

SEEING DEAD PEOPLE: A STUDY OF THE CYPSELIDS

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Having proved that Cyrus is portrayed as variously a plant, an animal, a divine being and a human in his birth and death stories, the next step is to see whether the same pattern of liminality is applied to other figures in the *Histories*.¹ As Cypselus' birth story is very similar to Cyrus', his story in Book 5.92 is a logical place to start. In addition, an earlier account of the Cypselid dynasty in Book 3.50-53, discussing the relationship of Periander and his son, Lycophron, holds some connection to the birth story of Cypselus and the subsequent account of his son, Periander. After close examination of the accounts, however, the conclusion is that while there are some connections between the stories, in terms of liminality the two accounts in Books 3 and 5 are not really connected. What we can say is that the dysfunctional relationships of the Cypselids in both accounts help to underline the reasons why the line dies out.

The account in Book 5 is told in the context of an event. The Spartans, having expelled the Pisistratids from Athens under false orders from the bribed Pythia (5.63, 5.90), realised the truth of the situation; together with the lack of thanks from Athens and new knowledge of oracles which predicted what Athens would do to Sparta, the Spartans planned to re-instate Hippias the Pisistratid as tyrant in Athens (5.91), with the view that this would keep Athens weak. First, however, they consult their allies as to whether this course is approved by all.

None of the allies want to voice their disagreement until Socles of Corinth launches into protest, on the grounds that it is immoral for the Spartans, who avoid suffering under tyranny themselves, to impose tyranny on anyone else, and illustrates the deeds of the tyrants of Corinth as examples of what tyrants are like (5.92).

For detailed discussions of whether Socles is convincing or not, and why, see Veen followed by Moles' recent convincing arguments to the contrary.² To sum up some of the problems involved with the speech: it is true that the more Socles details the violent acts of tyrants the more the Spartans might think that tyranny in Athens sounds better and better, but the more Socles goes on the more the allies agree that tyranny is not desirable.³ It is true that events following prove that democratic Athens can be just as cruel as tyranny,⁴ but as Moles points out, Socles is championing an ideal, and the ideal itself is not undermined when people do not live up to it; '[o]n the contrary, the ideals provide the fundamental touchstone for the evaluation of the failures'.⁵

Socles gives an account of Cypselus' birth story, which, as already noted, is very similar to Cyrus', and therefore holds much promise of showing a similar liminality. Both have divine signs preceding their births, showing them to be a threat to the current regime, and both have would-be assassins set on them soon after birth; both survive, both fulfill their destiny.⁶ Cypselus too may be a figure who crosses the

¹ In a paper delivered at ASCS 30 (Sydney, 2009), entitled 'Grisly Bookends: a Comparison of Cyrus' Birth and Death in Herodotus 1'. All translations are my own.

² Moles (2007) 245-268, Veen (1996) 68-89.

³ Socles causes the allies to stand up for what they believe in, getting an emotional response out of them which (by contrast with many other instances of emotional responses in the *Histories*) actually produces the outcome that they want, and the self-interested plan of the Spartans comes to nothing.

⁴ Dewald (2003) 31.

⁵ Moles (2007) 260.

⁶ For comparisons between the two stories, see Dewald (1981) 97 and Gray (1996) 367-77.

boundaries of the plant, animal, human and divine worlds, but unlike Cyrus he also represents something more sinister.

The oracles predicting the birth of Cypselus call him in turn a ‘boulder’ (ὄλοοίτροχος, 5.92β2), a lion (but also the son of an eagle), and play on the idea that he will be born in a rocky, remote area (a place is fittingly called Petrē, ‘Rock’) but will have a devastating effect on the city.⁷ So Cypselus is associated with the divine world before birth, as Cyrus is, and in both cases this adds an aura of power to him as a figure, helping to explain why they escape death and become so powerful later. Cypselus is also associated with the ground itself, in being described as a boulder. I think that this description is significant in the light of further developments, but before I go on to that I will point out that Cypselus, like Cyrus, crosses the boundary of the animal world in being described as a lion, and the unnaturalness of the lion being born from an eagle suggests the monstrous power wielded by such mythic creatures as sphinxes. All of these associations of the divine, animal and earthly kingdoms enhance the figure of Cypselus and lend him a more than human character.

