί[λ]ω[  
 θᾶς κ' ἄμμε βόλλητ' Ἄρευσ ἐπιτ.ύχε..[  
 τρόπην· ἐκ δὲ χόλω τῶδε λαθοίμεθ..[  
 χαλάσσομεν δὲ τὰς θυμοβόρω λύας  
 ἐμφύλω τε μάχας, τάν τις Ὀλυμπίων  
 ἔνωρσε, δᾶμον μὲν εἰς ἀνάταν ἄγων  
 Φιττάκωι δὲ δίδοις κύδος ἐπήρ[α]τον.

...to say this...the lyre, sharing in the banquet, makes merry, feasting with empty braggarts...them. But let him, married into the family of the Atreidae, devour the city as he did in the company of Myrsilus, until Ares is pleased to turn us to arms; and may we forget this anger; and let us relax from the heart-eating strife and civil warring, which one of the Olympians has aroused among us, leading the people to ruin, but giving glory to Pittakos.<sup>6</sup>

These verses do not come from a poem of truce. The text is clearly sarcastic in tone, as evidenced by φιλώνων πεδ' ἀλεμ[άτων and the verb δαπτέτω, for instance.<sup>7</sup> The forgetting of anger invoked in these verses can only be the result of final victory over the 'tyrant'.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis of the passage on the marriage alliance of Pittakos with the Atreids is without a doubt meant to cast the statesman in a dark light.<sup>9</sup> In the world of the sympotic invectives launched by the persona of Alkaios against his enemy, the actions of Pittakos embody all that is contrary to the aristocratic ethics of comradeship traced by the poet. In opposition to the group of ἑταῖροι gathered at the banquet in which the verses of Alkaios are meant to be sung, Pittakos belongs to a symposium of 'empty braggarts', a 'them' (αὐτοισιν) clearly distinguished from the 'us' (ἄμμε; λαθοίμεθ'; χαλάσσομεν) of the poem's performance community.<sup>10</sup> This anti-symposium of bastard tyrants is involved in 'devouring' the city (δαπτέτω πόλιν), an animal appetite of destruction which leads to 'the ruin of the people' (δᾶμον μὲν εἰς ἀνάταν ἄγων): *Ate*. This is done in contrast to the measured commensality and the communal benefactions of the poet's comrades, of course.<sup>11</sup> Pittakos is the pot-belly, the one who eats in the dark. The performance context of the poem, the aristocratic banquet, serves as the background against which the enemy's transgression of aggressive and unmeasured eating acquires its sense.

Contrary to the well-born friends of Alkaios, who 'constantly brought his own lineage and that of his whole native city to the ancients' (452V), the tyrant's pedigree is repeatedly put in doubt.<sup>12</sup> Pittakos is a κακοπατρίδης.<sup>13</sup> His mother is described disparagingly (72V) and his father is

<sup>6</sup> Alc. 70, trans. Campbell.

<sup>7</sup> Pippin Burnett (1983) 173–76. See also Rösler (1980) 165; Stehle (1997) 234–37. Cf. 129.23V.

<sup>8</sup> Rösler (1980) 169.

<sup>9</sup> See the comments of Rösler (1980) 163 and Stehle (1997) 235. Note also Kurke (1994) 73.

<sup>10</sup> On the meaning of φιλώνων πεδ' ἀλεμάτων, see Liberman (1999) 210.

<sup>11</sup> Rösler (1980); Davies (1985); Henderson (1999).

<sup>12</sup> See Page (1955) 169–79. Alkaios on noble birth: for example, 6, 67, 68, 72, 75, 76, 106, 130B, 371, 394, 427, 452V. On the contemporary ideology of inherited virtue, see, for example, Stein-Hölkeskamp (1989) 124–27, 134–36; Duploux (2006) 36–57.

