

Kairos

A story by William Page

So, you have heard that I was born in Kairos. I suppose you want to recount what others have told you about Kairos, and then you want me to say if these stories are true. On a boat traveling from the mainland to the Ionian coast, an oarsman asked me if it were true that Kairos had been ruled by a cult of priests who worshipped serpents. A woman I loved on the island of Aegina believed that our ruler, Aristeas, was one of the masks of Dionysus. In Athens a man who claimed to have been an archon during Solon's rule invited me to his house for supper in order to hear my opinions of tyranny and public execution. And in Sicily I bought olives from a man who was convinced that Kairos could not have existed because, as he put it, it is impossible for the principles by which a state is ruled to achieve coherence.

When Kairos was at its height, the Corinthians, our nearest neighbor, took us to be a tyranny. Actually we were a theocracy, but it was theocracy based on the divine interpretations of one man. My father, who took part in the founding of the Kairos, said the city would never survive without Aristeas. It was my father's opinion that Kairos began and ended with Aristeas. During my childhood I accepted his rule as representative of the way other men govern, but my travels have shown me otherwise.

In my time the houses of Kairos were made of clay and the temple and the prytaneum were built of stone and marble, but my father and his friends remembered when they, in some cases with wives and slaves, lived in caves. The legend is that the city was founded by thirty men who had gathered around Aristeas. The original founders had sworn to a pact of secrecy about their origins, but my father, in an unguarded, drunken moment, admitted that Aristeas and his supporters were part of a failed uprising in the city of Thebes and that they were permitted to go into exile.

My earliest memories of Aristeas are from a period of his greatest influence. My father made pottery—mostly water jugs—and was a sculptor. His name would mean nothing to you. In Kairos he was one of the many apprentices to a man named Menodorus. My father claimed that Menodorus was the greatest sculptor in the Greek world, and now that I have time to travel and see the friezes and kouroi in other temples, I believe that this judgment is true. Menodorus could have worked in any city, but he chose to live and work in Kairos. Aristeas rewarded him by commissioning a frieze of the council of the gods and an enormous kouroi of Apollo for our temple. My father worked on the details of the frieze, and as soon as I was old enough to hold a hammer, I was also put to work. At lamp lighting all the workers dined together and drank wine. It was at these suppers that I learned about Aristeas and his ideas.

In a sense Kairos was a closed city. Visitors and merchants were treated well, but generally we did not share our ideas with outsiders. This was considered a courtesy more than a rule. According to Aristeas the gods did not bestow their favors equally. He believed that the gods only revealed themselves to a select few; in particular, he thought the people of Kairos were favored. Naturally his doctrine was insulting to the men he supposed to be ignored by the gods. Still if there were auspicious omens about an outsider, he might be initiated into our circle.

Aristeas usually made the decision. I remember a number of cases where the elected man chose to become a citizen.

According to my father the importance of a sign or omen was not its interpretation; it was significant because it was a communication from the gods. He liked to quote Homer, "All men have need of the gods, but the gods don't need man." Like most Greeks he was content to know that the gods favored him in a general way. He believed that the gods communicate to men through the oracles and through omens, but he also thought that they destroy men who presume to interpret their designs. Aristeas was different. He was convinced that it was his fate to translate the language of the gods. His ideas about the gods and their relationship with man formed a central position in his vision of reality, but you would be wrong to think that his philosophy offered nothing more than prophecy. He gave his citizens not only a way to live, but also a way to prepare for their inevitable death.

The men of Kairos, including my father, believed that they could prepare their shades to enter the underworld by disciplining desire and strengthening the intellect. Aristeas taught them certain secret practices. All of the freemen of Kairos were initiated in their youth. I passed through this initiation myself. In the spring of my fourteenth year I was initiated with ten other young men. We were given a mixture of herbs to eat to prepare us for the ceremony. The herbs made the body numb, but at the same time enhanced the intellect. During the ritual we were laid side by side on a marble altar and instructed to imagine that we were dead. Our souls were then coaxed out from our bodies. We were assured that we would be able to return to our bodies, but at the same time reminded that the body was a temporary home, that it had to die, and that the soul could survive intact. Then we were made to witness the sacrifice of an ox. The blood of the bull was smeared on our legs and chests while hymns to Hades and Apollo were recited.

