

Lyric Messene: Collaborative Ethnogenesis and Historical Narrative¹

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Introduction:

In the ancient world, Messenia is the case study *par excellence* of competing historical-political narratives and notions of revival. The wholesale creation of the late classical polis of Messene illustrates the variety of ways in which new political realities look to the past to establish precedent and stability in the face of seismic change.² Many Messenian traditions map well onto what Jan Bremmer has called “Myth as Argument,”³ namely, a particular construction of the past to justify present political views, (sometimes) with an argument for a certain direction in the future. This idea is exemplified in the fragmentary lyric tradition of Eumelus known as the *Delian Prosodion*, of which we have only two attributed lines. As my analysis of this poetic tradition will show, it is inadequate to dismiss such evidence as mere political propaganda orchestrated by the Thebans and Messenians as they founded a new polis. The *Delian Prosodion*, when contextualized and queried against other emerging Messenian poetic traditions, historical narratives, and archaeological evidence, reveals the compelling traditions which are put forward in the process of ethnogenesis. Such expressions serve to establish legitimacy, not just in a broader external panhellenic political community, but also internally in the micro-narrative of Messene and the identity of its citizens. The poetry attributed to Eumelus shows the development of lyric memory, which functions much like the physical manifestation of civic memory, as seen in the city of Messene; both facilitate the emergence of a certain historical consciousness as well as the embodiment of a present contemporary community.

Before examining the *Delian Prosodion*, a brief overview of prior scholarship is in order. I do not intend to solve the multitude of diachronic problems surrounding the establishment of Messenia, but rather understand the limitations of the theoretical approaches which have been utilized in Messenian historiography. Traditionally, Messenian scholarship has been split into two camps, following broader schools of thought with respect to ethnic identity: the primordialists and the discontinuists.⁴ The primordialists argue for continuity, claiming the original kernel of tradition from archaic Messenians was preserved despite the Spartan occupation within the Messenian helot population, as well as in diaspora communities, until the return of autonomy and founding of Messene in 369 BCE. This interpretation also has roots in historical positivism, specifically the belief that we can read myth as a sort of genuine historical text as it relates to our modern concept of a factual record or chronicle.

In contrast, discontinuists claim that there is a clear break in tradition and a wholesale reinvention of Messenian ethnicity under Theban hegemony (this camp can also be labeled the instrumentalists, or constructivists).⁵ These scholars are epitomized by Lionel Pearson, who begged the question in the 1960s: “how can there be any history of a people that has had no existence as a nation or city-state?”⁶ While the tone of argument has shifted since then, the thesis remains similar: it is difficult for an oppressed group to maintain genuine traditions and so modern scholars should focus on the reactionary nature of helot and Messenian identity in the face of Spartan dominance.⁷

These interpretive positions create a false dichotomy when they can be quite compatible.⁸ We can accept a kernel of historical truth in Messenian memory while also understanding there is a great deal of invention involved in the emergence of the new Messenian community. Thus, as Thomas Figueira has noted, there is a “surviving dossier of documentation,” which

demonstrates “a virtual *blitzkrieg* of self-assertion by the Messenians spanning the generation from c.460.”⁹ The question seems to be one of extent or degree. Generally, this seems more profitable than rehashing the authenticity or legitimacy claims made by the Spartans and Messenians themselves (similar, perhaps, to arguing about if the Athenians were genuinely autochthonous, or whether any city-state possessed a set of unchanged ritual traditions between the early Archaic and late Classical Period, a span of over 400 years).¹⁰

Those are the issues when we limit ourselves to *Quellenkritik* and ignore the further complications of modern theoretical reception.¹¹ If a historian deconstructs Messenian myth as a fabrication, s/he is seen as unsympathetic to Messenians on the whole, and therefore implicated as a modern day *philolakon* and unsympathetic to the oppression of chattel slavery. Helotage and the emergences of Messenia carries the heavy baggage of modern ideology, namely how we grapple with questions of more recent systems of slavery and colonial history.¹² Given the hazards of modern ideology, it might seem natural to deconstruct the creation of an ethnic group in an etic/emic approach, but the result yields an answer that is already argued by instrumentalists. The etic objective perspective sees ethnic identity as a constructed tool of political assertion that fails to capture the emic significance of ethnicity.¹³ For the new Messenians, what mattered was recognition and legitimacy as a new city state, both internally for the preservation of their own institutions and by broader Greek ethnic and political bodies, even the King at Sousa and, eventually, a Roman emperor.¹⁴

Lyric Tradition as Performative Identity:

