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PLATO'S REFERENCE TO LAMACHUS*

The only reference to the Athenian general Lamachus in the Platonic corpus is at *Laches* 197c6 where Nicias compares Laches to him. In response to Laches' criticism that Nicias is embellishing himself with his words (κοσμεῖ τῷ λόγῳ, *La.* 197c3), and trying to deny that those agreed to be courageous are indeed courageous, Nicias says:

Οὔκουν σέ γε, ὦ Λάχης, ἀλλὰ θάρρει· φημὶ γάρ σε εἶναι σοφόν, καὶ Λάμαχόν γε, εἴπερ ἐστὲ ἀνδρεῖοι, καὶ ἄλλους γε συχνοὺς Ἀθηναίων. (*La.* 197c6–8)

But not you, Laches, so take heart. For I say that you are wise, and Lamachus too, since you are both courageous, as well as many other Athenians.[1]

What is the meaning behind this comparison? It is merely an off-hand comment, or has it some deeper significance? Commentators on the *Laches* generally note two things about Lamachus. First, that he was a general who, along with Nicias and Alcibiades, was in charge of the Sicilian expedition of 415 B.C. Second, that he died a notably brave death the following year at Syracuse.[2] On the basis of these notes, a reader of the *Laches* would assume that, by comparing Laches to the brave general Lamachus, Nicias is acknowledging Laches' own bravery.

However, Laches certainly does not interpret Nicias' words in this way. He replies:

Οὐδὲν ἐρῶ πρὸς ταῦτα, ἔχων εἰπεῖν, ἵνα μή με φῇς ὡς ἀληθῶς Αἰξωνέα εἶναι. (*La.* 197c9–10)

I will not say what I could in answer to that, lest you claim that I am truly an Aexonian.

Laches is saying that he has a retort worthy of the Aexonians who were renowned for their abusive wit. Whether he actually has such a retort to make or is bluffing lies

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[1] All translations of the *Laches* are my own. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations, as well as all Greek texts, are from the Loeb editions.

[2] See e.g. R.E. Allen (tr.), *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume 3. Ion, Hippias Minor, Laches, Protagoras* (New Haven and London, 1996), 61–85, at 81 n. 14; C. Emlyn-Jones (tr.), *Plato: Laches* (London, 1998), 112 n. c6; T.J. Saunders (ed.), *Plato: Early Socratic Dialogues* (London, 1987), 110 n. 1 [2005 ed., tr. I. Lane, pp. 69–83]; R.K. Sprague (tr.), in J.M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 664–86, at 682 n. 6; R.K. Sprague (tr.), *Plato: Laches and Charmides* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1992), 13–49, at 43 n. 64; R. Waterfield (tr.), *Plato: Meno and Other Dialogues* (New York, 2005), 35–66 and 188.

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outside of the dialogue. It is sufficient to see that Laches does not consider the comparison to Lamachus to be complimentary. Indeed, his reaction suggests that he sees it as highly insulting. Unless Laches has misunderstood Nicias here, which is hardly likely, his response is puzzling. To understand why Laches considers himself to have been insulted, it is necessary to know more about Lamachus than what is offered by the commentators. I suggest that Laches' retort can only be understood by considering the accounts of Lamachus offered by Plutarch, Thucydides and Aristophanes.

Relatively little is known about Lamachus prior to the Sicilian Expedition of 415 B.C. Plutarch writes that in around 436–5 B.C. Lamachus served in the successful campaign of Pericles the First against Timesilaus, the tyrant of Sinope (*Per.* 2.1). We have no information for Lamachus during the next eleven or twelve years, until 424 B.C. when Thucydides tells us that Lamachus lost ten ships in a flash flood while anchored at the river Calex (Thuc. 4.75). We know that in 421 B.C. Lamachus – along with Nicias and Laches – signed the Peace of Nicias and the Fifty-Year Alliance (Thuc. 5.19, 24). After this there is another lacuna in our information until 415 B.C. when Lamachus, again along with Nicias, and this time also with Alcibiades, was elected to command the Sicilian expedition (Thuc. 6.8), in which he was to die the following year (Thuc. 6.101; Plut. *Nic.* 18.1–3.). Nicias, Alcibiades and Lamachus were famously divided in their leadership, both concerning the advisability of the expedition in the first place, and regarding the specific strategies to undertake.[3] According to the accounts that have come down to us, Lamachus' most significant contribution to the expedition was his promotion of a strategy of immediate hostile action. Having arrived at Rhegium, the three generals held a council to decide what strategy to adopt. In opposition to Nicias' cautious and preserving plan, Thucydides tells us that:

