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The invention of tradition: Theseus' case

During the Classical period, the myth is used in Athens so as to reflect the Athenian ideology and construct the Athenian history. The supremacy and the greatness of Athens in comparison to the other Greek cities is underlined through the use of myth in various works of the Athenian literature and art of the fifth and fourth century B.C.

In my thesis, based on Classical texts, monuments and various archeological findings I will attempt to explore the way in which the mythical tradition concerning Theseus is used in Athens in order to serve political and ideological purposes.

As far as the artifacts are concerned, I will focus on vase-painting, sculptures and monumental buildings located either in Athens or in other areas, such as the temple of Athena and Hephestus, the Theseion, the Poikili Stoa and the Marathon base at Delphi. Taking into account the place, the time of construction, the mythological representations in combination with the contemporary texts I will study the use of Theseus' myth in Classical Athens.

As far as the texts of the Athenian literature are concerned, I will mainly focus on tragedies, funeral orations and atthidography. Some of the most important tragedies I will concentrate on are Euripides' *Ἰκέτιδες* and *Ἡρακλῆς* and Sophocles' *Οἰδίπους ἐπὶ Κολωνῶν*. In these tragedies, Athens is described as a refuge of marginalized people. I will also concentrate on Isocrates' *Πανηγυρικός* and *Παναθηναϊκός*, which are considered as praise for Athens. Relevant effort is observed by the atthidographers Cleidemus and Androtion.

In my thesis, I will firstly explore the political and ideological purposes that led to Theseus' gradual emergence as the Athenian national hero. This is an intractable question which has troubled many scholars for years.

Theseus' fame increases during the years of Cleisthenes, since we observe that new episodes about his life are created and many more vases are decorated

with themes related to his achievements.¹ As a consequence, many scholars tend to believe that Theseus' emergence should be connected with Cleisthenes.²

Nevertheless, during Cimon's years, we observe that Theseus becomes more popular than ever in Athens, since his bones are brought back from Skyros and his figure decorates the most prominent monuments of these years, such as the Poikili Stoa and the Marathon base at Delphi.³ It should be underlined that at the Marathon base, where the statues of the heroes of the ten Athenian tribes are placed, there is an unexpected shift: A statue of Theseus replaces the statue of one of the eponymous heroes.⁴ Therefore, if Cleisthenes had already tried to make Theseus the national hero of the city, why such a replacement is necessary in Cimon's years? Should we regard that Theseus' popularity in Cleisthenes' years is not linked to any political reasons? Should we regard that Cimon is associated with Theseus' promotion as a national hero? Why does Cimon insist so much on promoting Theseus?

Later, Theseus is even connected to the creation of democracy –despite the fact he is a monarch- and represents some principles of the Athenian propaganda: In tragedies, Theseus is the symbol of the powerful city, which protects and dominates the others. Theseus is not a suffering figure on stage, but the savior of the tragic protagonists, representing the main idea of Athens.⁵

Therefore, by the time Theseus becomes the national hero of Athens, he starts being the symbol of the city, of the Athenian political achievements and the Athenian ideology. So, we can consider that his figure is a representative example of Athenian use of myth as a means of serving political and ideological purposes.

To sum up, in my thesis I will try to explore the ways in which the mythical past is invented, changed and used for the presentation of the Athenian predominance in Greece and the justification of the Athenian imperialism. The use of

¹ Walker 1995: 24,50

² Kearns 1989: 118, Walker 1995: 50-54

³ Vidal-Naquet 1986: 303-309

⁴ Πάυσ. 10.10.1

⁵ Mills 1997

Theseus' myth in ancient texts, architecture and works of art has already been analyzed by scholars, such as Henry Walker,⁶ Felix Jacoby,⁷ Phillip Harding⁸ and Nicole Loraux.⁹ However, what is still missing is an approach involving a combination of literature, thought and art.

⁶ Walker 1995

⁷ Jacoby 1949

⁸ Harding 2008

⁹ Loraux 1986, 1993

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