My father told me that this rite ensured that all the freemen of Kairos entered the adult world having the experience of a reality beyond the reaches of the body. He was in favor of this ritual, but that was not true of other citizens. Some were of the opinion that it was this institution of initiation perverted the youth of the city and made them morbid and concerned with death instead of with the business of life. They believed that our blood bathing and deliberate contemplation of death would bring about our ruin. And I guess you could say that they were right, but reality is always more complex than men's opinions.

In any event I doubt it was this ritual that affected our downfall. If one factor resulted in our destruction, I would have to say that it was our preoccupation with determining the will of the gods. Like many Greeks before us, we believed that the gods spoke through the rites of the oracle, through natural phenomena, and through coincidence, but the system of interpretation that Aristeas gave us was individual and elaborate. For example, a sudden, short rainstorm meant suffering or pain, but if it happened during the day and was followed by a brilliant light, it meant that the suffering would be overcome and that the afflicted persons would be strengthened rather than weakened, and if it happened at night, it meant that the pain would cause confusion. The appearance of a serpent was interpreted as a future danger. But again there were many subtleties: if the serpent raised its head and hissed, the danger would be announced; if it slithered away in fear, misfortune would fall without warning. Birds, particularly when they flew together in a flock, were auspicious. If the flock was less than seven, an even number was supposed to give the observer clear or oracular thoughts, and an odd number heralded an emotional or mystical state. If the flock contained more than seven birds, it meant a general good fortune for the city, but if the birds were crows, or ravens, or if one of them cawed, it changed the interpretation. The

direction the birds flew and whether they passed over or set down in the city also skewed the meaning.

Aristeas was never arbitrary in his interpretations; there was always a logical, though sometimes twisted, connection between the sign and his explanation. The most insignificant event could be interpreted in the grandest way, especially in relation to coincidences. Once at a meeting, which was called to discuss the fate of a thief who had stolen from the treasury and fled, a coin was unintentionally dropped and Aristeas said that this meant that the man would die without an obol and that his shade would roam forever in the freezing winds on the near bank of the Styx. This was considered sufficient punishment. The man was never pursued. Another time a slave woman, who had been a lover of Aristeas, was caught stealing and was pardoned because a mouse was seen to run down the steps of the prytaneum before the proceedings. The evidence was against the woman; she should have been punished, but instead her accuser had his left thumb cut off.

We were forbidden, even the children, to use the word ‘accident’ in relation to any citizen of Kairos. An accident may happen to an outsider, but not to us. When I was still a boy, a wanderer, who was passing through our city, stopped to speak to me, and Aristeas said to my father that this meant I would lead a restless life. That, at least, has proved true. Another time, during my youth, I was helping serve supper at the prytaneum and spilled a few drops of water on Aristeas, and he told me, without anger, that I would die at sea.

At first Aristeas acted only as an oracle. He read signs, presided over disputes, and occasionally helped a citizen make a difficult decision. But in the summer that I became taller than my father, he announced in the prytaneum, in front of all the freemen of the city, that every action he witnessed was a message from the gods. At first nobody thought much about it. It seemed to be a logical extension of his way of thinking and our way of life, but it had unexpected consequences. I will try to explain. Let us imagine that you are my neighbor and that you, for your own reasons, bring me a gift of oil. Now instead of thanking you for your kindness, I tell you that my own store of oil is nearly finished and that it is obvious that the gods wanted me to save my gold and so sent you to replenish my supply. I don’t return your kindness; instead, I suggest that we both make an offering to the gods for their wisdom and generosity. Now if you are not a contemplative man, you might be offended or think me strange, but if you are given to self-examination and logical speculation, as the men of Kairos were, you might notice that I have, in a small way, undermined your perception of yourself. You didn’t decide to bring me the oil; the gods decided and used you as their messenger. If you take this speculation further, you might see that this one event was preceded by a thousand thoughts that motivated actions that had to happen in order for you to be in a position to give me the oil. Were these thoughts yours? Or did the gods plant them? And why not go further? Why not say that your whole life is an illusion and that the gods are pasting images of the world before your eyes, as they did with Hercules when he perceived his children as his enemies? From this kind of thinking there is only a short step to madness or, according to my father, the possibility of divine wisdom.