The ruling oligarchy in Corinth, the Bacchiads, send 10 of their δῆμος, their people, to kill the baby Cypselus. Cypselus’ mother, Labda, thinks that her kinsmen are paying a friendly visit and brings the baby out to present him, and the baby smiles at the first would-be assassin who is struck by pity and passes Cypselus on to the next man, who passes him on to the next, and so forth, so that in the first attempt, Cypselus survives (5.92γ1-4). They give the baby back to Labda and go outside to argue about their inefficiency, and decide to make a second attempt as a group, but Labda foils them by hiding Cypselus in a container, a κυψέλη, so that they leave with their mission unaccomplished (5.92δ1-2).

The container may be one for storing grain, which resonates with the grain in the Thrasybulous story and the mention of bread loaves later, as noted by Gray.⁸ The translation ‘bee-hive’ is a later one.⁹ If it is a grain container, there is the possibility that, like Cyrus, Cypselus is associated with the plant world. However I think there are greater implications for the placing of Cypselus in the container which are significant without identifying the exact form of the container or what it stores.

Dead babies are put in containers and buried; live babies are exposed for death in containers.¹⁰ Cyrus was put in an ἄγος to prepare him for burial at 1.109, and was replaced by a stillborn child at 1.113.1-3. I suggest that Labda, in hiding her living son in what amounts to a coffin, firmly pushes her son into another realm, that of the dead. Labda protects her son in the best way possible, by making him a corpse. He has already been described as a boulder, by the oracle, and this association with the physical earth is connected to his symbolic death and preparation for burial in the container, a container not only made of earth but with the additional nuance that it might be buried in the earth. But just as Cyrus is not only prepared for death but is ‘born again’ out of the portable uterus of the container he is carried in, so Cypselus is not just dead but is kept alive in a kind of clay uterus.¹¹

⁷ See Gray (1996) 373.

⁸ Gray (1996) 379.

⁹ See Griffiths (2006) 141 for the connotations of the bee-hive.

¹⁰ See Aristophanes’ *Frogs* 1190; Bolkestein (1922), 229. See also (for example) Young and Angel (1939) 13.

¹¹ It is of course part of the story pattern that the assassins conceal the facts and decide to lie, but I think it is also significant that they claim that the job is done, because in a way the job *is* done: Labda did it for them.

I think, however, that there is a difference between the two which results in one survival being fantastic, and one being ominous. In the story of Cyrus, his survival is told in the context of how he was qualified to make the Persians a great nation and to overthrow the Median rule. In that *logos* Herodotus emphasises the fact that Spaka sees the healthy baby kicking and alive in the container, and that her stillborn baby replaces Cyrus in the container. We see Cyrus miraculously born again.

We do not see Cypselus born again, and this is ominous. We know that he is kept alive, but we do not see him emerge, kicking and squirming, from his container. This is why the Cypselids are depicted as so bloodthirsty and prone to see dead people in this *logos*, because Cypselus (and Periander after him) remains associated with the realms of the dead. The account Socles tells dwells largely on the birth of Cypselus, comes to a head with his placement in a container (out of which he never really seems to emerge) and finishes with a flash-forward to his takeover of Corinth, which is stunningly brief in comparison.

He goes to Delphi, and the oracle calls him the king of Corinth.¹² Cypselus takes over Corinth as tyrant with the epilogue: ‘This is the sort of man he was: he persecuted many Corinthians, he robbed many of their property, but by far the most he robbed of their lives’ (τοιοῦτος δὴ τις ἀνὴρ ἐγένετο πολλοὺς μὲν Κορινθίων ἐδίωξε, πολλοὺς δὲ χρημάτων ἀπεστέρησε, πολλῶ δέ τι πλείστους τῆς ψυχῆς). We are meant to see the close connection between the baby who never really ascends from the grave and the man who takes away people’s lives; Cypselus becomes a figure like Hades, snatching people from the land of the living. This is the picture which the wording invites; a simple verb like ἀποκτείνω is just as applicable, but the narrative spells out for us that Cypselus takes away lives, and this is significant wording in the context of *logos*.

