

The Pseudo-history of Messenia Unplugged

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Some common knowledge about the Messenians to begin with. Dwelling in the southwestern portion of the Greek Peloponnese, these people were conquered by the Spartans in the course of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., although the detailed course of this conquest, and the precise nature and organization of the warring parties, remain opaque. What seems clearer is that those defeated who did not flee into exile were transformed into the famous “helots,” once described as “between free men and slaves” (Poll. 3.83). The few glimpses of helot life we possess from literary accounts, such as those of Tyrtaeus or Plutarch, are grim, and the Messenians appear periodically to have rebelled against their fate, most famously around the mid-fifth century B.C.E.¹ Liberation only came, however, in the early fourth century (ca. 370/69 B.C.E.), with the net result that the region lay under Spartan domination for the not inconsiderable period of some three-and-a-half or four centuries. Only with the coming of Epaminondas were the helots emancipated, numerous exiles reinstated, the monstrosly fortified city of Messene built, and the Messenians free to retake their place in the wider Greek world. Among other things, at this time we begin to get written accounts of the history of the Messenians.

Two basic positions in previous scholarship on the history of the Messenians can be readily identified and bluntly characterized. The first is the eponymous “pseudo-history” of my title (borrowed from a 1962 article by Lionel Pearson). This school of thought argues that the Messenians, under Spartan rule, inevitably had no history:

It is an axiom of Greek political life that a polis, in order to have dignity and standing, must have or acquire a history. But how can there be any history of a people that has had no existence as a nation or a city-state? The Messenians could not even hope to manufacture

¹For some recent literature touching on helot society, Cartledge 1987: 170–77 and *passim*; Ducat 1990; Harrison and Spencer 1998; Hodkinson 1992; Whitby 1994. The other resident population of Messenia—the *perioikoi*—will not be considered here, though they are obviously relevant to any more extended treatment of these issues: see Shipley 1997.

a history for the last two hundred years or so when, in the words of Tyrtaeus, they were "Like asses toiling under heavy burdens/In servitude and grim necessity." But they could say they *had* been a nation once, that they *had* enjoyed political unity before the Spartans robbed them of it.²

Pearson went on to draw contemporary parallels:

The invention of ancient history for new nations, such as Messene was, has obvious attractions; and it is not an attraction which has grown weaker with the passage of time. In modern times also new nations, like those which are emerging in Africa, are anxious to discover and establish a history of their people or peoples which will give them a place in the history of medieval or even ancient times before the European colonists arrived. The result cannot be arrived at without some "creative" writing; and some recent books suggest that current methods and standards of accuracy are not so very different from those of the third century BC.³

Thus, the narratives we possess (best preserved in Book 4 of Pausanias, but drawing on earlier Hellenistic sources such as Myron and Rhianos), these stories, these genealogies, and these explanations were all the invention of the post-liberation years. The Messenians, now free, required a past, so they manufactured one and gave it a positive, self-promoting spin.

Advocates of the other school, perhaps less numerous but just as passionate, argued for the Messenian right, despite Spartan rule, to possess a sense of their past. As L. R. Shero put it in 1938:

Essentially, the question at issue is whether or not one thinks it is likely that accurate traditions could survive for several generations among a nation of serfs. My own guess is that they could and did. It seems to me that the situation of the Messenians was such that stories about their fathers' struggles to preserve and to regain the freedom of their land would have been among their most cherished possessions. They would have jealously guarded from their masters this precious inheritance and would have reverently handed it on from one generation to another.... The tales would no doubt have been somewhat elaborated in the process of transmission, but that their main outlines would have been altered I find it difficult to believe. All this, of course, is mere

²Pearson 1962: 402; see p. 397 n. 1 for references to the long-running nineteenth- and twentieth-century debate over the "authenticity" of Messenian history. This school embraces figures such as George Grote and Carl Roebuck (see Roebuck 1941).