In order to establish the internal embodiment of the Messenian community and the external recognition of peer polities, the Messenians claimed a vast array of lyric traditions in order to support their civic existence. Lyric traditions, in this sense, are tightly bound to the

physical manifestations of a particular socio-political community and micro-context. As a part of the emergence of the localized Messenian historical consciousness, these songs provided an inconsistent but fundamental portrayal of Messenian identity in the face of contrary Spartan lyric tradition. In the examination of these lyric traditions as they related to the founding of Messene, previous scholarship has again fallen back into primordial and instrumental camps, focusing on whether lyric traditions are inventions or some remnant of genuine and authentic tradition. The irony here is that, for the ancients, this may not have been much of a concern in so far as how they conceived of authenticity or uninterrupted tradition in oral reperformative contexts.¹⁵ Concerns over authenticity therefore reveal much more about our modern criticism regarding factual analysis than the ideological and ethnic arguments in which ancient cities participated. As Naoíse Mac Sweeney has argued, the dichotomy we choose to implement between historical fact or mythic fiction was not necessarily a concern to an ancient audience.¹⁶

Returning to the fragment of interest, the *Delian Prosodion* was considered by Pausanias to be Eumelus' only authentic work (4.4.1, 4.33.2), and this brief attestation provides us with the only candidate for an authentic ritual poetic tradition, if there was such a thing, for the Messenians. Of the entire *Delian Prosodion*, only two attested lines remain (*PMG* 696):

τῶι γὰρ Ἴθωμάται καταθύμιος ἔπλετο Μοῖσα ἅ καθαρὰ καὶ ἐλεύθερα σάμβαλ' ἔχοισα.

For the god of Ithome took (or takes) pleasure in the Muse who is pure and wears free sandals.¹⁷

These verses emphasize Messenian cult tradition (Zeus of Ithome) and the heritage of a free Messenian territory (ἐλεύθερα σάμβαλ' ἔχοισα). Indeed, the theme of the goddess of lyric and choral inspiration dancing freely to the delight of Zeus of Ithome serves as the pointed political expression: Messenia, free from Spartan oppression. It takes the choral song and anchors it to the

Messenian landscape; Mount Ithome, as the location of helot rebellions and the key feature in the landscape around the city of Messene, is where harmony can flourish.

As Giovan D'Alessio notes, the verses of the ideal choral landscape stand in remarkable opposition to Sparta's own attested lyric tradition in Terpander (Gostoli Fragment 5):

ἔνθ' αἰχμά τε νέων θάλλει καὶ Μοῦσα λίγεια καὶ Δίκη εὐρύαγυια, καλῶν ἐπιτάρροθος ἔργων.

There the spear of the young men flourishes and the clear-voiced Muse and Justice who walks in the wide streets, that helper in fine deeds.¹⁸

Here Terpander essentially puts forth his own lyric vision of Spartan harmony and unity. This particular Terpander fragment certainly has its own problems in terms of textual transmission, but these lyric traditions are essentially another means of articulating political arguments about Spartan and Messenian legitimacy: A wandering Lesbian poet comes to Sparta to impart wisdom and political harmony, and a wandering Corinthian poet does the same for the Messenians.

Some critics, including M. L. West, have accepted that the *Delian Prosodion* was composed in the 8th century BCE and preserved moving forward into the Classical Period. West argues that the song was an anthem of independence and the facts regarding the original performative context were written down by later historians.¹⁹ Critics, such as Luraghi and D'Alessio, suggest that the *Delian Prosodion* may very well be a piece of later revisionist history, attributed to the Messenian archaic context at a later point in time.²⁰ In this view, the lyric tradition of Eumelus is more likely a product of the Messenian diaspora community of Naupactus, who had more reason to send a chorus to perform at the sanctuary of Delos as they began to articulate independence, than any Messenian community of the 8th century BCE.

While it remains unclear whether or not the Eumelus attestation is pseudohistorical, to argue about the authenticity or legitimacy of the tradition misses the wider point. We cannot be

certain as to the nature of the original choral performative context of the *Delian Prosodion*. Even if it was a choral performance on Delos which was formally recorded in a literary repository, we know little about what the Messenian performative community could have looked like in the 8th century BCE. Both lines of argument can be simultaneously true. The verses may have been authentic and subversive, clandestinely performed until the return of some form of Messenian autonomy. The Messenians of Naupactus could have been the first autonomous group that had the opportunity to send a choral delegation to Delos, claiming an archaic precedent while in a much more contemporary context to the (re)founding of the Messenian polity. Such a performance at Delos had serious panhellenic implications, lending legitimacy to local Messenian identity within a broader tradition of ethnic expressions that were perceived as legitimate. Thus, the lyric tradition of Eumelus established or reinvigorated an archaic lyric past as the new Messenian polity was building legitimacy with, or against, other established political and ethnic traditions.²¹

