

**THE ANCIENT BOEOTIANS:
THEIR
CHARACTER & CULTURE,
& THEIR REPUTATION**

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The Ancient Boeotians: Their Character & Culture, & Their Reputation by W. Rhys Roberts

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THEIR REPUTATION. 3 413.2

Boeotia Ἰ.

[PIND. *Olymp.* VI. 90.]

Summos posse viros et magna exempla daturos

Verecun in patria crassoque sub aere nasci.

Juv. *Sat.* x. 49.

BY

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CHAPTER I.

THE LITERARY TRADITION AND THE HISTORICAL AUTHORITIES.

I. THE LITERARY TRADITION.

Βοιωτία ὕς.—'Αναίσθησία.

THE stigma resting upon the Boeotians, both in antiquity and in later times, furnishes one more illustration, if it were needed, of the responsibility incurred by those who first give a bad name to an individual or a people. If the ill-natured saying is limited to two words, one stating *who* the person is and the other *what* he is, its piquant brevity may gain it immortality as a proverb, and thus what was at first only 'the cackle of your bourg' will have become 'the murmur of the world.' The aim of this treatise will be to bring together some of the hard things which have been said of the Boeotians, and to suggest certain considerations which may be urged in modification of so harsh an estimate and in favour of a more lenient view.

It is well known that the earliest reference to the proverb *Βοιωτία ὕς* is found in the writings of a Boeotian. In his Sixth Olympian (B.C. 468: probably), Pindar, towards the close of the Ode, addresses his *χοροδιδάσκαλος*, Æneas, as follows:

ὄτρυνον νῦν ἑταίρους,
Αἰνέα, πρῶτον μὲν Ἥραν Παρθενίαν κελαδῆσαι,
γυνῶναί τ' ἔπειτ', ἀρχαίων δνειδος ἀλαθέσιν
λόγοις εἰ φεύγομεν, Βοιωτίαν ὕν.

The passage requires some elucidation in detail, but the general sense is clear. Æneas, as chorus-master, is to rouse his fellows to sing the praises of the maiden Hera, and to form (or to suggest) some conclusion as to the justice of an ancient national reproach. The version in Boeckh's monumental edition runs thus: *Incita nunc sodales, Ænea, primum ut Iunonem Partheniam cantant, tunc ut declarent, antiquum probrum veris verbis an effugiamus, Boeotiam suam*. It will be seen that Boeckh takes γνῶναι in a causative sense. In support of this he quotes *Olymp.* xiii. 2, and he might have added that γνωρίσαι and γνῶριμον ποιῆσαι are found, by way of paraphrase, in the Scholia. His view of the exact meaning and connexion of the words ἀλαθέειν λόγοις is not clear from the literal rendering which he gives; but it is not in itself likely that Pindar, loyal as he is to his country, intends to endorse so coarsely insolent a proverb. We seem, therefore, driven to disagree with the accomplished English translator who renders: "to know for sure whether we are escaped from the ancient reproach that spake truly of Boeotian swine." Rather, the correct interpretation is that given by Erasmus (*Adagg.*, I. x. 6): *Admonet chorodidascalum, ita curet canendum hymnum, ut vetus illud probrum veris rationibus liceat effugere, quod in amicos dici consueverit, Βοιωτία ὄσ.* Here by *veris rationibus* we are apparently to understand 'on true grounds or calculations,' 'really and truly': so that ἀλαθέειν λόγοις is equivalent to ταῖς ἀληθείαις, τῇ ἀληθείᾳ, τῷ ὄντι¹. On this view, the translation of the whole passage will be, to quote Mr Myers with a few slight alterations: "Now rouse thy fellows, Æneas, first to proclaim the name of maiden Hera, and next to know (or, to make known) whether in very truth we escape that ancient reproach, *Boeotian swine*." Pindar is clearly anxious that no admission shall be made which is not well considered and sincere.