³Pearson 1962: 425–26.

conjecture: I make no claim that it is anything else. But I do contend that this guess is quite as likely to be right as the guess of the skeptics.⁴

Members of this school thus asserted an ongoing continuity of Messenian tradition and belief, a rock-hard, stubborn clinging to the past as one form of resistance to their fate.

The two positions offer two quite divergent interpretive choices: either a large-scale and impressive “invention of tradition,”⁵ or a subdued but devoted cherishing of the past, one ultimately allowed to flower and, more importantly, to enter our textual record. Both are argued from the fixed and limited body of literary sources that have survived. Both are obviously, and inevitably, guided by the political attitudes and scholarly paradigms of their authors—What means of self-representation are open to serfs and slaves? Who can make history? Is “invented” history a pejorative term? What constitutes a historical narrative?

Without engaging directly with that intimidating list of questions, it is easy enough to perceive that answers acceptable in a late-twentieth-century environment of subaltern studies and post-colonial critique (attitudes and approaches gradually infiltrating classical studies) will not be the same as for Shero in 1938 or for Pearson in 1962, let alone for their nineteenth-century predecessors. For one thing, any implicit notion of the Messenians as “blank slates” under Spartan rule seems not only politically incorrect, but actually quite wrong-headed. But does that swing us automatically into the other camp: to the admiration of plucky little Messenians, preserving memories and traditions unchanged through time?

Rather than aligning with one side or the other, my contention here is that we can steer a middle course, or at very least the issue can be explored afresh by expanding the sources for this inquiry. It should almost go without saying that archaeology, the evidence of the Messenian material record, should be consulted at this juncture. But what kinds of archaeology can help recover how people remember the past? Or, to put it another way, how can archaeology contribute to the study of memory?

⁴Shero 1938: 504. Treves 1944: 104 wrote “...it was not the coming into being of an independent state that brought about a spate of historical mythology and literature on Messenia...it was, on the contrary, an unshakeable national solidarity, and the determined fidelity to a glorious and revered tradition that, in favorable political circumstances, caused the refounding of Messenia.”

⁵Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

The limits to what material culture can offer the study of social memory are currently being explored and tested by archaeologists in a range of temporal and cultural settings.⁶ What seems clear is that sometimes it is more a matter of identifying the *contexts* for remembrance, rather than the *content* of memories themselves. Indeed, this seems the case for the Messenians under Spartan rule. The results of the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project, a regional survey conducted in the southwestern corner of Messenia (in the vicinity of the Bronze Age “Palace of Nestor”), suggests that—at least in that particular study area—helots lived in small communities, as opposed, for example, to dwelling in more isolated farmsteads.⁷ The question of helot residence is not a subject on which extant textual sources offer any sensible help, and at first blush it may seem an observation more relevant to issues of Spartan political control and economic exploitation. Comparative studies, however, not least studies of slavery in the New World, make clear that issues of where people live and in what groups have major ramifications for processes of communication, transmission, and reinforcement of communal identity.⁸

Another context for commemorative activity, one totally invisible in the documentary evidence, emerges from older and more traditional fieldwork in the region. Excavation at Bronze Age tombs has been a constant feature of archaeological research in Messenia, and an especially strong manifestation of “tomb cult”—the dedication of later votives at these graves—has been identified.⁹ Especially intriguing is the apparent practice of this ritual in Archaic and Classical times—in other words, during the period of Spartan control. Interpreting what is going on at these tombs is complicated and uncertain, as the “archaeology of cult” so often is, even in a case as meticulously excavated as the tholos at Nichoria published by W. D. E. Coulson and Nancy Wilkie.¹⁰ But it would take an inflexible critic indeed to disavow all instances of later veneration at these ancient graves. Tomb cults, together with the continued operation of certain Messenian sanctuaries (notably those of Zeus at Ithome and Apollo Korythos on the Messenian Gulf) can be taken to offer contexts for

⁶Alcock in prep.; Bergmann 1994; Bradley and Williams 1998; Edmonds 1999; Foxhall 1995; Jonker 1995; Küchler 1993.