> Λάμαχος δὲ ἄντικρυς ἔφη χρῆναι πλεῖν ἐπὶ Συρακούσας καὶ πρὸς τῇ πόλει ὡς τάχιστα τὴν μάχην ποιεῖσθαι, ἕως ἔτι ἀπαράσκευοί τέ εἰσι καὶ μάλιστα ἐκπεπληγμένοι. τὸ γὰρ πρῶτον πᾶν στράτευμα δεινότατον εἶναι· ἢν δὲ χρονίσῃ πρὶν ἐς ὄψιν ἐλθεῖν, τῇ γνώμῃ ἀναθαρσοῦντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ τῇ ὄψει καταφρονεῖν μᾶλλον. αἰφνίδιοι δὲ ἦν προσπέσωσιν, ἕως ἔτι περιδεεῖς προσδέχονται, μάλιστ᾽ ἂν σφεῖς περιγενέσθαι καὶ κατὰ πάντα ἂν αὐτοὺς ἐκφοβῆσαι, τῇ τε ὄψει (πλεῖστοι γὰρ ἂν νῦν φανῆναι) καὶ τῇ προσδοκίᾳ ὧν πείσονται, μάλιστα δ᾽ ἂν τῷ αὐτίκα κινδύνῳ τῆς μάχης. (Thuc. 6.49.1–2)
>
> Lamachus maintained that they ought to sail direct for Syracuse and as soon as possible make the fight near the city, while the Syracusans were still unprepared, and their consternation was at its height. For every army, he argued, is always most formidable at first, but if it delay before coming into sight, men recover their spirit and even at the sight of it are more inclined to despise than to fear it. But if it attack suddenly, while the enemy are still in terror of its coming, it will have the best chance for victory and in every way will strike fear into them, both by the sight of it – for at this moment it would appear most numerous – and by the expectation of the fate in store for them, but most of all by the immediate peril of the battle.[4]

To avoid an impasse, however, Lamachus eventually sided with Alcibiades, who argued that before they attack Syracuse and Selinus, they should seek allies and induce revolts in those cities subject to Syracuse, so that they might both ascertain who was friend and who was foe, and weaken Syracuse before battle (Thuc. 6.48).

[3] See Thuc. 6.8–15 and 20–3 for Nicias' objections to the expedition and reluctance to accept leadership of it; see 6.15–18 for Alcibiades' opposing views. For Nicias' recommended strategy see 6.47; for that of Alcibiades see 6.48; and for that of Lamachus see 6.49.

[4] C.F. Smith (tr.), *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War*, *Vol. 3. Books 5–6* (London, 1921).

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Lamachus died in the summer of the following year, 414 B.C., when three hundred Athenians were attacked by what was almost the entire Syracusan cavalry. Our main sources for the death of Lamachus – Thucydides and Plutarch – offer somewhat different accounts of it. Both contend that Lamachus rushed to the aid of his soldiers when he discovered that they had been attacked, and that he subsequently became cut off from his army (Thuc. 6.101; Plut. *Nic.* 18.1–2.) However, their accounts differ regarding how Lamachus actually died. Thucydides claims that Lamachus was killed while fighting alongside five or six of his companions, while Plutarch claims that he was killed in Homeric-style single combat. Plutarch writes that in the battle:

> ἀπομονωθεὶς ὁ Λάμαχος ὑπέστη τῶν Συρακουσίων τοὺς ἱππεῖς ἐπιφερομένους. ἦν δὲ πρῶτος αὐτῶν Καλλικράτης, ἀνὴρ πολεμικὸς καὶ θυμοειδής. πρὸς τοῦτον ἐκ προκλήσεως καταστὰς ὁ Λάμαχος ἐμονομάχησε, καὶ λαβὼν πληγὴν πρότερος, εἶτα δοὺς καὶ πεσὼν ὁμοῦ συναπέθανε τῷ Καλλικράτει. (Plut. *Nic.* 18.2–3)
>
> Lamachus was isolated, and then had to face some Syracusan horsemen who made an onset upon him. Foremost of these was Callicrates, a man skilled in war and of a high courage. Lamachus accepted his challenge to single combat, fought him, got a mortal blow from him, but gave him back the like, and fell and died along with him.[5]

While Lamachus was undoubtedly an experienced general undaunted in the face of war, Plutarch's account of the general's death brings to the fore the tensions that exist in the sources between attributing bravery or reckless bellicosity to him. Plutarch describes Lamachus as ἀνδρώδης, that is, manly, brave or sturdy (*Nic.* 15.1; *Alc.* 21.9), and δίκαιος, just or honourable (*Nic.* 15.1). Plutarch also describes Lamachus as πολεμικός, a good soldier (*Alc.* 21.9), who 'put forth his might without stint in battle' (τῇ χειρὶ χρώμενος ἀφειδῶς κατὰ τὰς μάχας, *Nic.* 15.1).[6] However, in *Alcibiades* Plutarch contends that, despite Lamachus' advanced years, in battle he was no less διάπυρος ('fiery', *Alc.* 18.2) and no less φιλοκίνδυνος[7] ('danger-loving', *Alc.* 18.2) than Alcibiades. While Alcibiades is said to have τόλμαν ('daring'), Lamachus is ascribed τραχύτητα, that is, roughness, ruggedness, harshness or even savagery (*Nic.* 12.5).[8]

Lamachus' strategy could be interpreted as fearlessness in the face of war, just as his death could be interpreted as the ultimate heroic act: death for one's country. However, both could also be interpreted as reckless, foolish, lacking in caution[9] and bellicose. Had Lamachus been more cautious in rushing to the aid of his soldiers at Syracuse, and had

[5] B. Perrin (tr.), *Plutarch: Lives, Vol. 3. Pericles and Fabius Maximus. Nicias and Crassus* (Cambridge, MA, 1943, 1955).

[6] However, despite his skill and experience in battle, Plutarch notes that Lamachus' authority was undermined in the eyes of his soldiers by his poverty (*Nic.* 15.1.5–2.1 and *Alc.* 21.6.8–9).

[7] φιλοκίνδυνος also has the negative connotation of fool-hardiness (LSJ).

[8] See LSJ, s.v. An example of Lamachus' harshness or savagery could perhaps be seen in *Against Agoratus*, where Lysias notes (67.2–4) that one of Agoratus' brothers '… was caught in Sicily making traitorous signals, and by Lamachus' order he was executed on the plank'; see W.R. Lamb (tr.), *Lysias* (London, 1930), 278–333. In C. Daremberg and M. Edmond Saglio (edd.), *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* (Paris, 1877–1919), 1523–30, at 1526, in the entry on 'strategos', G. Colin contends that such punishment was unusual. The less usual such executions were, the more savage Lamachus could be seen to be for ordering them. See D. Hamel, *Athenian Generals* (Boston, MA, 1998), 60–3 for a discussion of whether or not such executions were indeed unusual.

[9] Lamachus' loss of the ten ships in 424 B.C. could similarly be interpreted as the result of recklessness, foolishness or lack of caution. However, this is speculative, as the sources offer us no information regarding how this loss reflected on Lamachus, and whether he was blamed for it in any way.

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he been less bellicose and refused Callicrates' challenge, Nicias would not have been left in sole command[10] of the Athenian forces, and the course of the expedition might have been greatly altered.