Of course, one experience will not alter a man, but a man steeped in such thoughts begins to be affected. And so it was for many of the men of Kairos. It was natural that they fought back. Many became dissatisfied with Aristeas. They said that he had changed, that he wasn’t interested in Kairos, and that he only wanted to test his theories about the gods. Others began to find inconsistencies in his thought. In particular his interpretations of signs were disputed. For a long time his decipherments were written out on long papyrus sheets. It was thought that these explanations would form a coherent whole and that this totality would allow others in the future

to interpret the messages of the gods. But when a few of the scribes began to study these sheets, they found that Aristeas had said, for example, that a cool easterly wind in the summer at supper was the breath of Apollo and then later interpreted the same wind at the same time of day as indifference to some of our material concerns in the east. At first, when these inconsistencies were pointed out, Aristeas was careful to correct them: there had been a full moon one night and a quarter moon on the other, or perhaps a wolf had howled on one of the nights. But later he became impatient with these details and made a public proclamation which stated: 1) that his interpretations of signs were divine and therefore incontestable; 2) that all his thoughts were oracular; and 3) that if mistakes existed in his interpretations, it was because the gods had allowed them and that these mistakes should be seen as further signs which would require further explanations.

If you study this proclamation, you will see that it is an intellectual labyrinth. The third part seems to contradict the first two, and the first states that the process by which the third can be understood is irrelevant. I was told that one man lost his mind trying to decipher it. I have also heard it argued that the third statement is symbolic and that it represents the infinite-dimensional nature of the universe. Of course, it was also spoken in some corners of the city that this doctrine proved that Aristeas was a tyrant.

You have to understand that the reading of signs was not abstract for us; it affected our day to day lives, our policies, and the processes by which we were governed. And there were cases in which the predictions of Aristeas were plainly wrong. Once when Thebes threatened us, Aristeas by various signs calculated the time and the place of their attack. All the men in the city were armed and set out to watch that night, but the Thebans never came. Another time, because of certain obscure coincidences involving the symbol Ghimel, he invested half the city's treasury in a plot by a group of young nobles who planned a revolt in Corinth. The nobles were supposed to pay the loan in double after their victory, but they were defeated, executed as traitors, so, of course, the gold was never repaid.

After this loss, a man named Lacydes brought a suit against Aristeas. He argued that Aristeas had been negligent and that he failed to use a reasonable amount of care in his duties. He demonstrated that the Corinthians in question were vain young men who didn't stand a chance and that anyone with a small amount of military common sense would have sent them away without an obol. I attended the trial, and though I was too young to vote, I saw how Aristeas responded to the accusations. He stood, looked around at the different faces, and said quietly, "It has occurred to me while sitting here that we have been offered us the greatest gift. Our only obligation is to carry out the will of immortal gods. That is all I have ever tried to do. Lacydes thinks mistakes are possible, but I believe that these errors are also the will of the gods."

Aristeas was acquitted, but the vote was close. In our system a man who was falsely charged was allowed to propose a penalty for his accuser. Everyone thought Aristeas would choose exile for Lacydes, but he said, "Let those who wanted a judgment against me do what they like. They have lost their link with the gods and that is their punishment."

