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SOME ORIENTAL MOTIFS IN ARCHILOCHUS

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The influence on early Greek poetry of oriental - and more especially Semitic - literary forms and techniques, motifs, and idioms becomes ever more clearly a fact to be reckoned with.¹ The Cologne Epode revealed Archilochus using a proverb that was current more than a thousand years earlier in Sumerian and Akkadian: 'the bitch in her haste gave birth to blind puppies'.² There is in fact another in an iambic fragment published twenty years previously.³ Such items of popular wisdom must have spread all over the Near East and into the Aegean, and it is natural that they should surface in a poet such as Archilochus, who draws freely on popular turns of speech. The same applies, at a somewhat more formal level, to his use of animal fables, an originally Near Eastern genre. The close similarity of his fable of the fox and the eagle to the story incorporated in the Old Babylonian poem Etana has been noted by several scholars.⁴

The iambos was an ancient institution which, to judge by its non-Greek name, had its roots in the pre-Hellenic culture of the Aegean. Both this historical background and the popular nature of the festivity with which the iambos was associated are conditions favourable to the sporadic appearance of motifs that link up with the Near East.⁵

From an early period Mesopotamia and lands influenced by Mesopotamian culture knew a type of entertainer not altogether unlike the performer of some kinds of iambos and similar figures such as the δεικηλιετής and αὐτοκάβδαλος: the aluzinnu.⁶ He has been described as 'a buffoon who made a living entertaining others with parodies, mimicry, and scatological songs'.⁷ In lexical lists the aluzinnu appears in immediate association with

¹ I am preparing a large and shocking book on the subject.

² Archil fr. 196a. 39-41 W.²; letter of Shamshi-Adad in G.Dossin, Archives Royales de Mari I, Paris 1950, no. 5. 11-13; W.Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1992, 122; latest translation in B.R.Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, Bethesda (Maryland) 1993, 349. The proverb is also attested in Arabic, Turkish, et al.; for references to the growing secondary literature on it see W.W.Hallo in T.Abusch et al. (ed.), *Lingering Over Words. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in honor of William L.Moran*, Atlanta 1990, 208.

³ Fr. 23. 15f., 'I know how to hate my enemy and be the ant that []s him': cf. C.Bezold, *The Tell el-Amarna Tablets in the British Museum*, London 1892, 61 (translation in Foster 350), 'When an ant is struck, does it not fight back and bite the hand of the man that strikes it?'

⁴ See now Burkert 121 f. The opening of the fox's prayer to Zeus, ὦ Ζεῦ, πάτερ Ζεῦ, δὸν μὲν οὐρανοῦ κράτος, sounds like a Jewish prayer; cf. David's prayer in 1 Chron. 29. 11, 'Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power ... for all in the heavens and in the earth is thine...'

⁵ It is hardly relevant that one of the iambographers, Ananios or Ananias, has a West Semitic name, corresponding either to the common Ḥānanyāh/Ḥānanyāhū (Jer. 28. 1 etc.), 'Yah(u) is gracious', or to 'ānanyāh (Neh. 3.23), 'servant of Yah'.

⁶ See B.R.Foster, *JANES (Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University)* 6, 1974, 74-9; W.H.P.Römer, *Persica* 7, 1975-8, 43-68.

⁷ Foster, art.cit. 74.

words meaning 'slanderer', 'farther', and 'shitter'. One of his characteristics is that he is absurdly boastful. He recounts ridiculous adventures in which he has been involved; he makes fun of dignified persons such as the *āšipu* (incantation-priest) by impersonating them and producing preposterous ritual prescriptions;⁸ there is possible evidence for female impersonation too.⁹ He may originally have had some cult connection, as in the Ur III period (late third millennium) he is listed among temple personnel. In the early second millennium there is a record of an *aluzinnu* performing at wedding festivities in Alalakh, within 50 km. of the Mediterranean.¹⁰ Similar Bronze Age popular entertainments in the Aegean area may have formed the background out of which the *iambos* and its congeners evolved.

A conspicuous feature of the Ionian *iambos* is the uninhibited description of sexual activities involving promiscuous young women. There can be no doubt that originally, at any rate, this bawdy element was ritually determined, and connected with the promotion of fertility.¹¹ In Archilochus the promiscuous women are the daughters of Lykambes. We have a series of trimeter fragments which are naturally taken to refer to the willing participation of one or other or both of them in sexual activities, described in graphic detail.¹² Two fragments (39, 45) suggest the presence of several males, and elsewhere (fr. 207-8) Neoboule was called *δημος* and *ἐργάτις*, terms implying prostitution.

Sex is a universal, and its possibilities finite. Yet several of the fragments in question have parallels in oriental material that seem to go beyond the casual and fortuitous. In fr. 42 once of the girls is described in action in these terms:

ὥσπερ ἀλῶι βρῦτον ἢ Θρέϊξ ἀνήρ
ἢ Φρὺξ ἔμυζε· κύβδα δ' ἦν πονεομένη.