How, then, are we to resolve the tension in the historians' accounts of Lamachus in our attempt to understand the *Laches* reference to him? Laches' angry response discounts the possibility that Nicias is comparing Laches to a brave Lamachus; so then is Nicias comparing Laches to a bellicose Lamachus? Or even, perhaps, to a Lamachus who is at times brave and at other times bellicose? To answer this question, we must turn our attention from history to comedy, and consider the significance of the dramatic date of the *Laches*. While there is little consensus regarding the exact year in which Plato sets the *Laches*, it is generally agreed that it must lie between 424 B.C., when the battle at Delium took place, and 418 B.C., when Laches fell at the battle of Mantinea.[11]

Within the dramatic context of the dialogue, then, Lamachus was not to distinguish himself and die in battle for approximately another ten years. The question then becomes: how was Lamachus perceived around the dramatic date of the *Laches*? I suggest that this perception would have been largely informed by Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, victoriously performed at the Lenaea festival of 425 B.C., which definitely took place before the dramatic date of the *Laches*, and perhaps even just the year before. In this play, Aristophanes brutally lampoons Lamachus, representing him as the incarnation of bellicosity. This bellicosity is introduced when Lamachus is first mentioned in the play. Dicaeopolis declares that he has made peace for himself, 'released from bothers and battles and Lamachuses' (πραγμάτων τε καὶ μαχῶν καὶ Λαμάχων ἀπαλλαγείς, Ar. *Ach.* 269–70).[12] Lamachus affirms Dicaeopolis' identification of him with 'bothers and battles' later in the play when he says: 'I for one will ever make war on all the Peloponnesians, and everywhere harass them, with ships and foot soldiers, with all my might' (ἀλλ' οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν πᾶσι Πελοποννησίοις | ἀεὶ πολεμήσω καὶ ταράξω πανταχῇ, | καὶ ναυσὶ καὶ πεζοῖσι, κατὰ τὸ καρτερόν, 620–2).[13] Aristophanes even coins a word for Lamachus' bellicosity, πολεμολαμαχαϊκόν (1080), which A.H. Sommerstein nicely translates as 'belli-Lamachose'.[14]

Is Nicias, then, attributing Lamachus' bellicosity to Laches? Not exactly. Nicias compares Laches to Lamachus immediately after criticizing the bravery tradition of courage. This was the dominant tradition of courage in ancient Greece, with the great

[10] Alcibiades by this time was of course no longer in command of the Athenian forces, after disappearing on his way back to Athens to stand trial for the profanation of the Mysteries (see Thuc. 6.53, 61).

[11] The exact dramatic date of the dialogue is irrelevant for my purposes in this paper. All that is required is that it lies after the production of Aristophanes' *Acharnians* in 425 B.C., which is not disputed.

[12] J. Henderson (tr.), *Aristophanes. Vol. 1: Acharnians. Knights* (London, 1998). This line is repeated at 1071. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of *Acharnians* are Henderson's.

[13] See also 964–5, where the epithet traditionally denoting Ares, ὁ δεινός, ὁ ταλαύρινος (e.g. at Hom. *Il.* 5.289; 20.78; 22.267), is used to describe Lamachus. Aristophanes also uses it as an epithet of war itself at *Peace* 241. For a discussion of this see D.S. Olson, *Aristophanes: Acharnians* (New York, 2002), 309 (on lines 964–5). See also the most recent discussion of Lamachus in *Acharnians*, in K. Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat* (Cambridge, 2009), 139–44. Sidwell suggests that the identification of Lamachus with 'War' may have pre-dated Aristophanes' portrayal of him in *Acharnians*. He speculates that Cratinus identified Lamachus with 'War' in one of his plays, possibly the comedy *Horae* (140), and that Aristophanes appropriated this identification. I am grateful to the referee for drawing this to my attention.

[14] A.H. Sommerstein (tr.), *Aristophanes:Acharnians* (Warminster, 1980), 141.