The verses of Eumelus are not the only controversial poetic tradition implicated in Messenian identity. Rhianus of Crete composed an epic poem after the founding of Messene in the 3rd Century BCE regarding Messenian history, entitled the *Messeniacae*. Purportedly 6 books long, it fit in with his wider poetic project of ethno-epics, as he also wrote an *Achaica*, *Thessalica*, *Eliaca*, and *Heracleia*. The works of Rhianus of Crete and Myron of Priene provided Pausanias with his source material for writing his historical narrative of Messenia (Paus. 4.6.1-5). Aside from the issue of content (since we have only two possible fragments, *Suppl. Hell.* 923 and 946), the *Messeniacae* presents its own issues of source criticism, i.e. was Rhianus himself drawing on older poetic source material (perhaps similar to the verses of Eumelus, or the entirety of Eumelus' poetry) that we no longer possess? Furthermore, to what extent can third century

BCE ethno-poetic traditions be treated as legitimate sources for historical narratives of the Archaic Period?²² Pausanias clearly thought Rhianus to be a good authority for Messenian history but modern standards of fact were of little concern to ancient historians, to say nothing of wandering travel writers like Pausanias.

Nevertheless, the *Messenica* of Rhianus provides a parallel to the *Delian Prosodion* as way to solidify local Messenian identity within a panhellenic context. The *Messenica* does not seem to be a work of crass historical revisionism given the other works attributed to Rhianus, but rather a micro-narrative within the wider panhellenic ethno-poetic tradition. While the *Delian Prosodion* is a small piece of evidence, it is clear that it is not alone in articulating Messenian ethnic identity in a broader panhellenic world.

The Lyric and Physical Foundations of Messene:

This broader interplay between the emerging Messenian local narrative and other ethnically based poetics and traditions is vital for establishing the legitimacy of Messenian identity within the panhellenic context. In numerous ways, other ethnic groups lend their traditions in a collaborative context to bolster Messenian legitimacy. Such a collaborative process is reflected in the establishment of the physical city of Messene, in particular the fortification walls and the civic cult of the emerging city.

Messene was founded following the Theban victory at Leuctra (371 BCE) and the invasion of the Spartan homeland. The new Messenian polity represented a progression in grand strategy that had its origins in the Peloponnesian War. Epaminondas and the Thebans engaged in what Josiah Ober has called “*epiteichismos* on a grand scale.”²³ That is to say, Messenia represented a permanent culmination of a raiding strategy which consisted of constructing seasonal forts for territorial control and long term economic disruption. Messene, a fortress city

in what was historically a part of Spartan territory, amounted to a permanent check or socio-economic war on the Spartan state. Plundering the countryside became a permanent reclamation rather than a seasonal phenomenon.

The circuit walls of Messene support this view and they are as much a civic monument of Messenian liberation as they are an active defensive measure. They stand today as a prime example of the emerging architectural style of *rustikamauern*, leaving the courses of ashlar masonry unfinished in order to better absorb projectiles, a new development in siege defense in classical Greece that can be dated to the late fourth century BCE (compared with the circuit walls of Tanagra, ca. 386 BCE, and Mantinea ca. 371 BCE).²⁴ The construction of the walls and the city within are discussed by both Pausanias and Diodorus. The latter claims the circuit fortifications were completed in eighty-five days (15.67.1).²⁵ These walls physically imposed a new political reality but also commemorated the historical occupation and initial *ad hoc* fortification of Mount Ithome in the Third Messenian War.²⁶ The whole city permanently enshrines the earlier rebellion, preserving the memory of a prior uprising and standing as a continual thorn in the side of Sparta. In this sense, the city is in direct conversation with the natural landscape which surrounds and supports the existence of the polis. Messene is grounded upon Mount Ithome as an inseparable sacred ideological vision.

According to Pausanias, we are told the allies built the walls while working to the sound of music:

εἰργάζοντο δὲ καὶ ὑπὸ μουσικῆς ἄλλης μὲν οὐδεμιᾶς, αὐλῶν δὲ Βοιωτίων καὶ Ἀργείων:
τά τε Σακάδα καὶ Προνόμου μέλη τότε δὴ προήχθη μάλιστα ἐς ἄμιλλαν

“They were working to the sound of music, but only from the Boeotian and Argive flutes, and the tunes of Scadas and Pronomus were brought into keen competition.”²⁷

In this account, Pausanias reminds us of the convergence of ethnic identity within lyric traditions (here specifically regarding the musical instrument known as the *aulos*). Scadas represents Argive lyric tradition and Pronomus a Theban or broader Boeotian one. This particular incident in Pausanias' narrative reflects the ethnic and political arguments being made at the time, namely, that Messene was founded with the backing of Thebes and Argos.²⁸ Pronomus is a particularly apt choice for this moment, as Pausanias elsewhere claims the poet invented the *aulos* with which one could play Dorian, Phrygian, and Lydian modes of music (9.12.5). Not only is Pronomus representative of Theban civic harmony, but he seems to have broader significance as a unifier of disparate ethnic modes of music which traditionally required separate kinds of flutes. As a sort of soundtrack to the construction of the circuit walls, Pronomus (alongside Scadas) embodies intra-ethnic harmony in this performative context.