A short time later Lacydes and his friends tried to poison Aristeas. The hemlock intended for Aristeas fell to one of his favorites, and the young man died. The conspirators were caught. They admitted their crime in the hope that the city would revolt around them, but the men of Kairos were not barbarians. The family of the murdered boy called for a public execution, and they were given one. The three men who admitted to the intrigue were bound and cut down. Lacydes, who initiated the conspiracy, had his heart pierced; the second, who conceived the plot,

had his head severed from his body; and the third, who carried out the crime, had his arms and legs cut off. Aristeas didn't attend the executions.

Before the attempted assassination Aristeas had been open and very much a part of the community, but now he became cautious, secretive, and aloof. Rumors that he had gone mad began to circulate. A few of his favorites gathered around him, and he saw no one else. Projects that had been started stopped because of a lack of gold or interest. The city was waiting for direction.

Maybe two moon cycles passed after the execution of the three conspirators before it was announced that Aristeas would make a public statement. When he appeared at the prytaneum, it was clear that he was not well. His face was pale and he had lost weight. The city was maybe four hundred free men at that time. The men and boys, who had no right to be inside, stood in the square outside. I was among them. I didn't hear Aristeas speak, but his words were simple enough and were repeated on everyone's lips. He announced that he was a god. He said that he didn't know if he had always been a god and had been ignorant of it or if a man was capable of becoming a god in his lifetime, but he wanted us all to be aware that this also might be possible for us.

He didn't explain what he meant by becoming a god, or how he was different. Surprisingly no one asked. He retired after his statement and left us to figure it out. No one returned to work. Instead we met in groups outside the temple and spoke. We repeated what Aristeas had said and tried to make sense of it. Some believed it impossible for a god to be ignorant of his divinity. They believed that Aristeas was deluded. Others thought it possible for a man to join the ranks of the gods. They spoke of Odysseus and of the ancient heroes. But there were others who were indignant. Many citizens felt cheated. They had lost gold or a slave or been passed over for a post because of the way Aristeas had interpreted their fate. It isn't that they didn't think he was a god; on the contrary, they seemed to believe it. It was as if they were saying: here is a god, one of that race who has frustrated us and kept us down, let's show them that we are also capable of revenge. Anger at another man is limited, but anger at the gods is boundless. In the case of a man you may blame him for one or two crimes he has precipitated against you, but every frustrated desire, sorrow, and piece of bad fortune can be blamed on the gods. One man, Isyllus, who was the brother of Lacydes, stirred up the crowd. He called for us to strike, to destroy *their* city. He said that we had been duped into believing that we were powerless and that we had to prove to them that we could fight back. The anger he roused spread through the city. At nightfall, as if it were preordained, the violence erupted. Enormous fires were built and men ran together in packs like wolves. They wrecked the temple and the prytaneum. Statues were overturned and smashed. The wooden stalls in the agora were burnt. Even the private houses were destroyed. Kairos, the very idea of it, was being obliterated. By dawn many of us had fled. It was never proved, at least to my satisfaction, that Aristeas was killed, but it is generally given out that he was murdered that night. I like to believe that he escaped.

Later I learned that the Corinthians, when they heard the reports of our uprising, formed an army, razed what was left of the city, made slaves of those who remained, and pillaged what gold and metals they could find. I never returned to find out.

I see disbelief in your eyes. Maybe you think my tale is too extraordinary, but perhaps there is a kind of truth in it that you want to hide from yourself. We are both Greeks. We talk and think and we are rational, but the gods have revealed themselves to us, and their truth is not our truth. The city of Kairos is destroyed, but maybe the gods wanted it that way and used our hands

because they have none. Look around. Those of us who fled are everywhere. The gods scattered us like seeds, and our influence is cropping up in Athens, and Thebes, and as far away as Sicily. Kairos is an idea. It is in my way of looking at this river and the plain behind it and these horses that wait for us, and tonight it will be in your thoughts as you turn over my story in your mind and realize that you, because you are a Greek, fear the irrationality of the gods.