Some who read this account of Cypselus find that his tyranny is a bit anticlimatic,¹³ but I suggest that if we read the account in terms of Cypselus as a liminal man in both the land of the living and the land of the dead, that this final note is supremely macabre and chillingly sinister. It becomes a climactic point which strengthens the argument Socles is trying to make: tyranny is hell on earth.

Given Cypselus’ semi-chthonic characterisation, the actions of his son, Periander, look part and parcel of the family heritage. In the interests of brevity I will take up the story again from 5.92η1, where the narrative says that whatever Cypselus left in the way of killing and persecution, Periander finished off. Periander takes the grisly family connection to a new level, however: he talks to ghosts. Specifically, he consults the ghost of his dead wife, Melissa (the narrative here does not say that he murdered her) to find out where a guest-friend’s deposit was (5.92 η2-3). The ghost refused to say until she got some clothes to use in the underworld: the ones buried with her were no good until burned. She proves to Periander that she is Melissa’s ghost and is speaking the truth, because ‘Periander stuck his loaves on the cold oven’ (ἐπὶ ψυχρὸν τὸν ἰπνὸν Περιάνδρος τοὺς ἄρτους ἐπέβαλε). Periander knew what she meant, because he had committed necrophilia with Melissa’s corpse.

Cartledge and Greenwood claim that necrophilia is ‘un-Greek’.¹⁴ As I doubt that any society in the world has made or makes a common practice of necrophilia, I prefer to say that Periander’s action is nearly inhuman. But in the context of where his

¹² The oracle says ‘Happy is the man who comes down into my house...’, where the use of the verb ἐσκαταβαίνω may be read as a reference to Cypselus’ underworldly connections and an indication of the way he fits into underground settings.

¹³ Moles (2007) 260-61 notes the difficulty that the tyranny is successful and somewhat attractive.

¹⁴ Cartledge and Greenwood (2002) 368.

father came from, and how his father looks very much like Hades, it makes a twisted kind of sense that Periander sees dead people as being very close to what he is, and that, though dead, he should find Melissa's corpse still attractive and worth talking to. Melissa may be dead, but she and Periander still have a mutually beneficial relationship: she needs clothes, and he gets her some; he needs to know where the deposit is, and she tells him.¹⁵

Furthermore, it is in keeping with the way containers feature in this account that Melissa refers to a cold oven. This is a container also, into which, or onto which, bread is placed to cook. This too would be made of earth, like Cypselus' container, and signifies not only a burying of Melissa but also of further progeny and the end of the line – as we know it is (5.92ε2).¹⁶ If Cypselus was, in a strange way, born out of a pot, the line of the Cypselids dies with Periander trying to inseminate one, an exercise doomed to failure.

This strange attempt at a working relationship with a corpse shows a dysfunction in human relationships seen in Cypselus as well, and is also seen in the Book 3 account of Periander and his relationship with his son Lycophron. While border-crossing occurs in the *logos*, it is not the main focus of the account. There is little to connect the account of Periander and Lycophron in Book 3 with the account in Book 5, although there are some repeated motifs, such as the mistreatment of Melissa, the intervention of another woman, and pity exhibited by the powerful.¹⁷ What stands out as a connection is the way Periander and Lycophron just cannot live get along. There is much to be said about the account but I will discuss these aspects: the notion of hostility between the father and son, Lycophron as a liminal figure, the implications about his health and the idea of departure, return and borders.

The account begins in 3.50 but is part of a larger, circular discussion of the life and times of Polycrates of Samos (3.39-44) and the troubles he had with trying to get rid of troublesome citizens (3.44-46) who returned with allies to try and overthrow him (3.46-49). The idea of departure and return is a theme continued into the story of Lycophron and Periander, and revenge is a motif as well.

Herodotus approaches the account by introducing the idea of the disagreements, or *διάφοροι* that existed between the Corinthians and the Corcyrans. Although the Corinthians colonised Corcyra, they always disagreed. This circumstance sets the context for the story of Periander and his son Lycophron, whose dysfunctional relationship reflects the relationship between the parent city, Corinth, and its 'offspring', Corcyra.¹⁸ The main theme in this account is that of a disagreement which can never be settled.