The playing of Pronomus' music at the founding of Messene represents a broader induction of Messenian identity and tradition into the umbrella of ethnic identities in the panhellenic world. The lyric songs of these established ethnic groups lend a cultural legitimacy to the foundation of Messenian identity and Messene itself. Through this collaborative process, recognized traditions and ethnic speech acts that are perceived as legitimate, are in conversation with the emerging Messenian state.²⁹ Messene is becoming a legitimate peer polity. This sort of lyric semantic argument synchronizes well with the poetry of Eumelus being performed at Delos, in a panhellenic peer context, endorsing Messenian freedom and legitimacy.

The (re)Foundation of Messenian Civic Cult:

This lending of legitimacy, as seen in the performative context of the *Delian Prosodion* and the grounding of the Messenian walls, is also seen in the establishment or revival of

Messenian civic cult. As Pausanias relates in his narrative, each of the allied ethnic groups sacrifices to their relevant deities at the foundation of Messene. According to Pausanias:

ὡς δὲ ἐγγέγονει τὰ πάντα ἐν ἐτοίμῳ, τὸ ἐντεῦθεν—ἱερεῖα γὰρ παρεῖχον οἱ Ἀρκάδες—αὐτὸς μὲν Ἐπαμινώνδας καὶ οἱ Θηβαῖοι Διονύσῳ καὶ Ἀπόλλωνι ἔθρον Ἰσμηνίῳ τὸν νομιζόμενον τρόπον, Ἀργεῖοι δὲ τῇ τε Ἥρᾳ τῇ Ἀργείᾳ καὶ Νεμείῳ Δί, Μεσσήνιοι δὲ Δί τε Ἰθωμάτῃ καὶ Διοσκούροις, οἳ δὲ σφισιν ἱερεῖς θεαῖς ταῖς Μεγάλαις καὶ Καύκωνι. ἐπεκαλοῦντο δὲ ἐν κοινῷ καὶ ἥρωάς σφισιν ἐπανήκειν συνοίκους, Μεσσήνην μὲν τὴν Τριόπα μάλιστα, ἐπὶ ταύτῃ δὲ Εὐρυτον καὶ Ἀφαρέα τε καὶ τοὺς παῖδας, παρὰ δὲ Ἡρακλειδῶν Κρεσφόντην τε καὶ Αἴπυτον: πλείστη δὲ καὶ παρὰ πάντων ἀνάκλησις ἐγένετο Ἀριστομένους.

When all was in readiness, victims being provided by the Arcadians, Epaminondas himself and the Thebans then sacrificed to Dionysus and Apollo Ismenius in the accustomed manner, the Argives to Argive Hera and Nemean Zeus, the Messenians to Zeus of Ithome and the Dioscuri, and their priests to the Great Goddesses and Caucon. And together they summoned heroes to return and dwell with them, first Messene the daughter of Triopas, after her Eurytus, Aphareus and his children, and of the sons of Heracles Cresphontes and Aepytus. But the loudest summons from all alike was to Aristomenes.³⁰

The legitimacy of Messenian cult deities and heroes is substantiated when paired with the equivalent figures from Argive and Theban traditions. Much like the lyric traditions, Messenian cult is incorporated into a broader panhellenic (or at least pro-Theban) context. Zeus of Ithome is perhaps the local deity that binds a multiplicity of collective social memories under one civic identity (of helot oppression, perioikic dissatisfaction, diaspora, etc.).³¹ The collaborative process is particularly emphasized with the cult heroes who are summoned jointly by both the Messenians and their allies to return to Messenia (ἐπεκαλοῦντο δὲ ἐν κοινῷ καὶ ἥρωάς σφισιν ἐπανήκειν συνοίκους). This recalling provides a framework for a plurality of traditions which might be endorsed in Messenian civic identity.

The call for the return of Aristomenes, as a civic benefactor endorsed by everyone (πλείστη δὲ καὶ παρὰ πάντων ἀνάκλησις ἐγένετο Ἀριστομένους), supports this view, as he represents a “polysemic multi-talented” heroic figure.³² Even the hero’s name is pretty generic in

and of itself as Aristomenes (Ἀριστομένης) means something like “the one with a great/the best spirit.” It would be hard to be against such a cult figure, to say the least. As a civic cult hero, Aristomenes’ mythic traditions reflect a plurality of Messenian narratives, and as a legitimate panhellenic hero, he interacts with other interested parties—e.g. Boeotian, Theban, Lebadaean, even Spartan—within the Greek socio-political framework.³³ As with the binary relationship between Eumelus and Terpander, Aristomenes provides a series of counter narratives against the other heroic/mythic traditions of the Spartans and a sort of ritual inversion of Spartan myth making.³⁴

