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Tyrants in Bed: Hippias and Others

One of the Greek commonplaces about tyranny was that tyrants were given to sexual misconduct. This paper, drawing on my study in *GRBS* 39 (1998), examines the putative sex lives of the Greek tyrants with an emphasis on connections between public and public--what tyrants were thought to do out of bed and what they were thought to do in it. Tabloid tales of tyrannical sex are colored by ideas about how tyrants governed. In addition, I offer an interpretation of the dream which Herodotos (6.107) says Hippias, the deposed tyrant of Athens, had shortly before the battle of Marathon. Hippias' dream that he had intercourse with his mother is a reflection of his tyrannical character and ambitions.

Sexual misconduct figures in Greek discussions of tyranny from Herodotos' debate on constitutions (3.80.5) on. It also appears in many stories about particular tyrants--often doubtful historically, but useful for showing how Greeks thought about tyranny. From collecting and examining this material, three main themes emerge. (1) A tyrant enjoys complete license, including the license to have sex with anyone he pleases. This is viewed with a combination of envy at what tyrants could get away with and anxiety about what tyrants could do against lesser folk. (2) Tyrants engage in sex with a view to asserting their power and dominating or humiliating their partners. This answers to our ideas of sexual harassment and sexual abuse, and it is sometimes known as *hybris* rather than *eros* (Plut. *Mor.* 251a, 768e; Arist. *Pol.* 1311b19-20). It forms a vivid (often melodramatic) aspect of *hybris* as one of the tyrant's stock vices. (3) Tyrants engage in sexual perversion of one sort or another, violations of proper *nomoi* in sexual conduct. Stereotypically, tyrants set aside *nomoi* in one sense, disregarding established laws and constitutional arrangements; hence (it is thought) they are likely to set aside *nomoi* in another sense, violating proper standards of personal conduct.

Hippias' dream makes sense as an expression of a common way of thinking about the way tyrants acted. The dream story in Herodotos is an elaborate way of calling him a name not fit to print in the pages of the *APA Abstracts*.