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AJAX'S OATH

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Wolfgang Rösler's recent article "Der Frevel des Aias in der Iliupersis" (ZPE 69 (1987), 1-8) has greatly enhanced our understanding of the way in which Ajax's offence and its immediate aftermath were narrated in the Cyclic Iliupersis, fundamental for all later treatments of the subject in both art and literature.<sup>1</sup> But his revival of Carl Robert's decidedly idiosyncratic view that the *aition* of the Locrian Maiden Tribute was to be found there<sup>2</sup> should not be allowed to pass unchallenged.<sup>3</sup>

Pausanias (10,26,3), in describing Polygnotus' great painting of Troy after its capture, refers to Ajax's oath as if its gist were too familiar to need any explanation: Αἴας δὲ (ὁ) Ὀϊλέως ἔχων ἀσπίδα βωμῷ προσέστηκεν, ὀμνύμενος ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἐκ Κακκάνδραν τολμήματος· ἡ δὲ κάθηται τε ἡ Κακκάνδρα χαμαὶ καὶ τὸ ἄγαλμα ἔχει τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς, εἶγε δὴ ἀνέτρεψεν ἐκ βάθρων τὸ ξόανον, ὅτε ἀπὸ τῆς ἱκεσίας αὐτὴν ὁ Αἴας ἀφείλκε. γεγραμμένοι δὲ καὶ οἱ παῖδες εἰσὶν οἱ Ἀτρέως, ἐπικείμενοι καὶ οὗτοι κράνη· ... ἐπὶ τούτοις (τοῖς) τὸν Αἴαντα ἐξορκοῦσιν κτλ. Less well informed than Pausanias' original readers and the visitors to Delphi envisaged by Polygnotus, we are reduced to speculation. Most scholars have supposed Ajax's oath to have been exculpatory, though concern for decorum seems to have inhibited discussion of the precise charge brought against him. Robert, however, argued that the oath was promissory, that Ajax undertook to arrange for the regular dispatch of Locrian girls to serve as menials in Athena's temple at Troy, in accordance with the terrible custom described by Lycophron (Alex. 1141-73).<sup>4</sup>

This suggestion has usually been dismissed as more ingenious than plausible,<sup>5</sup> but it has now found a powerful advocate in Rösler (op.cit. p.5): "Seine Unschuld wahrheitswidrig zu betuern verbietet sich für Aias angesichts der manifesten Folgen der Tat: ἡ δὲ κάθηται τε ἡ Κακκάνδρα χαμαὶ καὶ τὸ ἄγαλμα ἔχει τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς. Nicht minder unplausibel ist ein differenzierender Eid - zwar den Frevel begangen, nicht aber darüber hinaus Kassandra

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<sup>1</sup> It may be appropriate to emphasise here the inadequacies of the account of the "Sources littéraires" for this episode given in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* I i (1981) s.v. Aias ii; apart from bypassing Lycophron it fails to mention Alcaeus' poem (fr. 298 Voigt) and betrays ignorance of the new fragments of Sophocles' Ajax Locrensis (P.Oxy. 3151 = Sophocles F 10 (TrGF)).

<sup>2</sup> Die Iliupersis des Polygnot (1893), 63f., Die griech. Heldensage iii 2.1 (1923), 1269-73.

<sup>3</sup> Rösler has restated, and somewhat refined, his argument in *Métamorphoses du mythe en Grèce antique*, ed. C.Calame (1988), 202 n.1.

<sup>4</sup> If, as it surely must, Lycophron's account reflects some misconception, still it is unlikely that outside Locris many others were better informed. See further J.Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (1978), 131-7, F.Graf, "Die lokrischen Mädchen", *SSR* II i (1978), 61-79.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, J.G.Frazer, *Pausanias' description of Greece* v (1898), 367: "Presumably he [Ajax] swore that he had not been guilty of the outrage. This explanation, however, is too simple for Professor C.Robert"; A.C.Pearson, *The fragments of Sophocles* (1917), 9; T.Zieliński, *Eos* 28 (1925), 38, A.M. van Erp Taalman Kip in J.M.Bremer, A.M. van Erp Taalman Kip, S.R.Slings, *Some recently found Greek poems* (1987), 97.

vergewaltigt zu haben. Denn die solchermassen eingeräumte Tat ist ja nichts weniger als eine Bagatelle, ein derartiger Eid mithin ungeeignet, dem Täter Entlastung zu verschaffen. Nein, Aias muss - zum Zeichen der Reue - ein Versprechen abgegeben haben, woraufhin, wie man glaubte, die Angelegenheit als erledigt betrachtet werden konnte". If we accept these premises, there is much to be said, Rösler argues, for Robert's suggestion. "Athene freilich ist nicht besänftigt, was den Achäern zunächst verborgen bleibt. Allerdings muss das Missverhältnis zwischen Freveltat und Busse des Aias an sich offenkundig und für jeden Zuhörer des Epos einleuchtend gewesen sein. Vermutlich war gerade das eine eindringliche Lehre der 'Iliupersis', dass der rauschhafte Vollzug des Sieges die Sieger in Gefahr bringt, insofern er Wertmassstäbe verrückt und Besonnenheit und Selbstkontrolle ausschaltet".