¹⁵ Periander gets Melissa the clothes she wants by having all the women of Corinth go to the temple of Hera (5.92η3). The women, thinking there was going to be a festival, wore their best clothes, but when they got there, Periander had them all (without exception of class) stripped and their clothes burned in a pit; this was how Melissa could make use of them. It is significant that Periander burns the clothes in a pit in the ground, not only for the sake of wastage or proper ritual for the dead, but also because his chthonic family tends to put things in the earth anyway. See also Bolkestein (1922) 233. Johnston (1999) vii-viii and 27 n. 68 argues that the intermingling of the dead and the living, and the rites (and rights) due to the dead are explored in tragedy as well as in this passage; I would suggest that the reason for the intermingling in this passage is because the account is emphasising Periander's liminality, but it is certainly the case that Herodotus is influenced by the same sort of themes that tragedy explores. See Said (2002) 117-47.

¹⁶ See Said (2002) 127 on the tragic nature of the family curse.

¹⁷ See Gray (1996) 367-69, 371.

¹⁸ Boedeker (2002) 112-13.

The reason for the bitter discord between Periander and his son is due to Periander's murder of his wife, Melissa (3.50). We are not told any details about the circumstance at this point, but Herodotus does describe it as a disaster, a συμφορή, as does Periander himself at a later point (3.52), so we get the impression that it was not the work of a cold-blooded sociopath at least, rather more a regrettable accident.

Trouble begins, however, when Melissa's father, Procles, gets involved. The idea of departure and return begins with Procles' inviting the two sons of Melissa to stay with him at Epidaurus, where he was tyrant (3.50). On their departure, he asks the boys 'Do you know who killed your mother?', a question which the older boy pays no attention to, but which causes Lycophron, the younger son, much suffering. The wording is significant: ἤλγησε ἀκούσας, 'he was traumatised when he heard it'. The verb ἀλγέω can have both mental and physical connotations, and in this *logos* it is particularly important to retain both ideas and to see the trauma as psychosomatic.¹⁹

Lycophron refuses, on his return to Corinth, to speak to Periander at all. Lycophron in fact is never given any direct speech in the *logos*; this is a deliberate, amusing underlining of his behaviour by Herodotus. Lycophron's name, 'wolf-mind', may be significant in this matter as well, indicating not only his harsh nature but, more importantly, offering a shading of wildness to his character and lending another level to the idea of his refusal to speak in the suggestion that it would be unnatural for him to do so. There is the possibility that Lycophron is a border-crosser in this respect, that he is associated with the animal world by means of his name and certain aspects of his behaviour, but the link is not as strong as it is in Cyrus' story, for example.

If we consider the action so far in terms of movement over borders, we can see that the *logos* suggests that there is a great deal of harm in travelling. Procles has his grandsons cross a border to come into his territory, and in doing so they become allied with the mother's side of the family (this is emphasised by Herodotus dwelling on the idea that the boys are related to Procles through their mother). On leaving the border to go back to Corinth, Lycophron finds out about the murder, and this causes an irrevocable split between himself and Periander because he becomes firmly allied with the memory of his mother. As a direct result of this, Periander gets angry (περιθύμως ἔχων, 3.50.3) and throws Lycophron out of the house.²⁰ Of more interest, however, is the idea the Lycophron's choice of alliance with his mother causes an opposing reaction on Periander's part, and this is signalled by the removal of Lycophron from his father's innermost border, a rupture of the father-son relationship.

Periander inquires of his elder son as to what changed Lycophron (3.51), and eventually gets the picture. In response to the information, he expands his own borders and forces Lycophron to keep moving around the city, by having him driven out (ἐξελαύνω) from the friends' houses he has been living in. Lycophron keeps one step ahead of his father, moving from house to house, in a game of cat and mouse; his status as the tyrant's son makes his friends take him in despite their fear of Periander himself. So whenever one house is closed off to Lycophron, another house receives him. In a way, when Periander closes a border, Lycophron's position as the tyrant's son still opens borders.

Periander's next step is to make it impossible for Lycophron to stay with friends by announcing that anyone who takes him in or talks to him must pay a sacred fine to Apollo, of whatever amount Periander specifies (3.52). This effectively forces

¹⁹ Veen (1996) 9-10.

²⁰ The verb ἐξελαύνω is suggestive of the treatment of animals, although not exclusively.

