Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse
A Lesson in Patriotism: Lycurus’ Against Leocrates
and the Ideology of the Ephebeia
Dr. Bernd Steinbock
Department of Classical Studies

1) Problem: Lycurus’ Use of King Codrus as Historical Paradigm
In 330 BC, the leading Athenian statesman Lycurus charged the Athenian blacksmith Leocrates with treason for fleeing his country after the crushing defeat at Chaeronea in 338 BC. Lycurus’ prosecution speech is unusual for its exuberant use of mythological and historical examples. He contrasts, for instance, Leocrates’ cowardice with the patriotic self-sacrifice of the Athenian king Codrus (Lycurg. 83-87).

The 5th-century author Hellanicius wrote in his Αττικὴς (Φιλοσ. 323a F23) that the Dorians invaded Attica during Codrus’ reign, trusting the Delphic oracle which assured their victory as long as they avoided killing the Athenian king. When King Codrus learned of this oracle, he disguised himself as a woodcutter and ventured outside the city-walls to seek death from enemy hands, thus foiling their invasion.

Lycurus’ treatment of this myth differs remarkably from Hellanicius’ literary version. It reflects a decidedly civic and patriotic coloring of the story and, to the surprise of many commentators, enlists Codrus among the ancient Athenian kings who have become “eponymous of the land” (Ἐτώνημοι τῆς χώρας).

3) Codrus as Eponymous Age-Set Hero
Taking all available ‘carriers’ of social memory into account, including oral traditions, rituals and festivals, public commemorations and monuments, I make the case that Codrus was one of the little-known forty-two eponymous age-set heroes (Ἀθ. Πόλ. 53.4-7) who played an important role in the Athenian military and socio-political system (Davidson 2006). Devotion to the city’s gods and heroes and knowledge of their mythology were essential parts of the religious and ideological instruction of Athenian ephebes. The eponymous heroes in particular served thereby as role models of civic virtue and as focal points of tribal and age-set identity. The patriotic version of Codrus’ self-sacrifice, used by Lycurus, was likely told to Athenian recruits in Codrus’ sanctuary (Πολ. Ἐπιγραφαὶ 2) on their official tour of the city’s shrines (Ἀθ. Πόλ. 42.3).

4) Lycurus’ Rhetorical Strategy
In light of this elucidation of the Athenian memorial framework, Lycurus’ citation of the Ephebic Oath, the self-sacrifices of King Codrus and the daughters of Erechtheus, as well as his repeated invocation of the city’s gods and shrines, gain new relevance for the appraisal of this speech. They can no longer be interpreted as diversionary arguments extra causam, but must be seen as integral elements of Lycurus’ indictment of Leocrates for cowardice and treason – behavior that is diametrically opposed to the hoplite ethos and religious devotion instilled into young ephebes (cf. Allen 2000). In this way Lycurus brings the jurors’ memories of their own ephebate into the courtroom and taps into emotions and values that lie at the heart of Athenian collective identity.

2) Method: How to Study the Orators’ Historical Allusions
Previously, scholars have ascribed these differences to Lycurus’ rhetorical ability to manipulate a pre-existing literary version to suit his case (e.g. Vielberg 1991). Yet a reading which proceeds from the assumption that the orators drew their historical examples primarily from literary sources has considerable short-comings. First, it cannot account for every modification. Why, for instance, is Codrus enlisted among the eponymous heroes? Second, thanks to Thomas (1989), we now know that most Athenians did not draw their knowledge of the past from literary sources. Consequently, a purely intertextual interpretation tells us very little about the jurors’ likely reactions to Lycurus’ use of this story. Third, since it was the orator’s objective to persuade his listeners, there were constraints upon what an orator could and would say in front of a mass audience.

Using the concept of social memory as an analytical tool (Halbwachs 1980, Fentress & Wickham 1992, Misztal 2003), I propose to restate the orator’s historical paradigms within the socio-political realm and explore how and why Lycurus’ historical allusions might have resonated with his audience.

5) Selected Bibliography
Alcock, Susan E., Archaeologies of the Greek Past (Cambridge 2002)
Connerton, Paul, How Societies Remember (Cambridge 1989)
Fentress, James & Wickham, Chris, Social Memory (Oxford, Cambridge 1992)
Kearns, Emily, The Hero of Attica (London 1989)
Misztal, Barbara, Theories of Social Remembering (Maidenhead 2003)
Thomas, Rosalind, Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens (Cambridge 1989)

For questions and comments, please contact bsteinbo@uwo.ca