⁷Davis et al. 1997: 455–57 on Archaic through Hellenistic settlement patterns; Alcock et al. in prep.

⁸Bastide 1978; Genovese 1974; see also Cartledge 1985. More generally, McGuire and Paynter 1991.

⁹Antonaccio 1995: 70–102; Alcock 1991: 456.

¹⁰Coulson and Wilkie 1983: 332–39; cf. Antonaccio 1995: 92–94.

Messenian commemorative practices, or, even more basically, for talking and for making memories.¹¹

Thus far, archaeology might be taken to support the second position, the one overtly more sympathetic to what Pausanias termed “the many sufferings of the Messenians” (4.29.13). Yet there are problems here. First of all, these archaeological contexts can offer no support for arguing fixed and “unchanging” versions of the Messenian past. It is possible, for example, that the “Messenians”—as a unified entity, with a self-awareness of group identity—were only created *with* conquest; that is, from a collection of peoples, it was Spartan intervention that outlined the limits of Messenian territory and that “made” the Messenians. While the data available for pre-liberation Messenia, either from our textual accounts or from archaeological evidence, leave this matter very uncertain, there must be elements of truth to such a reconstruction: conquest by the Spartans and distaste for helots would have an inevitable defining impact on local self-perceptions. Implications are clear: the content of the memories at play within the observed contexts of helot remembrance would, of necessity, be in a process of transformation, not of steady adherence to a “true” past. Moreover, at the other end of the period of Spartan domination, another major transition is visible. With liberation, all aspects of the archaeological record undergo a metamorphosis. Cities such as Messene were founded, and polis units, complete with civic centers and territorial boundaries, now divided up the landscape anew. For the period following liberation, the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project discovered an efflorescence of rural settlement and intensification of land use, together with evidence for the installation of new shrines in the countryside. Known examples of tomb cult more than double in number, becoming more conspicuous and unambiguous.¹² When put together with the radical, post-liberation change in Messenia’s political status and resident population, how could such alteration *not* have a dramatic impact on Messenian self-conceptions? Surely, “inventions” would indeed be needed to bridge this profound disjunction. By the time of Pausanias, for example, the region’s centers possessed their own civic identities and sacred histories, anchored not in pan-Messenian struggles and heroics but in local myths and happenings. At Classical Pylos, for example,

¹¹Ithome was the Messenian refuge site in the major rebellion of 465/64 B.C.E. Probably in connection with this same episode, Apollo Korythos received a spear butt from “the Messenians” commemorating a victory over the Athenians: Th. 1.103.2; Bauslaugh 1990.

¹²Alcock 1998a, 1998b.

Pausanias sees the house of Nestor, the tomb of Nestor, a painting of Nestor, the cave of Nestor, and the tomb of Nestor's son (Paus. 4.36.1–5). Civic claims to fame, however, cannot begin until the city is in place, and that was a post-liberation phenomenon.

Rather than swinging back and forth endlessly between the two previously established scholarly positions, it seems time to dismiss this particular “either/or” division—either total invention or total recall—as frankly unhelpful. Recent work on the creation of social memory points in a new direction, towards accepting an incessantly dynamic process of remembrance and oblivion, commemoration and rejection. This more fluid modeling of “how societies remember,” current today across several academic disciplines concerned with the potential use and abuse of memory, renders both previous schools of thought untenable.¹³