Lycophron to live on the streets of Corinth, as not only do people now refuse to take him in despite his status, but he himself does not think it right to get people to disobey. Periander seems to appeal to an authority higher than the position of tyrant when he brings Apollo into the situation, but clearly this is mere manipulation by the tyrant, as he is still the one stipulating the amount to be paid. Periander is only reinforcing his own position.

Lycophron is then described (3.52): ‘holding on to the bitter end, he staggered around the stoas’.²¹ I have translated *καλινδέομαι* as ‘stagger’, having considered the use of *καλινδέομαι* by Thucydides (used of plague victims in 2.52) and Xenophon (used of horses and riders in *Anabasis* 4.8.28 and of fugitives in a ravine in 5.2.31). My conclusion is that the verb in these passages indicates the kind of staggered running which occurs when pulling against the gravitational force exerted on a subject stumbling downhill.²²

This staggering action is significant when teamed not only with the idea that Lycophron was traumatised to hear of the murder, but also when we read that Periander, on seeing his son emaciated with lack of food, and unwashed, pitied him (3.52). The form *συμπεπτωκότα*, rather than ‘worn out’, as Powell suggests, has the force here of ‘collapsed in on himself’ or ‘emaciated’, as it is used in the Hippocratic writers, Plato and Xenophon.²³ The reference to lack of food clearly indicates this meaning, and together with *ἀλγέω*, *καλινδέεσθαι* and *συμπεπτωκότα*, the impression we get is one of sickness. Lycophron’s trauma seems to have affected him physically. In addition, there is an etymological link between wolves and rabies (*λύσσα*), so sickness and wolves go quite naturally together in Greek and may well be doing so in this account.²⁴

There is a natural congruence between the concepts of death and sickness; the death of Melissa leads to the sickness of Lycophron. However, the reversal of the usual process (sickness followed by death) is interesting when we juxtapose it with the later account of Periander and his associations with the dead and the underworld. The later account provides us with another reason why the line of the Cypselids dies out with Lycophron: not only does the chthonic line produce sickly offspring, but they reverse normal processes (for example, necrophilia as opposed to intercourse with the living) as a matter of course.

It is Periander who highlights the way in which Lycophron blurs boundaries: he points out that Lycophron is his son and could rule Corinth after him, and goes on to say ‘but you chose the life of a vagrant’ (*ἀλήτην βίον εἴλευ*). Lycophron is manifestly in two positions at the same time: he never ceased to be the son of the tyrant, but he is also a vagrant. Periander’s deliberate contrast of the two positions shows us that not only is it a highly ironic liminal position to be in, but also that in Periander’s view, it is ridiculous. Lycophron could be materially benefited by siding with his father, and Periander dwells on the advantages of being the tyrant’s son in order to persuade

²¹ *διακαρτερέω*, ‘holding out to the bitter end’ is also used at 7.107 of the Persian governor, Boges, who refused to make a truce with his Greek besiegers, finished off the food in the city, killed his entire household, burnt them, threw all the wealth of the city into the river and then committed suicide. This is the extreme stubbornness based on a sense of honour that *διακαρτερέω* indicates.

²² LSJ and Powell associate the verb with another very similar: *κυλινδέομαι*, ‘roll around’. LSJ sv. *καλινδέομαι* and *κυλινδέομαι*. Powell (1938) 182 sv. *καλινδέομαι*. I suggest that if there is reason to translate the passages from Thucydides and Xenophon as ‘stagger’, then there is as much reason to reconsider the use of this verb by Herodotus.

²³ Hippocratic Corpus: see *Coac.*, 209.5; Xenophon *Eq.*, 1.10; Plato *Ti.* 82.c.6.

²⁴ Lincoln (1975) 98-105; Redfield (1994) 200-201, see also n. 74. Compare *Il.* 8.299, 22.66-71.

Lycophron to change his mind, mentioning the good things (τάγαθά) a tyrant has, and the prosperity of his city (εὐδαίμονος). He contrasts the way that people view tyrants as opposed to vagrants: one inspires envy and the other pity; ‘you know how much better it is to be envied than pitied’, Periander claims (3.52.5, σὺ δὲ μαθὼν ὅσῳ φθονέεσθαι κρέσσον ἐστὶ ἢ οἰκτίρεσθαι). It is clear that Periander feels that there is every material and social gain to be had in the tyrant’s position, and that laying out the contrast for his son should be enough to convince Lycophron to stop his obstinate behaviour and choose to end the quarrel with his father.