<sup>13</sup> 67, 75, 106, 348V.

portrayed as a Thracian of low birth.<sup>14</sup> The mention of Pittakos as an ὕρραον παῖδα in fragment 129V is probably not a reference to the name of his father being Hyrras, as later tradition has thought, but a derogative term concerning the origin of his birth.<sup>15</sup> Not only that, but the father of Pittakos himself, and probably the father of his father also, are shown in fragment 68V to have been responsible for grave crimes, something which results in Pittakos being described as μῖσος ἄλιτρον.<sup>16</sup> In addition to having been made ἄλιτρος by the crime of his own parents, Pittakos, like the Lycambes of Archilochus, has broken the great oath of aristocratic convention, and thus probably incurred the punishment of a generational imprecation κατ' ἐξωλείας on his children.<sup>17</sup> The list could be extended. In fragment 70V, the acquisition of an Atreid wife is another element in the negative representation of Pittakos as the enemy of the aristocratic ἐταιρεία. Instead of acquiring the prestige of a noble line, Pittakos now possesses the taint of an Atreid alliance. It is interesting to note that, at about the same time as this poem, if we are to believe Herodotus, Peisistratos refused to marry an Alcmaeonid wife so as not to participate in the pollution of their *genos*, a very serious weight to bear as a political leader, as the later examples of Kleisthenes and Pericles can attest.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Pittakos has 'acquired an Atreid' wife from the Penthilid clan is an element in his characterization as an enemy of the élite sympotic group's values.<sup>19</sup>

Our fragment suggests that descent from the Atreids was already a potentially powerful source of negative associations at the time of Alkaios. Just as the symposium of Pittakos and his friends is a parody of the true aristocratic gathering embodied by Alkaios and his comrades, the ancestry of his marriage is a corruption of alliance with true nobility. Long before the story of the 'ancestral curse' coursing through the mythical generations of the descendants of Pelops would be attested elsewhere, this fragment portrays descent from the Atreids, in the actual world of the audience, as a form of taint which contrasts with the virtue of a desirable descent. The Penthilids, whose family Pittakos has married into, were named after the son of Orestes.<sup>20</sup> In fragment 70V,

<sup>14</sup> See Mazzarino (1943) 68–69; di Benedetto (1955); Page (1955) 171–74.

<sup>15</sup> Hesych. s.v. Ὑρράδιος· ἀπό τινος τῶν προγόνων, ἄδοξος, ἢ εἰκαῖος; cf. s.v. συρράδ(ι)ος· νόθος. μικτός. εἰκαῖος; s.v. ὕραξ· μίγδην· ἀναμίξ; Thgn. C. 2.23.22 s.v. Ὑρράδιος; on the tradition of 'Hyrras' or 'Hyrradios' as the father of Pittakos, see Call., *Ep.* 1.2; Diog. Laert. 1.74; Dion. Thrac., *Ars. Gramm.* p. 25.8 Uhlig; Herod. Techn., *Rel.* 3.2 p. 858.25 Lentz; Prisc., *Gramm.*, 2.65.16; *Schol. in Dion. Thrac. (Gramm. Graec.* III Hilgard) p. 573.13; Sud. s.v. Πιττακός. See di Benedetto (1955) and Gallavotti (1970), who both argue for an equivalence between ὕρραος and νόθος. The names 'Hyrras' or 'Hyrradios' are nowhere attested in the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* outside of the Alkaios tradition. It is interesting to note that Pittakos is described as lame by Alkaios (429V; cf. 129V), a condition often associated with 'tyrants', of course, but also with low birth (Pl., *Resp.* 535a–536b; Xen., *Hell.* 3.3.1–3; Plut., *Ages.* 3.1–6; *Lys.* 22.12; Paus. 3.8.10); see Vernant (2000) 113–14; Kurke (1994) 86.

<sup>16</sup> Alc. 68V:

...  
 ...[.].[.].[.].[.].[.].[.].  
 οὐκ ἄ[.]ταίσει  
 πρᾶυ λάβολον πάτερ' ἀγκ[  
 κᾶτι τ[ὸ]ν κήνω πάτερα[  
 τωῦτ[ο .] ὠνάισχυντος ἐπ[  
 μ[ῖ]σος ἄλιτρον.

See Liberman (1999) 47–48 with bibliography. Cf. Ferrari and Pontani (1996).

<sup>17</sup> On the perjury of Lycambes, see Archilochus 173W; Giordano (1999) 53–54; Gagné (2009a); cf. Hipponax 115W. On the perjury of Pittakos: Alkaios 167, 129V; see Liberman (1999) 61–62; Bachvarova (2007); cf. Trumpf (1973). On the generational imprecation κατ' ἐξωλείας, see Glotz (1904) 572–75; Parker (1983) 186, 201; West (1999).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Hdt. 1.61, 5.70–72; Thuc. 1.126–28; cf. Williams (1951); Thomas (1989) 264–82; Giuliani (1999). See also Gernet (1968).