This polysemic understanding of Aristomenes aligns well with the other ethnic *indicia* of the Messenian community. As with Eumelus, Rhianus, and the fortification of the city, the foundation of civic cult deities signifies a multiplicity of meaning in a variety of contexts. These heroes help express locality while binding the Messenians to the broader political landscape of panhellenism. Consistency is not at issue for ancient ethnic traditions, but rather the traditions present a polyvalenced semantic field whence a variety of political arguments and communal articulations might be derived in a given moment.³⁵

Archaeological Evidence:

Regarding the return of these cult heroes, we might expect a sharp change in votive offerings, ritual contexts, and cult traditions in the Messenian landscape; however, with the end of Spartan hegemony, the archaeological evidence suggests a continuity of traditional cult practice.³⁶ The issue with archaeological studies of tomb cult is that they do not state things as clearly as we would like. There is certainly a pattern of development and growth in the late Classical and Hellenistic Period—practices that were formerly limited developed into at least ten definite sites with unambiguous votives and ritual deposits, with another ten locations as

potential tomb cult sites in the late Classical Period³⁷—Sue Alcock suggests that each of these cult centers was a “local source of authority for communities under duress,” citing comparative repressed communities as a model for exaggerated remembrance of the good old days. Nevertheless, we can only posit that, “such changes point to possible shifts in sponsorship,” but it remains unclear if these cult sites continued, “in celebration of freedom rather than resistance to subjugation.”³⁸ In this sense, the archaeological record will likely never yield the result for which historians have traditionally looked, i.e. proof of either the Spartan or Messenian version of events.³⁹

Luraghi and others have argued that many of the new Messenians at Messene were simply Messenian *perioikoi*, and thus maintained their traditional cult activities. Sparta, at the time of the Theban invasion, seems to be more or less on the brink of civil war. Not only did the Spartan kings have to worry about the disaffection of helots, but also *perioikoi*, debarred spartiates, and full citizens who may have concluded that the current political state was untenable. This interpretation works well, given that Xenophon famously suggests that even *perioikoi* had good reason to eat the Spartiates raw:

αὐτοὶ μέντοι πᾶσιν ἔφασαν συνειδέναί καὶ εἴλωσι καὶ νεοδαμώδεσι καὶ τοῖς ὑπομείοσι καὶ τοῖς περιοίκοις: ὅπου γὰρ ἐν τούτοις τις λόγος γένοιτο περὶ Σπαρτιατῶν, οὐδένα δύνασθαι κρύπτειν τὸ μὴ οὐχ ἡδέως ἂν καὶ ὠμῶν ἐσθίειν αὐτῶν.

“For whenever they conversed with such men about the Spartiates [helots, newly freed citizens, lower grade citizens, and the peoples of the surrounding towns], they said that not even one of the men in those groups could hide how bitterly he felt towards the Spartans, going so far as to say that they would even eat them raw”⁴⁰

Clearly, by the time of the Theban hegemony, it was not just Messenian helots who were discontent with Spartan domestic policy. It seems likely that the new polity of Messene emerged from a hybrid consensus of a number of groups from various political and socioeconomic statuses, not a singularly oppressed group.

The continuity of cult tradition might also be an archaizing political statement unto itself, much like we have observed in the recalling of old cult heroes and the emergence of archaic lyric traditions. The emerging Messenian historical consciousness might consider these cult locations to have always belonged to them. Thus, traditional Doric practices and ritual dedications would be subversive in their own right, suggesting that these ritual traditions originated from archaic Messenians and not Spartans. In this way, Messenians might claim they were the original Doric inhabitants of the land all along. This sort of competition of historic authority and authenticity is similarly seen in Pausanias' comments on the pure Doric Messenian dialect, although we lack any real evidence of "Messenian speech" as Eumelus is supposedly Corinthian interloper much like other wandering poets and wandering law givers. In this argument, Messenians speak such a pristine Doric dialect that they must be the original inhabitants of the Peloponnese. All of this seems to make a rather broad and exaggerated claim concerning the identity of free Messenians. It is worth remembering when examining the historical record as it stands, that we lack even a single name of a helot in the Classical Period. For all the talk of who the Messenians were, we possess very little in their own words. It remains unclear whether or not Pausanias refers to an archaizing tradition established retroactively whereby Messenians play up their primordialism to a wider Greek audience, or some genuine continuity within Messenian speech.⁴¹

Continued archaeological study of Spartan and broader Laconian and Messenian cult contexts is likely the only possibility for additional evidence that might shed light on diachronic changes in the evolving identity politics between Sparta and Messene. It is unlikely that additional literary evidence will come to light in the form of some long-lost poem of Eumelus, or the lost epic verses of Rhianus. As of 2018, Nicolette Pavlides has published the most recent work on cult sanctuaries in Laconia, in particular the sanctuaries to Apollo Maleatas and Apollo