But the speech tells us more about Periander than about Lycophron. Before the speech, Herodotus says that Periander was angry and later let go of his anger. In the speech Periander talks about his son being angry (ὀργῇ χρεώμενος ... ἐς τοὺς τοκέας καὶ ἐς τοὺς κρέσσονας τεθυμῶσθαι), but this is inconsistent with what we know about Lycophron. I suggest that Periander is in the mould of the Median king, Astyages, and his side-kick, Harpagus (1.107-1.122). Both these characters took no responsibility for their part in the attempted murder of Cyrus, just as Periander here is taking no responsibility for his part in forcing Lycophron to be a vagrant. Lycophron was traumatised (ἀλγέω); only Periander describes him as angry. In modern terms we would say that Periander is projecting his own anger onto Lycophron to justify the way he himself has acted. Gould notes the ‘modern’ portrayal of the two;²⁵ to the contrary, we can see that dysfunctionality in family relationships is clearly not modern at all, but extremely old.²⁶

The speech has no effect on Lycophron, who does not bother to answer his father other than to say that Periander now owes a sacred fine to Apollo for speaking to him. Periander gives up, and sends Lycophron away from his sight (ἐξ ὀφθαλμῶν μιν ἀποπέμπεται, 3.52.6) to Corcyra, where Periander also rules.²⁷

From this point in the story we jump forward to Periander’s retirement. Periander sends a message to recall Lycophron to Corinth for the tyranny, seeing as his older son is unsuitable for the job (3.53). When Lycophron does not bother to reply to the message, Periander sends Lycophron’s sister to persuade him. Her speech is on similar lines to Periander’s speech; in fact we are told after the speech that Periander told her what to say, so these really are Periander’s own words in proxy.

There is a greater emphasis this time on the loss of Lycophron’s inheritance to others, and an echo of the main theme of discord in this *logos*. She asks whether he would rather his father’s house be fractured than to come back and take it over, where the verb for fracturing, διαφορηθέντα, reminds us of the main theme of hostility in this *logos*, διάφορος. She repeats Periander’s imperative ‘come back home’ (ἄπιθι ἐς τὰ οἰκία, 3.53.3), and adds ‘stop punishing yourself’ (παύσαι σεωυτὸν ζημιῶν). Her use of the verb ζημιῶ echoes the word used twice before for the sacred fine that was to be paid to Apollo (ζημίη). The sister’s use of it here does not hit the mark, because

²⁵ Gould (1989) 52. See also Griffiths (2006) 133 (and n.3) on the drama of this episode and that of Cyrus’ birth. See Fisher (2002) 205 on the theme of the breakdown of family relations in the *Histories*.

²⁶ Periander does allude to the murder of Melissa. The one part of his speech which rings true is the way he acknowledges and shows regret for the murder, but it is couched in a conditional clause which at the same time distances Periander from the event. The reconciliatory admission is bracketed by labelling Lycophron a vagrant, and by the claim that it is better to be envied than pitied; on the whole, the overture is weakened by its position in the speech. Equally, the peremptory imperative ‘come back home’ (ἄπιθι ἐς τὰ οἰκία) does not add to the mollifying effect.

²⁷ The phrase is also used by Herodotus at 1.120 to describe Astyages sending Cyrus out of his sight. This is not a phrase with positive connotations.

(as earlier), this is not something that Lycophron is really doing to himself, it is forced on him by Periander.

When this speech does not persuade Lycophron, Periander makes a third offer to swap places with him in Corcyra. Lycophron agrees to this proposal but is killed by the Corcyrans before he can leave, because they do not want Periander to live on Corcyra.

Lycophron and Periander end up being absolutely mutually exclusive: they cannot live in the same city. His death occurs because he is the son of the tyrant, while he is living in exile.

Reading the story of Lycophron and Periander followed by the account in Book 5 provides a backlighting which reveals the dysfunction of the relationship between Lycophron and Periander as in keeping with the sinister dysfunctional behaviour of the Cypselids in general. It also confirms why the line of the Cypselids was doomed: they never really were very good at relationships with the living, and seem to get along much better with the dead.

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