



PEITHO: THE EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT.

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Don Fenton

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INTRODUCTION

This Introduction will, first, indicate the subject of the inquiry, then briefly discuss the primary and secondary sources on this subject, followed by a discussion of my approach to it; finally the reasons for undertaking the inquiry will be stated.

The subject of this inquiry is the Greek word, Peitho. The meaning of this word is usually given as "Persuasion". Peitho as a concept bears on politics, religion, philosophy, and the erotic. The English word "persuasion" has no such immediate connotations. Therefore, the rendition of Peitho as "Persuasion" is doubtful. It is also of some interest to the student of political thought that a concept which was associated with the political business of the public assembly should be equally associated with the erotic activities of private life. This inquiry proposes to examine the context of the use of Peitho in order to explain this connection of the political with the erotic and to see how far "Persuasion" is an adequate rendition of Peitho. The chief aim of this inquiry is, however, to show that the meanings of words do not remain static, that the conceptual context of a word does shift over time, and that the meaning of a word can only be explicated within the terms of its own social, political, and historical context.

Contemporary scholarship on Peitho is scarce. Fränkel (1) has a footnote; Guthrie(2) gives us a page; Mourelatos

has a chapter(3) in which he attempts to assimilate Peitho to other concepts in the thought of Parmenides. All the above appear to be indebted to (though they do not specifically cite) the unpublished Ph.D. thesis of Pepe(4) who attempts to show Peitho to be a political concept. This view is criticized by Buxton in another Ph.D. thesis(5), later published as a book(6): he denies the political interpretation as the basic context of Peitho in favour of a view of Peitho as a basically erotic concept. Benveniste(7) provides a linguistic analysis of Peitho and its cognates. There is a small and highly specialized scholarship which focusses on the extant art portraying Peitho and its archaeological aspects with reference to the Peitho cult; While the dates are uncertain, this data appears to be too late in origin to be relevant to the present study.

The only written primary source for the Homeric period is the Homeric corpus itself. As these poems cannot be precisely dated, the archaeological record is no sure check on the data embedded in the Iliad and the Odyssey. The dating of the Homeric poems is a matter of some scholarly controversy, but this discussion is irrelevant to the present work, as the proposed dates generally fall within the period outlined below.

Likewise, the only written primary sources for the Hesiodic period are the poems of Hesiod. The dating of the Hesiodic poems is a matter of some controversy which will be referred to below.

Alkman's situation in the "order of events" of Spartan history is not a matter for controversy although the precise date is not known for certain. Our written primary sources for Sparta at this period are the poems of Alkman himself, and those of Tyrtaeus. The lyric poets in general - Theógnis, for example - form our written primary source knowledge for the Archaic period. The 5th century, especially at Athens, is much better known, although dating is often imprecise.

These writings, forming a part of the public verbal discourse of the societies which produced them - none are private communications - are taken, following Havelock(8) to be an affirmation and reinforcement of social mores, a reflection and representation of general societal attitudes. Such evidence is scanty, and often inadequate, but it is all that we have. The argument from silence is scarcely an ideal method or procedure, but in some cases it is unavoidable. For example, Homer's failure to stress agricultural poverty, juxtaposed with Hesiod's preoccupation with the possibility of food-scarcity, leads us to the conclusion that more individuals in Homer's period were better fed than in Hesiod's period.

Finley explains some of the difficulties facing the scholar:

... the lack of primary sources for long stretches of time and for most regions of the Mediterranean creates a block not only for a narrative, but also for the analysis of institutions. There are periods and places about which we have considerable knowledge ... this happy situation

should not blind us to the inadequacy, often to the hopelessness, of the available evidence for the rest of Greece outside Athens ... A complicating factor ... is the random nature of the documentation that has come down to us ...(9)

For the centuries before Alexander the Great, Athens was unique among the Greek city-states, 'publishing' a remarkable variety of documents - the survivors now number in the thousands - whereas Corinth, for example, has produced virtually none, the Greek cities of Sicily only a handful. That the contrast is nothing more than the result of archaeological accident can no longer be maintained: classical Corinth, for example, has been thoroughly excavated down to virgin soil. It must follow that we have a reflection of Athenian democracy on the one hand, of Corinthian (and other) oligarchy on the other hand. I say 'Athenian' because none of the other Greek democracies followed Athenian practice ...(10)

... the epoch-making discovery of literacy was followed for centuries by the survival of a fundamentally oral non-literate society ... The verbal transmittal over many generations of detailed information about past events or institutions ... entails considerable loss of data ... For the great bulk of the narrative we are faced with the 'kernel of truth' possibility, and I am unaware of any stigmata that automatically distinguish fact from fiction.(11)

