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Theognis' Riddle: A Reexamination of Theognis 667-68

tauta moi einichthô kekrummena tois agathoisin

What are the “hidden things” in this line 681 that Theognis wants to “conceal in riddles” for his fellow aristocrats? According to Gregory Nagy (*Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis*, pp. 66-8), Theognis intimates to some members of the elite that they have betrayed him and their class with their venality, thereby driving the *polis* to ruin. Yet Nagy’s reading of these lines is overly influenced by his attempt at a unified interpretation of the corpus of Theognis’ poetry. A more faithful reading of 667-682 shows that Theognis conceals and reveals not a reprimand for the aristocrats, but a call to regain control of the *polis* from the baser classes.

The interpretation of Theognis’ riddle depends above all on how one construes the relationship between the *agathoisin* and Theognis as speaker of the poem. Nagy adduces examples from elsewhere in the corpus to show that Theognis is at odds with these aristocrats in 667-682. But it is in fact the base-born merchants, not careless aristocrats, who hold sway, are ruining the *polis*, and are therefore the object of Theognis’ scorn, as line 679 makes clear:

phortêgoi hoi d’ archousi, kakoi d’ agathôn kathuperthen.

The nautical imagery of the poem, showing the good pilot of the ship of state deposed, supports this interpretation. In Theognis’ day, it was increasingly merchants, considered of a lower class, who took to and controlled the seas, in contrast to earlier days of aristocratic naval dominance (*Thuc.* 1.5). Just as the merchants were ascendant at sea, so were they in the *polis*; each circumstance, according to Theognis, threatened the community and especially its elite.

What, then, do Theognis’ riddling words mean? After blaming the base merchants for his poverty and the collapse of an ordered society, the speaker leaves his aristocratic audience to draw a simple conclusion from his puzzle: they must take action as a class to restore their rightful place and set the state on its proper course.