Tyrtias on the border between Laconia and Argos.⁴² Pavlides shows how these martial sanctuaries helped connect the Spartan center to a broader sacred Laconian landscape and created unified common cult rituals between the Spartans and their perioikic neighbors when asserting power against Argos. These sanctuaries facilitated an interconnected and dynamic relationship between the Spartan polis in the center and broader regional territories which made up the Laconian countryside.⁴³

It is likely that a similar interwoven urban and rural dynamic existed in the shared cult sanctuaries in Messenia, where both Spartans and Messenians participated in cult activities. After all, Messenia was not just inhabited by a helot population, but perioikic neighbors and rural settlements. For the Spartans, shared cult spaces would have been away to maintain a unified Laconian-Messenian landscape in the face of emerging ethnic differences and geographical limitations. With the passage of time, it seems likely that these cult sanctuaries would have simply reverted into Messenian sacred spaces, with little change to ritual action or votive deposits. The shift was to the central civic institution: no longer was it the city of Sparta, but a new urban hub emerged in the landscape in the form of Messene. Ritual interdependency which was once used to project a unified body politic and Spartan hegemony became a vehicle for self-differentiation and primordial identity claims for the new city of Messene, and its emerging cult traditions and broader ethnic identity claims.

Conclusion:

Thus, archaizing tradition pervades many of these identity claims, from dialect, to lyric tradition, to ritual act. What we can say confidently is that Messene and the greater territory of Messenia were a byproduct of Theban hegemony and a check on Sparta. The new city state was rhetorically portrayed as a return to past tradition. In this sense, the new Messenian polity was an

artificial construct, a supposed refoundation, through the lens of classical rebellions and a possible ethnic diaspora, resulting in a new city-state.

While criticism of Messenian tradition is certainly warranted, ethnogenesis was not simply cynical propaganda on the part of the Thebans. As Naoíse Mac Sweeney has suggested, these traditions have a strong emotional appeal and social significance, which extends beyond political expedience.⁴⁴ There were kernels of archaic Messenian identity preserved into the Classical Period, but the refugees and allies building Messene likely knew that they were creating something innovative, within the context of the collapse of Spartan hegemony. In turn, these new Messenians used historical traditions, such as the *Delian Prosodion*, that supported their right to exist within Greek political space, giving them a veneer of resurgence and historical precedent.

These traditions had a broad and compelling appeal to ancient audiences and were accepted, not in terms of consistency, but rather as a means to articulate more broadly a plurality of cultural and historical difference, as they still do today. The persistence of Messene into the Hellenistic Period should be largely attributed to its very real siege walls and the support of a broader Hellenic community in Peloponnesian politics. Of course, how Messene gained political support of the Hellenic community was through its articulation of ancient history in all of the various strands, real or imagined.⁴⁵ Collaborative ethnogenesis offers a compelling explanation for Messenian legitimacy in the face of political turmoil of the early 4th century BCE, but it does leave some questions unanswered: namely, why Messenian identity was still a contentious issue for Pausanias in the 2nd century CE, around 500 years *after* the city was founded and long after the end of autonomous political action in the Peloponnese.

Notes:

¹ A version of this paper was given at a graduate student conference at the University at Buffalo S.U.N.Y., focusing on resurgences and revivals in the ancient world. The author would like to thank Professor Andrew Scott and Professor Melanie Subacus for reading earlier drafts and providing helpful comments and suggestions. Additionally, the author is thankful for support from the Classical Studies Program at Villanova University and the guidance of Professor Valentina DeNardis, who helped facilitate financial support to attend the conference and conduct summer research.

² As McNerney (2001, 51) notes, ethnicity and sense of peoplehood arising from, “shared blood, history, territory, language, and customs, has come increasingly to serve as the ideological basis for violent political action.” McNerney goes on to comment that, “The underlying causes of these conflicts are often to be found in the upheavals that follow the collapse of central authority.”

³ See Bremmer 1997, 9.

⁴ For a concise survey of the literature written by both historical camps see: Alcock 1999, 333-335.

⁵ For the distinction of primordialism and instrumentalism see: Hall 1997, 18-19.

⁶ Pearson (1962, 402) is a sort of absolute instrumentalist, is essentially dismissing the entire experience of Messenian/helot identity. Conversely, varied individual experiences frequently become lost in unifying diaspora traditions/narratives. See Alcock 2002, 152-164. See also Figueira 1999, 222-224. Figueira shows the complexity of internal and external political movements from helots within the Spartan state. Messenian identity seems to be explicitly linked with those who were no longer cooperating with their Spartan masters.