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Achilles as its exemplar. Courage according to the bravery tradition was associated with great physical strength and military prowess, and was thought to derive from the extreme passions of the *thumos* that Homeric man shared with wild beasts. Bravery was associated with boldness and daring, and was manifested primarily in epic deeds on the battlefield. In this way, bravery could appear to be on the way to bellicosity, especially to someone like Nicias who does not subscribe to the bravery tradition (as can be seen from the following quotation). In the *Laches*, Nicias rejects the view that bravery constitutes the whole of courage. He argues that courage is more than bravery, that it requires a cognitive element as well. He says:

Οὐ γάρ τι, ὦ Λάχης, ἔγωγε ἀνδρεῖα καλῶ οὔτε θηρία οὔτε ἄλλο οὐδὲν τὸ τὰ δεινὰ ὑπὸ ἀνοίας μὴ φοβούμενον, ἀλλ᾽ ἄφοβον καὶ μωρόν· ἢ καὶ τὰ παιδία πάντα οἴει με ἀνδρεῖα καλεῖν, ἃ δι᾽ ἄνοιαν οὐδὲν δέδοικεν; ἀλλ᾽ οἶμαι τὸ ἄφοβον καὶ τὸ ἀνδρεῖον οὐ ταὐτόν ἐστιν. ἐγὼ δὲ ἀνδρείας μὲν καὶ προμηθίας πάνυ τισὶν ὀλίγοις οἶμαι μετεῖναι, θρασύτητος δὲ καὶ τόλμης καὶ τοῦ ἀφόβου μετὰ ἀπρομηθίας πάνυ πολλοῖς καὶ ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν καὶ παίδων καὶ θηρίων. ταῦτ᾽ οὖν ἃ σὺ καλεῖς ἀνδρεῖα καὶ οἱ πολλοί, ἐγὼ θρασέα καλῶ, ἀνδρεῖα δὲ τὰ φρόνιμα περὶ ὧν λέγω. (*La.* 197a6–c1)

In no way, Laches, do I call wild beasts courageous, nor anything else that for want of understanding does not fear the fearful, but rather fearless and foolish. Or do you suppose that I call all children courageous, who fear nothing because they lack understanding? Rather, I think that the fearless and the courageous are not the same thing. I think that, of courage and forethought, very few have a share; but of rashness and daring and fearlessness with a lack of forethought, many have a share, men, women, children and wild beasts. That which you and most people call courageous, I call rash; but that which is prudent concerning the things of which I am speaking, I call courageous.

Laches objects to Nicias' introduction of a cognitive element into his definition of courage. He accuses Nicias of embellishing himself with his words, and trying to deprive those whom everyone agrees to be courageous of that virtue (*La.* 197c2–5). It is in response to this accusation that Nicias compares Laches to Lamachus.

That is to say, to the claim that no cognitive element is required in a definition of courage, Nicias responds ironically, offering an example of someone who was perceived at the time to most severely lack such a cognitive element: Lamachus. Now that we have seen how Aristophanes represented Lamachus in the *Acharnians*, and the context in which Nicias refers to him in the *Laches*, we can understand why Laches sees his pairing with Lamachus as such an insult. The pairing was preceded by Nicias' objection to a conception of courage that the Aristophanic Lamachus embodied. Aristophanes' Lamachus is a gross caricature of the hero: he wears the grand armour of the hero – replete with a helmet extravagantly adorned with crests and feathers and a shield bearing a terrifying Gorgon head[15] – and he responds to insults with the hero's outrage.[16] Indeed, the word 'hero' appears twice in the play, and both times it is used by Dicaeopolis mockingly of Lamachus (ὦ Λάμαχ᾽ ἥρως, 575, 579).