The barest bones of any historical narrative, the events selected and arranged in a temporal sequence, imply a value judgment (or judgments) ... The study and writing of history, in short, is a form of ideology ... I speak of ideology ... roughly as defined in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: 'a system of ideas concerning phenomena, esp. those of social life; the manner of thinking characteristic of a class or an individual' ... I retain a rather old-fashioned notion of history as a systematic account over a long enough period of time not only to establish relationships, connections, causes and consequences but also to show how change occurs and to suggest why.(12)

This study has attempted to balance 'Athenocentricity' by giving relatively greater attention to non-Athenian sources of data. By so doing, the inquiry has necessarily laid

considerable stress on what might appear to be very minor appearances and applications of the subject. I contend that these minor applications of Peitho are of major importance in that they form our only evidence for the pre-Classical - that is, pre-Athenian, - use of the term, and that without a thorough understanding of what early Greeks thought about Peitho, we cannot hope to comprehend the Athenian (Classical) meaning of the word. The purpose of this study is to provide "a systematic account over a long enough period of time ... to establish relationships, connections, causes and consequences"; given the paucity of the evidence, to try "to show how change occurs and why" would be an impertinence: although the evidence will imply that change in the way the word Peitho is used is the result of change in social and political mores, the evidence does not show that. We cannot, under the circumstances, show "how change occurs" or "why". What will be done is to show that change did occur, and that this change was accompanied (or preceeded) by changes in the economic, social, and political ordering of society. The implication that the thought of a society is determined by its economic base is there; the demonstration that this is the case is not. Frankly, I think that, given the current state of the evidence, such a demonstration is not possible.

The root of the present problem was exposed by Havelock.(13) Briefly, this amounts to an assumption, general in classical scholarship, that the ancient Greek

language is a system which is representative of a common culture; that Homer and Aeschylus would, hypothetically, have been able to converse with one another, and each with Aristotle, despite some obvious differences in their respective political cultures. Havelock attributes this assumption to the way in which Greek is formally taught: students learn Greek from passages chosen for relative and graded ease of translation, regardless of period of composition; in this way differences in language and expression come to be viewed, subjectively at least, as idiosyncrasies on the part of the composers* rather than as expressions of the culture of a specific historical period.

The texts which are to be examined were intended to be communications between the composers and a wider audience rather than "art" for the sake of the composers' personal self-expression. They formed a part of the public verbal discourse of the society. In no way were any of these texts private records or private communications. As public discourse these compositions were a part of the society's attempt to define itself.

Greek society was based on the oikos, "family". As Vickers explains

The oikos, family, included father, mother, children, lands, possessions, animals, and slaves:

*The word "composer" is used throughout in preference to "author", because all of the texts to be discussed were either created without the aid of the written word (Homer) or with writing serving merely as an aid to composition, or as a mnemonic aid, for the purpose of public performance. None was intended for an audience of readers.

the "estate", kleros, plus the dead ancestors and the notions and rites which constituted the family cult; it looked to the future, to its continuance: marriage was subordinate to the needs of the oikos; even marriage of women to their nearest agnate relatives was permitted if this was necessary to ensure the continuance of the male line. Expulsion from the oikos would cut off the individual from the family worship and might call his citizenship into question.(14)

Thus the Greek citizen was an adult male member of an oikos. With the exception of founder-members of a colony or the very rare grant of citizenship for services to the state, citizenship was a function of birthplace; slaves or metics, resident aliens, could not be citizens as they were regarded as citizens of their own place of birth. Political rights, as distinct from citizenship, appear to have been a function of military usefulness, at least at Athens. The reforms of Solon, (see Chapter 4) which led to the establishment of the democracy at Athens, followed on the development of hoplite (heavily-armed citizen infantry) tactics, which broke the military monopoly of the aristocratic basileis; the extension of citizenship rights to the thetes (the poorest property class) in classical Athens followed on their military importance as rowers in the fleet. The military force of a polis was the assembly under arms; the assembly of a polis was the army in session to deal with civic matters. The new importance of rhetoric (and hence of the Peitho that rhetoric was designed to produce) in classical Athens, was co-incident with the extension of political rights to the whole male citizenbody.

It will be shown in Chapter 1 that Peitho in its primary meaning of "obey", was a word applicable to the response of the assembly to the exhortations of the basileis; Peitho was not applicable to relationships between persons of equal standing. The use of verbs from Peitho implied a dominance/sub-dominance relationship. Chapter 2 will show that, with the emergence of Peitho as a deity, the concept was personified as a goddess of erotic charisma and as a condition of human well-being. This change in the conception of Peitho was co-incident with changes in the economic, social, and political aspects of the society. Further economic, social, and political changes in Greek society, some specific to Alkman's Sparta, are shown in Chapter 3 to accompany the emergence of Peitho as a directly political concept, although as yet the specific application of this concept to political affairs is absent. Chapter 4 will show that, in the early 5th century B.C., alongside the by now traditional concept of an erotic and an undefined political view of Peitho, Peitho appears as a central concept in the philosophy of Parmenides, and its specific application to the achievement of political unity is promulgated by Aeschylus. Politically conservative Thebes was the home of Pindar, whose traditional concept of Peitho is contrasted with the innovative concepts of Peitho advanced by Aeschylus and Parmenides, both of whom lived in politically volatile situations. Continuing fierce political struggle is shown in Chapter 5 to be the