To pass from the interpretation of the passage to the substance of the proverb. We have seen that, according to the view of

¹ For the plural ταῖς ἀληθείαις, see Rutherford's *Babrius*, lxxv. 19. Some light is thrown on the passage under discussion by the line ἦν ὄρε σάας τὸ Βοιωτικὸν ἔθνος ἔρεον (quoted by Schol., on *Olymp.* vi., from one of Pindar's Dithyrambs; cp. Strabo vii. 7, 1), which is usually, and no doubt rightly, translated: *erat quom sues Boeoticam gentem appellarent*.

some, Pindar endorses the proverb. Others would perhaps urge that the proverb itself is meant half in jest, and is not so offensive as it appears. No doubt there is truth in Professor Gildersleeve's somewhat quaint reminder that "the moral character of the swine was not exactly the same among the Greeks as it is among us and the Semites".¹ But everywhere and always we may assume that it has been reckoned a 'reproach' for a human being to be termed a 'swine.' At all events, a ten years' acquaintance with the inhabitants of the Island of Anglesey has not convinced the writer that they really relish the delicate humour of the exactly parallel expression *Moch Môn*, or that they would not turn a ready ear to an ingenious Scholiast of modern days who should imitate his Greek forerunner by referring us to some ancient Welsh tribe analogous to those primitive Boeotian *Hyantes* ("Ἰάντες) whose name, originally innocent enough, was thought to have suggested the ribald jest of later times². For, however it originated, the phrase *Βουωρία ὄς* must, as the Pindaric Scholiast remarks, have implied *ἀγοικία καὶ ἀναγωγία*, by which latter word is meant *ἀπαιδευσία*, the equivalent given for it by Suidas³. The proverb is, as we are told elsewhere, appropriately used *ἐπὶ τῶν ἀπαισθητῶν καὶ ἀπαιδευτῶν*⁴. In fact, we may with safety say that, whatever else it indicated, it must have argued certain defects of—character and culture. We feel that this twofold weakness must be attributed by the irate Milton, in one of his prose writings, to an unknown opponent, when he impatiently exclaims, "I mean not to dispute philosophy with this pork, who never read any". We are quite sure that, whatever else Milton means, he does not intend to compliment his nameless antagonist upon uniting in his single

¹ B. L. Gildersleeve, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes*, p. 180. But cp. Circe's swine and see (for partial confirmation only) Plato, *Rep.* ii. 372, *Laches* 196, *Leges* vii. 819 D (Grünwald, *Sprichwörter u. sprichwörtliche Redensarten bei Plato*, p. 18; Lingenberg, *Platonische Bilder u. Sprichwörter*, p. 15).

² Boeckh, *Pindari Opera*, tom. ii. pars i., p. 151. Compare, again, Strabo vii. 7, 1.

³ See E. A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*: s. v. ἀναγωγή.

⁴ *Macarii Centuria* ii. 49, in Leutsch u. Schneidewin's *Corpus Pseudoepigraphorum Graecorum* ii. 151.

⁵ *Colasterion: a Reply to a nameless Answer against the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*.

person all the virtues of Hebraism and all the graces of Hellenism.

The point which Pindar wished to be decided was: *εἰ φεύγομεν ἀρχαίων ὄνειδος*. If the poet is referring to his countrymen at large, the answer is clearly in the negative. They did *not* escape the reproach: their vivacious Athenian neighbours saw to that. We can well imagine that the Boeotians, who were themselves given to coining proverbs, invented in revenge, unless forestalled by the Corinthians (see Thucyd. i. 70), the phrase Ἀττικὸς πάροιχος to denote a troublesome neighbour¹. But then it is one thing to invent a taunt, another to give it vogue; and here the Athenians had the advantage, for they controlled the channels of literature.

At a later date, Plutarch expressly states that it was the people of Attica who applied various opprobrious epithets to the Boeotians and called them 'pigs.' His words are: *τοὺς γὰρ Βοιωτοὺς ἡμᾶς οἱ Ἀττικοὶ καὶ παχεῖς καὶ ἀναισθήτους καὶ ἡλιθίους, μάλιστα διὰ τὰς ἀδηφαγίας προσηγόρευον. οὗτοι δ' αὖ οὖς. καὶ ὁ Μένανδρος ὁ γνάθους ἔχουσι* (*De Esu Carnium*, orat. i. 6, p. 995)².