Aristophanes' *coup de grâce* comes at the end of the play when Lamachus, having been called away urgently to war, is forced to return immediately after wounding himself. In his recklessness, Lamachus dislocates his ankle by tripping over a stake when crossing an irrigation canal and fractures his head by falling upon a stone. But despite

[15] For Lamachus' helmet as adorned with crests and feathers see lines 575, 965, 1109 and 584, 988, 1103, 1105, 1182 respectively; for his Gorgon shield see lines 574, 582–5, 1124, 1181. For the historical Lamachus' possession of such a shield, see Olson (n. 13), 223 (on lines 572–4).

[16] For example see *Ach.* 577 and 593.

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these injuries, Lamachus the hero rises from his ditch: 'he stood up and faced his fleeing men, as he pressed and routed the brigands with his spear' (ἀνίσταταί τε καὶ ξυναντᾷ δραπέταις λῃστὰς ἐλαύνων καὶ κατασπέρχων δορί, 1187–8). And, just like the hero who fears injury to his reputation over physical injury, it is not his wounds, but the prospect of being mocked (ἐγχάνοι, 1197) that most distresses Lamachus (1190–7). By referring to a character whose courage severely lacks a cognitive element, from a play that shows what can happen to such characters when their bravery is left unchecked, Nicias is restating his rejection of the bravery tradition.[17]

Plato's reference to Lamachus fulfils both the tragic and the comic dramatic themes of the *Laches*.[18] The introduction of Aristophanes' foolish, ridiculous, unself-aware and war-mongering general Lamachus into a squabble[19] between two distinguished generals, which itself is at times ridiculous and is characterized by lack of self-awareness (e.g. *La.* 200a4–c2), is a stroke of comic genius. The comedy of the *Laches*, however, is tempered by a sobering note of tragedy. All three generals – Nicias, Laches and Lamachus – were to die within five years of each other, in just over approximately ten years from the dramatic date of the dialogue. And all three were to die in battles in which Athens incurred devastating losses. First, Laches died in the Battle at Mantinea in 418 B.C., in which over a thousand Argives and two hundred Athenians fell (Thuc. 5.74). Lamachus was killed four years later outside Syracuse when three hundred Athenians were attacked by the Syracusan cavalry (Thuc. 6.101). And Nicias' death followed swiftly after that of Lamachus, when he was executed by the Syracusans after surrendering to them in 413 B.C. (Thuc. 7.86). After considering the accounts of Lamachus offered by Plutarch, Thucydides and Aristophanes, it is clear that a reader of the *Laches* would be sorely misled if she were to interpret Nicias' comparison of Laches to Lamachus as complimentary, as existing scholarship on the reference would lead her to believe.

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[17] Aristophanes' Lamachus, however, must of course be distinguished from the historical Lamachus. While the historical Lamachus could be seen as bellicose, Aristophanes' Lamachus is undoubtedly an extreme caricature. After Lamachus' death Aristophanes presented Lamachus in a positive light in *Women at the Thesmophoria* (841) and *Frogs* (1039). My concern in this paper is, however, solely with the perception of Lamachus at the time of the dramatic date of the *Laches*, which comes before the production of both *Women at the Thesmophoria* and *Frogs*.

For a discussion of the complexities of the Aristophanic view of Lamachus see Sidwell (n. 13), 143–4, 271. For an exploration of Aristophanes' choice of Lamachus rather than another ancient Greek general as the personification of bellicosity in *Acharnians*, see A. Ercolani, 'Sprechende Namen und politische Funktion der Verspottung am Beispiel der Acharner', in id. (ed.), *Spoudaiogeloion: Form und Funktion der Verspottung in der aristophanischen Komödie* (Stuttgart, 2002), 225–54, at 233.

[18] For a discussion of Plato's use of comedy, see R. Brock, 'Plato and comedy', in E.M. Craik (ed.), *Owls to Athens* (New York, 1990), 39–49 (once more, I am grateful to the referee for drawing this to my attention).

[19] See *La.* 195a7; 195a11–b1; 195b2–6; 196a8–b9; 196c5–6; 197c2–5; 197c6–8; 197c9–10; 197d7–9; 197e5; 197e9; 199e16–200a3; 200a4–c2.

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