One Messenian example of this ongoing memorial process, and of the equal part played in it by “the politics of forgetting,” can be explored through the lens of both text and material culture. In Book 4 of Pausanias, his lengthy discussion of the history of the Messenians, a gap in the story can be easily discerned. Essentially his narrative runs through the Second Messenian War, the exploits of the great Messenian hero Aristomenes, and the final conquest of the Spartans, then “fast-forwards” to the period immediately prior to liberation—with very little mentioned between. Apart from a brief reference to the fifth-century helot rebellion and some description of Messenians in exile, Pausanias jumps over a time-span of fully some fifty Olympiads. The end result, of course, is a version of the Messenian past that elides the period of Spartan domination. Given other perceptible emphases in Pausanias, not least his sensitivity on the topic of external conquest and lack of *eleutheria*, this treatment is not perhaps surprising, and may to some extent reflect his reliance on pre-existing sources.¹⁴ What is interesting, however, is that this “gap,” this elision of time, appears also in the city-scape of Messene and in the commemorative landscape of Messenia. Pausanias describes in detail the decorative program of the Asklepieion at Messene, a program now

¹³Excellent recent studies come from anthropology, history (both ancient and modern), Holocaust studies, religious studies, and sociology: e.g., Assmann 1997; Carsten 1995; Geary 1994; Fara and Patterson 1998; Hutton 1993; Kammen 1991; Rappaport 1998; Young 1993; Zerubavel 1995.

¹⁴Elsner 1992; Alcock in press.

archaeologically confirmed by excavations under Petros Themelis.¹⁵ Statues and shrines to honor early Messenian kings and heroes (including Aristomenes) stand side by side with Epaminondas and the city of Thebes. The chronological pattern of Pausanias is here cast in stone and bronze in the Hellenistic city of Messene itself. Nor can archaeology or text offer any traces of activity commemorating helot endurance or rebellion. Mount Ithome, refuge during the fifth-century revolt, is subsequently honored for many things (not least, its claim to be the birthplace of Zeus), but its role as helot sanctuary is not among them. It is difficult to argue against the conclusion that what is happening here is an occlusion of history, a deliberate, willed forgetfulness.

To understand this period of oblivion—and not least its countless, often negative consequences for the later study of Messenian history and archaeology—we cannot think in terms of either the invention of a “pseudo-history,” or an all-or-nothing preservation of tradition. More than classicists and classical archaeologists perhaps still like to admit, what was chosen for remembrance possesses a shifting, unstable quality—with past decisions on these matters inexorably influencing the nature of our sources and the success of our attempts at reconstruction. Both texts and material culture played a part in that endless process of remembering and forgetting in the past; both have a part to play in analyzing that process in the present.

It is worrying to read perfectly respectable, indeed admirable, scholarly accounts that seem to accept Archaic and Classical Messenia as having no history—meaning these people had little written about them, and wrote nothing for themselves.¹⁶ A willingness to deploy archaeological evidence can make that sad lack no longer the end of the story. Equally worrying are attempts to unravel the “many sufferings of the Messenians” that naively treat literary sources such as Pausanias as either collections of fantastical whoppers or as embodiments of gospel truths. Both attitudes can be traced in archaeological treatments of this region. When confronted with something like the history of the Messenians, past arbitrary divisions between text-based classics and the material culture of antiquity—treatments of archaeology, history, and literature as essentially separate and rarely equal sources—all too painfully emerge as inadequate, indeed even as “pseudo.” It may be in the nature of closing pieties

¹⁵Habicht 1985: 36–63; Themelis 1993, 1994a, 1994b.

¹⁶E.g., “Messenia, the subject of book IV, was a region of Greece that for centuries had been subject to Sparta and, consequently, had no history of its own and only a small number of important sites and monuments”: Habicht 1985: 21.

at a celebratory session such as this Presidential Panel to assert that things are getting better, and that our mutual fields are the stronger for it. I think it is also the truth.¹⁷

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¹⁷I would like to thank Nino Luraghi (University of Freiburg), who is working on the subject of Messenian ethnic formation, for his comments on this paper, as well as to acknowledge the advice of Robin Osborne and John F. Cherry. I would also like to express my gratitude to Helene Foley for inviting me to participate in her Presidential Panel.

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