<sup>19</sup> The marriage of Pittakos was derided elsewhere in the poetry of Alkaios: see fr. 5V. The trouble incurred by the law-giver because of this marriage became a theme of the wisdom tradition attached to him; see, for example, Diog. Laert. 1.80. On the meaning of παῶθεις, see Page (1955) 236.

<sup>20</sup> Strab. 13.1.3; Paus. 2.18.6; schol. ad Alc. 70.2 (where Πένθιλον is a supplement, however); cf. Sappho 17V., where τᾶν ἀράταν does not necessarily refer to a prayer. That poem is unfortunately too fragmentary to contribute much of value to the present discussion, but the close association between ἀρά and Ἄτ[ρεῖδα] in a contemporary Lesbian text does deserve mention. On the Penthilidai, see Page (1955) 149–50. For an example of a family still claiming descent from the Atreids in Hellenistic Cyprus, see *CRG* 717 (late fourth to early third century BC).

this functions as an element of the poet's dark representation of his enemy. Rather than calling Pittakos a Penthilid, a descendent of Orestes' innocent son, Alcaeus refers to him as an Atreid, shifting the emphasis onto a different ancestor. Rather than portraying the marriage in the traditional language of aristocratic honour, he points to its destructive power for the entire community. Through its orchestration of theme and language, the poet directs our attention to the negatively-charged, dangerous aspects of his enemy's marriage. Pittakos certainly married into the Penthilids with the idea of political advantage. Alcaeus strategically turned this on its head and reframed the symbolic value of an ancient line as a weakness and a threat. Ancestral fault, in this early text as in later literature, remained a contested concept in the web of Greek culture. It acquired its charge and meaning through the context of the message in which it was embedded. It was an object of conflict and oppositions of discourse, exactly as in the case of the contemporary Alcmaeonid ἄγος.

The negative associations attached to Atreid descent in the poem derive in all probability from the mythical events and the crimes represented by the family of Tantalus. It is interesting to speculate that the poem might even have played on the homonymy of the tyrant Myrsilos with his namesake Myrtilos in the legends of the Pelopid cycle, the charioteer whose actions are at the centre stage in later narrations of the causes behind the 'ancestral curse' of the Atreids.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the case, the mention of the Atreids in fragment 70V of Alkaios is an early example of ancestral fault, of the idea that children can inherit the fault of their parents.

The ancestry of Pittakos' bride is an element of invective in the poem of Alkaios. It is overwhelmingly likely that this ancestral fault refers to the 'ancestral curse' of the Atreids. What the agency of this ancestral fault was in fragment 70V, however, whether it was portrayed as transmission through a 'curse', pollution, wrath or some form of heredity, or as the result of any specific agency for that matter, cannot be determined with the present state of the text. But, whatever the date of the passage from the Pisander scholion might be, Alkaios 70 is the oldest extant witness to the connection between a great House of myth and the idea of ancestral fault. The fragments of Alkaios are among the earliest documents at our disposal concerning the extension of the ancestral fault beyond the semantic sphere of the oath, where it had remained confined in Homer and Hesiod.<sup>22</sup> These fragments are as fundamental as the – exactly contemporary – *Elegy to the Muses* of Solon in tracing the evolution of the concept of ancestral fault in the Archaic period.<sup>23</sup> They offer tantalizing glimpses of the symbolic language and the social context in which the early incarnations of that influential idea could be formulated.

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<sup>21</sup> The first attestation of the role of Myrtilos in the tale of Pelops is found in the (probably) contemporary work of Pherecydes: 3F37 *FGrHist* = F 37 Fowler; see also Soph., *El.* 509; Eur., *Or.* 992, 1548; Pl., *Crat.* 395c; cf. Triantis (1992). It might be relevant to note that the character of Myrtilos is not only one of the central figures associated with the 'curse' of the Atreids, but also the main agent of the marriage between Pelops and

Hippodameia, a fitting parallel to the theme of the poem. For the different attestations of the name Myrsilos and its cognates in and around Lesbos and Anatolia, see Bremmer (2008) 317.

<sup>22</sup> Hom., *Il.* 3.295–302, 4.160–62; Hes., *Op.* 283–85; cf. Archil. 173 W.

<sup>23</sup> See Gagné (2009b).

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