This passage reminds us not only that it was the Athenians particularly who gave the Boeotians their bad name, but that among the Athenians the lead in this respect was taken by the Comic Poets, to whom their rustic neighbours were a most convenient butt. Plutarch names Menander. But long before Menander, Cratinus seems to have styled the Boeotians *Συβοιωτοί*, thus facetiously implying a connexion at once with *οὖς* and with *βοῦς*³. In Aristophanes it is from Boeotia that things good for eating come, and the Boeotian trader with his oddities of dialect makes an excellent mark for comic shafts, while the much-prized eel he brings from Lake Copais inspires one of the happiest even

¹ Lentsch u. Schneid. i. 40, i. 380, ii. 149. Cp. Aristot. *Rhet.* ii, 21, 12.

² "The men of Attica were in the habit of terming us Boeotians dense and stupid and witless, mainly owing to our enormous appetites. They it was, also, who named us pigs. And Menander called us 'the men with the jaws.'"—Of course it cannot be proved that it was the Athenians who invented the proverb *Βοωρία ὄν*, which even in Pindar's time was an *ἀρχαίων ὄνειδος*. But while it is in the highest degree probable that it had an Attic origin, it is absolutely certain that the feeling which it represents owed its widespread expression to Attic literature.

³ Meineke, *Poet. Graec. Fragm.* 71 (Didot). Kock, *Comic. Attic. Fragm.* i. 108.

of Aristophanic parodies¹. The excesses in the matter of eating and drinking attributed to the Boeotians by the Comic Poets generally may be estimated from Athenaeus (x. 417, 418), who brings together a number of passages the burden of which is that they were *very valiant trenchermen* (φαγεῖν μέγ' ἀνδρικοί), and something more than that².

Proceeding to Demosthenes, another Athenian who is known to have spoken badly of the Boeotians (especially the Thebans), we shall find that his disparaging references to Theban ἀναίσθησία and ἀναλγησία are not so numerous as they are sometimes supposed to be. Indeed the noun ἀναίσθησία appears not to be used at all by Demosthenes in connexion with the Thebans, while the adjective ἀναίσθητος is thus used twice only. In the *De Pace* the orator makes use of the expression without perhaps actually adopting it himself (εἰ καὶ πάνυ φησὶ τις αὐτοὺς ἀναισθήτους εἶναι, 61), and in the *De Corona* he uses it in a fit of indignation

¹ *Ach.*, vv. 860 et seqq. Cp. *Pax*, vv. 1003—1005.—For the Boeotian dialect, see R. Meister, *Die griechischen Dialekte (auf Grundlage von Ahrens' Werk 'De Graecae linguae dialectis')*, vol. i. pp. 203—286. As Meister points out (p. 212), Aristophanes, like other comic poets, has not taken the trouble to give an altogether accurate reproduction of the brogue he ridicules. See also *Die boeotischen Inschriften* by R. Meister in H. Collitz, *Sammlung d. gr. Dialekt-Inschriften* (Heft iii. 1884, with Nachträge in the same year).

² *Evidence of the Comic Poets.* Many of the considerations advanced by Wilhelm Vischer (*Kl. Schr.* i. 469—495, *Ueber die Benutzung der alten Komödie als geschichtlicher Quelle*) are applicable not only to the Old Comedy but to Comedy in general. In the present case, Athenaeus himself admits that the charge was a wholesale one (καὶ ἔφη δὲ δια εἰς πολυφαγίας ἐκωμωδεῖτο, ὡς τὸ *Hourós*, x. 417). It would hardly be fair to judge of a City Feast solely from the pages of *Punch*, and in the same way the lines of the Greek Comic Poets, which ascribe gluttony to the Boeotians, one and all, must be taken with all due reserve. They indicate a tendency, a weakness; one cannot safely say more. The impression which the Boeotians, on this side of their character, are represented as making on the Athenians may be compared with that which the voracious Saxons made on the Normans, whose self-indulgence took a more refined form. "The polite luxury of the Norman presented a striking contrast to the coarse voracity and drunkenness of his Saxon and Danish neighbours. He loved to display his magnificence, not in huge piles of food and hogheads of strong drink, but in large and stately edifices, rich armour and gallant horses, choice falcons, well-ordered tournaments, banquets delicate rather than abundant, and wines remarkable rather for their exquisite flavour than for their intoxicating power." (Macaulay, *History of England*, i. p. 11.)