⁷ See Figueira 1999, 221. See also Luraghi 2002, 236-238 regarding the Messenian polis as a reconfiguration of helot and perioikic identity. Luraghi touches on other unsolved problems regarding helot identity, including the implausibility of enslavement *en masse* and *in situ* in the initial Spartan conquest of Messenia. Such an action would be doomed to fail on account of the inherent solidarity within an enslaved population, following the arguments by Patterson 1970, 320; however, Patterson himself considers Helots an exception to the *en masse* rule, see Patterson 1982, 112. The fundamental question here is how helotry fit in the Spartan kosmos, as chattel slavery or otherwise, and the possibility of helots being a distinct self-reproducing/sustaining group.

⁸ The instrumentalist model of ethnogenesis still needs some kernel of “hard” historical fact. Malkin (2001, 17-18) provides a modern example that is particularly illustrative: Canadian Hurons were decimated in the Iroquois Wars and their remnants were forced to emigrate; however, “a Jesuit dictionary was used to revive the Huron language, and counterfeit cultural traits were created.” There is a conjunction of old and patently new cultural heritage. A similar “problem” can be seen in American Powwow culture. It remains to be seen to what extent Messenian traditions were defined by Spartan accounts of their historical identity.

⁹ See, Figueira 1999, 215, 219, and 226. Figueira provides analysis of the refoundation terminology used in Book 4 of Pausanias and its implications for historical narrative. New historical traditions offered a blank slate to helots that were Messenian and non-Messenian alike, “a blank canvas of social manifestation.”

¹⁰ Luraghi notes that these arguments rely upon which biased ancient sources scholars choose to privilege, so we are seeing “two competing political agendas generating two opposite directions of reality.” See Luraghi 2008, 223-224.

¹¹ Hall (2000, 15) discusses this point in particular when he writes, “in many cases, these traditions have combined cumulatively (rather than interacted dialectically) over the past two centuries, so that it is perfectly possible for ancient historians today to promulgate as doctrine certain historical ‘facts,’ the epistemological underpinnings of which may well belong to a current of thought quite alien to that presently in use.”

¹² In the classic treatment of this issue, Moses Finley (1998, 77) writes, “contemporary ideological considerations are active in that seemingly remote field of historical study – active in the sense that they underlie, and even direct, what often appears to be a purely ‘factual’, ‘objective’, presentation.” Cf. Hall (2000, 15), following Benedetto Croce: “Ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea,” (“every true history is a contemporary history”).

¹³ Regarding the risks associated with positivism and a constructed objective etic viewpoint, see Hall 2000, 18-19, 30-31.

¹⁴ See Buckler 1980, 152-156.

¹⁵ See D’Alessio 2009, 145. A new song may be seen in a different light if it is presented as a reperformance of an original or ur-song and projected onto a foundational past. See Hornblower 2004, 312-313. According to Thucydides, there was a Spartan 5th century reperformance of the ur-performative song and sacrifices which were performed when the dual kingship was established at the founding of Sparta. See Thucydides 5.16.3.

¹⁶ Mac Sweeney (2013, 15) writes, “The Athenians don’t need to be *either* autochthonous *or* Hellenic. Counter-intuitively, they can be both, equally, and at the same time. If we no longer read foundation myths as relating to historical truth, and if we no longer seek to uncover the reality behind the stories, the two options cease to be mutually exclusive. The alternative myths can be told in different contexts, for different audiences, for different reasons.”

¹⁷ See D’Alessio 2009, 139. Translation is D’Alessio.

¹⁸ Campbell’s text and translation. Cf. Pindar Fragment 199 (Snell-Maehler), and *Olympian* 13.22-3 in praise of Corinth. See D’Alessio 2009, 138-142.

¹⁹ See, West 2002, 110. Cf. Bowra 1963, 145-153. Bowra argues there may have been a copy preserved at the sanctuary at Delos as a depository of songs.

²⁰ Luraghi distrusts all poetic traditions. See Luraghi 2008, 5, 73-5. See also D’Alessio 2009, 137-145. Like other lyric poetry, Eumelus may simply be a product of the 4th century with archaizing style.

²¹ See, D’Alessio 2009, 141 and 145.

²² See, Ogden 2004, 155-175. Ogden’s Appendix 1 is an exhaustive account of the source issues regarding Rhianus of Bene and his literary output. Ogden surveys the possible fragments in the *Supplementum Hellenisticum* and debunks the so called, “Rhianus Hypothesis.”

²³ Ober (1985, 36, 41-42) describes *epiteichismos* as “the establishment of a permanent post in enemy territory to serve as a center for raiding and socio-economic disruption.” Cf. Luraghi 2008, 217-219.

²⁴ Ober (1985, 132) also notes the innovative catapult windows which were incorporated into the circuit wall towers.

²⁵ Xenophon is notably silent and anti-Theban; he seems to tow the Spartan line of not acknowledging the Messene’s existence. This silence is perhaps more informative than other later narration. By refusing to acknowledge the city-state’s foundation, Xenophon, more or less is censuring Messene’s right to exist within the broader panhellenic community.