This reconstruction does not meet Zieli ski's objection:<sup>6</sup> "Si enim nulla fraude admissa honesto voto vitam redemit reus, nullus iam Palladis irae locus relinquitur neque in ipso neque in Achivis exercendae corruique tota Nostorum hypothesis in hac ipsa ira occupata 'unius ob noxam et furias Aiakis Oilei'". Moreover, it would call for considerable ingenuity to devise a scenario in which the Greek leaders, with no reason to let Ajax off lightly, approved the promise of a penitential offering in the belief that it constituted adequate expiation for the offence committed, while disposing the audience to judge it manifestly insufficient. If Ajax's vow was recognizable as the *aition* of the Locrian Maiden Tribute as described by Lycophron, it is hard to see how Athena could have been represented as justifiably dissatisfied.<sup>7</sup>

But whether or not it is reasonable to set the origins of the custom at a date early enough for it to have been mentioned in the Iliupersis, the lack of any reference to it before the fourth century<sup>8</sup> implies that it was, at least, not widely known, and therefore not familiar from the Epic Cycle. Arguments from silence may, in general, be of doubtful value. But amid the lively fifth-century discussion of traditional religious practices and beliefs we might surely have expected to find the Locrian Maiden Tribute called in evidence by one thinker or another, whether because the practice imputed to Athena an insatiable thirst for vengeance unworthy of a goddess or (from a more traditional standpoint) because it showed that sacrilege could not be treated like other crimes, but imposed on the offender's community a burden of guilt hereditary from generation to generation.

There is more to be said for the conventional view than Rösler allows. He has himself pointed out that Agamemnon does not scruple to profit by Ajax' crime; no attempt is made to

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<sup>6</sup> loc.cit.; it is worth noting his rather tart characterization of Robert, "quo erat semper studio ἄλλων δίχρα μονόφρων εἶναι."

<sup>7</sup> I assume that Ajax could not be expected to be confident of winning his people's consent to this practice without some sacrifice or concession on his part.

<sup>8</sup> Aeneas Tacticus (31.24) mentions the Trojans' failure to keep the Locrian Maidens out of Ilion to illustrate the difficulty of preventing planned intrusions. But the passage has often been thought to be an interpolation; it has little obvious connection with the subject of the chapter, which is otherwise concerned with methods for passing secret messages into a besieged city. No other source antedates the third century.

restore Cassandra to the sanctuary from which she has been forcibly removed, or to find some alternative asylum for her. As the last surviving virgin daughter of Priam she is the most desirable girl in Troy, and thus it could be foreseen that she would be Agamemnon's perquisite when the booty is divided up.<sup>9</sup> It would not assume any exceptional intelligence in Ajax to suggest that he might have suspected that his commander had a particular interest in Cassandra, and accordingly sought to concentrate Agamemnon's attention on a question of immense personal concern to him, though a right-minded man would have dismissed it as utterly trivial compared with the indubitable fact of sacrilege. Cassandra's value would plummet if she were no longer a virgin and liable, nine months hence, to bear a child of doubtful paternity. Agamemnon would not be likely to regard Ajax's unsupported word as sufficient assurance that, so far as he was concerned, Cassandra was still *virgo intacta*. The appropriateness of an oath in such circumstances is indicated by Agamemnon's offer to Achilles in connection with Briseis (Il. 9.274-5) καὶ ἐπὶ μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμείται μή ποτε τῆς εὐνῆς ἐπιβήμεναι ἢ δὲ μνησθῆναι (cf. 19.175f., 187f.).<sup>10</sup>

Ajax would have been foolish not to attempt to turn his superior's personal interest in Cassandra to his own advantage. Here, I would suggest, we have an explanation for the apparent apathy towards his offence which so enraged Athena: κούδέν γ' Ἀχαιῶν ἔπαθεν οὐδ' ἤκουσ' ὑπο (Eur.Tro. 70). I suspect that Ajax extracted a guarantee of immunity from further proceedings before agreeing to take his oath,<sup>11</sup> and thus enjoyed an amnesty (we note Athena's comment that he did not even have to suffer verbal abuse) until Calchas revealed the goddess's wrath.

This hypothesis serves to produce a narrative at least as well suited as Rösler's to demonstrate the perversion of moral values in the intoxication of victory and also, I think, assigns a greater importance to Ajax's oath, appropriate to Polygnotus' selection of this episode for inclusion in his painting.

*Quidquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi.* In the Iliad too Agamemnon's interest in a desirable girl takes precedence over the respect due to a god, and thus brings destruction on the Greek army as a whole.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Apollod.Epit. 5.24 λαμβάνει δὲ Ἀγαμέμνων μὲν κατ' ἐξάριετον Κακκάνδραν; Aesch.Ag. 954-5, Eur.Tro. 249.

<sup>10</sup> The possibility of asking Briseis herself about Agamemnon's behaviour towards her is not considered.

<sup>11</sup> It would be particularly appropriate if the divinity invoked in his oath was Athena herself, supremely well-placed to observe his dealings with Cassandra.