The meaning is almost certainly that she is performing fellatio, described with the graphic simile of the Thracian or Phrygian drinking beer through a tube, and at the same time being penetrated from behind. At various sites in Mesopotamia baked clay plaques have been found, dating from the Old Babylonian period, a thousand years or so before Archilochus, and showing a scene of sexual intercourse with the man entering the woman from behind while she is bending forward and at the same time drinking through a tube from a jar that

⁸ We recall that the Spartan *δεικηλιτής* might impersonate a foreign doctor who used strange and imposing language (Sosibios, FGrHist 595 F 7). Stephanie West makes the interesting suggestion that the word *ἀλαζών* may derive from *aluzinnu* or a related form; *aluzinnu* is a loan-word in Akkadian of unknown origin, the Sumerian equivalent being *alam-zu*. The conventional theory that *ἀλαζών* comes from the Thracian tribe called *Ἀλαζώνες* or *Ἀλιζώνες* is not very convincing. On the meaning of *ἀλαζών* cf. W.Burkert, *Rh. Mus.* 105, 1962, 51 n. 74.

⁹ Cf. the fragment of Semonides (16) where the speaker appears to be a prostitute.

¹⁰ Römer 50 f.

¹¹ Cf. the role of *Iambe* in the Demeter myth; my *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus*, Berlin & New York 1974, 23 ff.

¹² Fr. 30 ff.; *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus*, 26 and 123-5.

Women who give themselves to a series of men on a goddess's holy ground make us think of oriental sacral prostitution. The suspicion is not that this existed in seventh-century Paros (Archilochus represents whoring on holy ground not as something institutionalized but as the most disgraceful impropriety), but rather that it is the underlying source from which the scene ultimately derives.

'The shadow of a wall' is in fact exactly the typical station of the Babylonian prostitute. In the Epic of Gilgamesh (VII 88 ff.) the dying Endiku lays a curse on the harlot Shamhat who seduced him from the wild and set him on the road to ruin; he is actually laying down the law for all future prostitutes:

The crossroads shall be your sitting-place,
the wasteland shall be your couch,
the shadow of a wall shall be your standing-place.

(105-7.) The last line recurs in a similar passage in the Descent of Ishtar (106), where Ereshkigal curses the rent-boy.

Another example of this topos, but with the wall's shadow pictured in more agreeable terms, turns up in a remarkable text recently published by Wolfram von Soden: a tablet from Nippur which strengthens the link between Archilochean iambs and Babylonian sacral prostitution. It is the libretto of a song dating, according to the colophon, from the accession-year of Hammurapi (1848 BC, on the high chronology now in fashion), and perhaps indeed of Old Babylonian origin, though in its present linguistic form it has to be dated to the second half of the second millennium.¹⁷ It is complete in twenty lines. The first line is 'Rejoicing, that's a (sure) foundation for a (or the) city!', and all the other lines have this as a following refrain or response. Lines 2-7 are too fragmentary to translate, but they seem to contain references to Ishtar, to young men and a girl, and perhaps to a temple prostitute (*kul[mašītum?*). Here is a fresh version of lines 8-20:

One ca[me to her, and:	<i>(Refrain)</i>
'Come, accept me!'	<i>(Refrain)</i>
Another too came to her and:	<i>(Refrain)</i>
'Come, let me touch your "lintel"!'	<i>(Refrain)</i>
'Well, as I am accepting you (pl.),	<i>(Refrain)</i>
gather me the young men of your city,	<i>(Refrain)</i>
and let's go to the shadow of the (or a) wall!'	<i>(Refrain)</i>
Seven to her waist, seven to her haunches,	<i>(Refrain)</i>
sixty and sixty find relief on her nakedness.	<i>(Refrain)</i>
The young men have wearied, (but) Ishtar is not wearied:	<i>(Refrain)</i>
'Set to, young men, on my "lintel", such a nice one!'	<i>(Refrain)</i>

¹⁷ W. von Soden, *Orientalia N.S.* 60, 1991, 339-42; Foster 590.

When the girl spoke (thus), *(Refrain)*

the young men heard, they accepted her word! *(Refrain)*

The Akkadian word which I have rendered as 'lintel', *hurdatu*, means (a) cross-beam, (b) the female sex organs, by a metaphor that recalls Archilochus' *ἄρχιλοχὸς δ' ἔνερθε καὶ πυλέων* (fr. 196a. 21). Besides this and the 'shadow of the wall', there are other details that recall Archilochus. The description of the crowd of young men all satisfying their lust may remind us of Archil. fr. 45,

κύψαντες ὕβριν ἀθρόην ἀπέφλυσαν.

Other points to be noted are the enthusiasm and insatiability of the girl, who embodies the unflinching sexuality of Ishtar, and the festive tone of the song as a whole. One might take it for some sort of tavern song. But the colophon identifies it as a *pārum* of Ishtar; *pārum* is a rare term denoting some kind of song honouring a deity. Von Soden suggests that the tablet contains an excerpt from a temple ritual; 'der zwanzigmalige Refrain spricht für ein vor einem größeren Kreis vorgetragenes Kultlied.'¹⁸ If we wonder what such a song had to do with Ishtar, the most obvious answer is that she was the goddess of sexual love. But it is also worth noting that a Sumerian text associates her with knockabout humour: 'Streit Anfängen, Persiflieren, Gelächter, gering geachtet Sein (und) angesehen Sein, sind, Inanna/Eštar, dein (Prärogativ).'¹⁹

A merry, bawdy song, performed in a cult setting, celebrating the fantastically insatiable young woman who wears out throngs of eager men in the shadow of the wall - have we here come upon some kind of distant, ancient relative of the Ionian iambos?

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¹⁸ Op. cit., 342.

¹⁹ Römer 53.