²⁶ Luraghi (2009, 116) writes that, “the imposing fortification wall was the most impressive component of the city for an ancient visitor. Built in stone up to the top, nine kilometers long, it

was a true masterpiece of military architecture, exploiting the nature of the terrain to its best effect.” Luraghi goes on to note that, “the permanence of a strong garrison in the city once Epaminondas left (Diod. 15.67.1) confirms this point. However, both on a symbolic and on a material level, the imposing walls on Ithome defined a new way the status of this settlement vis-à-vis the rest of Messenia and the Greek world at large.” Luraghi follows the recent work of Silke Müth-Herda, whose dissertation examines Messene as a whole. See Müth-Herda 2005, 42-139.

²⁷Pausanias 4.27.7. Translation and text is Jones with slight modification. See also Alcock 2001, 145 and D’Alessio 2009, 144.

²⁸ See D’Alessio 2009, 144.

²⁹ Sue Alcock (2001, 145-6) writes, “Music, Ritual, monuments and repopulation: all come with repatriation and freedom.” Alcock also examines Messenian induction into the panhellenic community through Olympic victories, see Pausanias 6.10.2-11.

³⁰ Pausanias 4.27.6.

³¹ For the notion of a number of Messenian collective memories, see Alcock 2002, 173-175.

³² See Ogden 2004, 103.

³³ See Ogden 2004, 152. Aristomenes can be, “all things to all men.” Funke (2008, 2-3) writes that the, “integration of the hero of Messenian freedom into Theban traditions about the battle of Leuctra certainly goes back to the attempt by the Messenians to consolidate their identity in the years after 370/369; but it also reveals something about the way in which Thebes, the new dominant power in the Greek world, if for a short time, depicted itself in historiography. For the Thebans, it was obviously very important to show their newly acquired hegemony in the best possible light and underpin it with ideology.” Cf. Pausanias 4.32.4-6 regarding the fetching of Aristomenes shield and Pausanias’ rationalizing this story with the inscription commemorating Leuctra, *IG VII 2462/CEG 632*, which mentions three outstanding combatants: Xenoteles, Theopompos, and Mnasilaos. See Ogden 2004, 75-88.

³⁴ Aristomenes as a doublet or foil to Spartan myth seems natural, considering that helots were afraid or not allowed to sing the songs of Terpander, Alcman, or Spondon (Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 28.10). On this point, see Garland 1982, 199. On the various doublings in the Aristomenes tradition see Ogden 2004, 21-28.

³⁵ Ogden (2004, 37-54) reviews the structural forms which Aristomenes occupies in myth, of particular interest is the trope of epic or invincible losers (Ogden, 46) following Figueira. Cf. Figueira 1999, 226-227. Ogden, in error, cites p. 27, which is a typo. Figueira writes that, “The whole portrait of the war follows a pattern that might be called ‘invincible losers’ in that the Messenians outfight the Spartans in every detailed episode, but are defeated because of factors extraneous to their arete.”

³⁶ See Luraghi 2008, 239-248.

³⁷ See Alcock 2002, 150 and 166. The definite tomb cult locations: (1) Kaminion Kremmidia; (2) Routs; (3) Peristeria; (4) Tourliditsa; (5) Vathirema; (6) Voidokoilia; (7) Volimidia, Angelopoulos 2; (8) Volimidia, Angelopoulos 6; (9) Tragana 2; (10) Ellenika/Thouria. Cf. Alcock 1991, 460-466.

³⁸ See Alcock 2002, 166.

³⁹ Socio-political tension could be expressed within a cult community in a way modern archaeology might not detect, i.e. varying factions could use cult spaces in a similar manner. See Alcock 2002, 146-152. Cf. Luraghi 2008, 239-248.

⁴⁰ Xenophon, *Hellenica* 3.3.6. Translation is Marincola.

⁴¹ The passage in Pausanias is 4.27.11. The implication, may be, that Messenians were interested in being perceived as even more Doric than the Spartans, and therefore more legitimate. See Hall 2003, 142-168.

⁴² Pavlides 2018 offers the most comprehensive and up to date bibliographic survey of archaeological studies conducted in Laconia and Messenia. Cf. Shipley 2005 and 2006.

⁴³ Pavlides 2018, 22.

⁴⁴ See Mac Sweeney 2013, 12-13. Mac Sweeney analyzes the Cimon/Theseus' heroic bones affair.

⁴⁵ See Funke 2009, 11. It is worth quoting Funke in full, "Here the relations and conflicts between oikties were characterized in a peculiar way by the interplay between the autonomy of the *polis* and regional – that is, ethnic – cohesion. This tendency towards symbolity across the boundaries of the individual *poleis* may in many ways have been determined by foreign policy, especially insofar as it worked in opposition to Sparta. However, it is also the political consequence of a of a conspicuous phenomenon: the "ethnicization" of the political world of the Peloponnese at the end of the fifth and the beginning of the fourth century BCE."

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