background for the work of Empedokles, whose concept of Peitho is shown to be essentially similar to that of Parmenides - the product of logical discussion. The political stresses, internal and external, to which the Athens of the later 5th century B.C. was subject, accompanied a variety of attitudes towards Peitho, as Chapter 6 shows. Peitho retains its erotic context with magical connotations, still has the basic sense of "obey", but is now seen as being produced in a number of possible ways, including speech, compulsion, reasoned discussion, falsehood, truth, and empirical evidence; different perspectives being the property of different individual composers. Peitho, however it is produced, was perceived in this period to be a morally superior means to achieve a given end as compared to Bia, "Force", even when the end was not itself regarded as desirable. Unlike the earlier 5th century, Peitho was not perceived to be a panacea for political disunity, but it was perceived to be a "best possible" means to achieve ends.

The present work relies heavily on the previous work by Buxton and Pepe. Buxton is a scholar of literature whose judgements are in line with his academic preoccupation with Greek tragedy of the classical period. In the introduction to his thesis he states

I shall not be treating the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles as documents, as sources of evidence for what the Athenians in general, or Aeschylus and Sophocles in particular, might have thought about peitho... What will concern us is ... how a

particular facet of human experience is realized in precise dramatic terms.(15)

In contrast, the present study treats all the primary source materials which are discussed as documents, as sources of evidence for what the composers and the people around them thought about Peitho. The present writer has no pretensions to literary scholarship, but is chiefly interested in the way in which people think, and in the connection between thought and environment. As is inevitable, where Buxton's analysis is lacking for my purposes, or when he seems to me to be simply wrong, I criticize the appropriate points; at other times, where I have no argument with his exposition, I rely straightforwardly upon him for textual sources, exposition and interpretation. It is more difficult to pin down Pepe, as his thesis lacks both introduction and conclusion, and the chapters are independent studies whose only connecting link is the subject, "Peitho". I have, however, a good deal of sympathy with Pepe's approach, which is generally similar to my own - an attempt to explicate meaning from contextual use. As with Buxton, I rely on Pepe, as the authority which he undoubtedly is, when I have agreed or at least have no argument with his exposition, and criticize (or, more often, add to) the exposition when I feel that I have some valid contribution to make to the point at issue.

Now I must answer the question: "why Peitho?" It is possible that any moral-emotive-ethical concept would have done as well to demonstrate the existence of a linkage

between environment and thought. However, earlier studies had indicated that Peitho was an important concept in the thought of Parmenides. And Peitho, being a concept which is at once erotic and political, is a concept of intrinsic interest to the student of political thought, offering as it does insights into the thought of the composers in whose work Peitho appears. This study has attempted to avoid the preconceptions of scholars such as Mourelatos, who states that Peitho

appears as the patron of civilized life and of democratic institutions. Peitho in this context is the spirit of agreement, bargain, contract, consensus, exchange, and negotiation in a free polis.(16)

This study will show that this definition of Peitho does not hold for the period prior to the 5th century B.C.. Mourelatos has fallen into the trap, indicated by Havelock and referred to above, of perceiving the Greek language as a whole, rather than as an evolving system within which words shift contextually and meanings of words alter over time. As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, Peitho is an important concept in the thought of both Parmenides and Aeschylus; their understanding of the concept can only be validly explicated by ascertaining the history of the concept up until their time, together with an analysis of their usage of the concept and that (if any) of their contemporaries. To look to the late 5th century or later still for evidence about the meaning of Peitho in Parmenides or Aeschylus would be quite anachronistic. Mourelatos' definition of Peitho

will be shown in Chapter 4 to be the concept of Peitho (or part of it) promulgated by Parmenides and Aeschylus; there is no evidence to suggest that such a conceptualization of Peitho was yet general. This study proposes to examine the evidence for the meaning of Peitho stage by stage, in chronological sequence, without anachronistic intrusions of evidence from one period into the explication of the evidence of an earlier period.

A NOTE ON SPELLING.

An older tradition of scholarship rendered Greek proper nouns in their latinized form, thus: Socrates. Contemporary scholarship favours direct transliterations of the Greek letters, thus: Sokrates. This practice is rarely followed with full consistency. It would be most unusual to find Platon for Plato in English-language scholarship. There was, and is, a practice of retaining what a scholar perceives as well-known words in the latinized form and giving less-common words in their Greek form. In the present work the contemporary practice of direct transliteration of the Greek is generally followed, although force of habit may occasionally result in the use of the older form, thus: Athena rather than Athene. Quotations, of course, retain the original spellings of the passages quoted.