

IN SEARCH OF PALLADAS

*A papyrus of previously unknown poems has been attributed to Palladas, a now little known poet of ancient Alexandria. Following the first international conference on the new poems, **Kathryn Gutzwiller** goes in search of Palladas*

New understandings of ancient Greek literature come about primarily in one of two ways: by asking new questions stimulated by contemporary concerns, or by the discovery of new texts, usually on papyri. A case in point is that of Palladas, a writer of Greek epigrams who lived in Egypt in the fourth century AD. Although a large number of his poems, about 150, were preserved in a collection of poems known as the Greek Anthology, he has received relatively little attention, especially from a literary perspective. I have to admit that I was never much attracted to this curmudgeonly figure, whose tone is either moralistic or bitter, giving instruction on how to bear the inevitable pangs of misfortune or complaining about his dull life as a school teacher, his battle-axe wife, his poverty, and employers who don't pay.

Then, in 2012, a papyrus codex was published containing the scant remains of about 60 epigrams, which are probably part of a collection of Palladas' poems produced during his lifetime. The attribution to Palladas was made by the editor Kevin Wilkinson, who spent a decade or so meticulously piecing together the papyrus scraps, deciphering the faded letters, and then

writing a commentary on the poems. Scholars reacted with admiration, but also, predictably, with objections. Wilkinson re-dated Palladas from the late to the early fourth century AD, a move that was questioned, as was the attribution itself. The claim for Palladas' authorship relies, in large part, on the occurrence of two of the papyrus epigrams also in the Greek Anthology, where there are indications, though not conclusive ones, of composition by Palladas. This evidence is augmented by a general similarity of style, diction, and theme, as well as a number of geographical and historical references that fit with what is known of Palladas' life. Again predictably, a conference was called, and an international group of scholars convened at University College London last September.

As a literary scholar interested in epigram collections, I was happy to be invited to speak on the new Palladas. Here was the rub: the text on the papyrus is so fragmentary that scarcely any poem can be fully read or reliably restored. In truth, most of the pages consist of expanses of white, with only a few letters at the beginnings or ends of lines. A literary reading of the recently discovered epigrams just wasn't possible.

The papyrus does, however, contain a complaining first-person voice of a teacher who lives in Egypt that bears comparison with the Palladas known from the Anthology, and a fragmentary reference to one Gestius calls out for identification with the Gessius known from the old Palladas epigrams. In

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addition, the fragmentary codex reveals quite a lot about what an epigram collection of the fourth century AD looked like. A thematic arrangement can be spotted in places, and many poems have subject headings like those in the Byzantine manuscripts of epigram collections. These clues about how the papyrus worked as a poetry book, possibly arranged by the poet himself, led me to examine the groupings of Palladas epigrams in the Anthology, where thematic sequences are undoubtedly extracts from some ancient

collection of his poetry, arranged to his own tastes.

For me, then, the new Palladas became a stimulus to rereading the old. Epigrams - by definition poems of small scope - have often seemed of marginal interest, designed to make a witty point or to depict a poignant moment. In aggregate, however, in surviving sequences or even in whole epigram books, they can address larger issues or paint a poet's interior life, social interactions, or cultural milieu. Read thus, the figure of Palladas came into focus for me, emerging as a man deeply devoted to the great poetry of the Greek past who lived in an increasingly Christianized world where his cultural heritage was losing its centrality, a world in which his poetic talents and literary knowledge served only the utilitarian purpose of teaching boys their grammatical forms.

Palladas' poems fall mostly into the category of scoptic epigrams, which mock or make fun of a class of people or a named individual. Such epigrams lack political correctness, but are meant to amuse by depicting what the mocker is not. For instance, Lucillius, a scoptic epigrammatist of the second century AD, satirizes grammar teachers because they possess 'anger, wrath, and bile'. Other professions are also routinely made fun of, as are such human types as women, the blind, or the excessively thin. Palladas produced a series of seven epigrams that lampooned the otherwise

unknown Gessius (or Gestius, as the name is spelled on the papyrus) as an example of an overly ambitious person. What is unusual is the vehemence of the attack on an apparently historical person, one who held an unspecified political office and was brutally executed for ambitions that may have been viewed as treason against the emperor. This mockery of the dead, dressed up with sexual slurs, points to new social uses for scoptic epigram, something more profound than the usual playful 'roasting'.

The most interesting sequence in the old Palladas, 11 poems long, centres on the theme of anger as a natural state of being. The poet begins by claiming that for Zeus woman is anger, since, angry at the gift of fire made to mankind, Zeus presented humans with the counter-gift of Pandora, the source of all human sorrows. He further asserts that Homer showed the wicked nature of woman, whether whore or wife, since the miseries of the Trojan War were caused by Helen's adultery and the trials suffered by Odysseus were due to faithful Penelope. As the sequence progresses, the 'wrath' of Achilles, repeatedly quoted as the opening line of the *Iliad*, becomes the template for Palladas' own emotional state, caused in concert by his wife and his profession (*Greek Anthology* 9.168) (see below).

With a recurring linkage of personal circumstance and the opening of the *Iliad*, the sequence acquires a

biographical flavor, wittily enhanced with puns on grammatical terminology. The 'wrath of Achilles' is also the cause of Palladas' poverty, and the first five lines of the *Iliad*, through which the five noun cases (or 'falls' in Greek) were taught young students, are five misfortunes (also 'falls' in Greek) for him. Because a dishonest employer broke his 'contract' (also meaning 'syntax' in Greek), he must sell his copies of Callimachus and Pindar, superb but difficult poets, and so not grammar school fare.

Taken one by one, the poems seem misanthropic and misogynistic, even a bit bizarre, the ravings of a depressed man mired in the minutiae of grammar. If his epigrams are read more holistically, however, Palladas can be appreciated as a wry spirit, who in other times and places might have found renown as a serious poet. As it is, his poetry preserves for us an insider's view of the detritus of pagan Greek culture, surviving minimally under the cover of grammatical instruction, though surviving nevertheless. In the end, Palladas produces, with his self-loathing, a new kind of scoptic epigram - targeted not so much at women generally or grammarians or the greedy rich, but at the life to which he's wedded, marked by limited intellectual contacts and petty disputes. The tactic has the effect of remaking scoptic epigram to suit a desperate age of cultural decay when what remains is the possibility of poking fun at one's own realities.

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‘Destructive wrath’ is the wife that I married, after
I had started with wrath in my profession.
Poor me, full of wrath, with two forces of anger,
the art of grammar and combat with the wife.

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