

Pélekus and Lábrys

A linguistic-philological analysis of the Homeric archery

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Objectives:

Philological and linguistic explanation of archery's episode in *Od. XIX*, 572-576:

οἴκου ποσχήσει· νῦν γὰρ καταθήσω ἄεθλον,
τοὺς πελέκεας, τοὺς κείνος ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ἐοῖσιν
ἴστασχ' ἐξείης, δρυόχους ὥς, δώδεκα πάντας·
στάς δ' ὃ γε πολλὸν ἄνευθε διαρρίπτασκεν οἴστον.
νῦν δὲ μνηστήρεσσιν ἄεθλον τοῦτον ἐφήσω·

*Oiku poschēsei; nūn gār katathēsō áethlon,
Tūs pelékeas, tūs keīnos evi megároisin heoīsin
hístasch 'hexeīēs, dryóchus hōs, dōdeka pántas;
Stās d'hó ge pollòn áneuthe diarriptasken hoīstón.
Nūn dè mvēstēpessin áethlon tūton ephēsō;*

and *XXI*, 420-422:

ἄντα τιτυσκόμενος, πελέκεων δ' οὐκ ἤμβροτε πάντων
πρώτης στείλειης, διὰ δ' ἀμπερὲς ἦλθε θύραζε.

*Ánta tityskómenos, pelékeōn d'uk ēmbrote pántōn
Prōtēs steileiēs, dià d'amperēs ēlthe thýraze..*

Methods:

The analysis has been developed upon previous studies and can be summarized in three lines:

- 1.W.B. Stanford (1949) and J.Russo (2004) affirm that the axes were deprived of their handles and the arrow should have passed through the center hole of the twelve blades set up in a row. The inconvenience of this suggested translation sees an unlikely importance of the word στείλειη, “hole” (instead of ‘handle), that is documented in f.ex. ap. Hesych. σ 1702 Latte στείλε(ι)ή· τοῦ πελέκουσ ἢ ὀπή, εἰς ἣν ἐντίθεται τὸ ξύλον (*steileiē; tū pelékyos ē opē, eis hēntíthetai tò xýlon*)
- 2.C.P. de Tubieres (1757) supposed that the axes mentioned by Homer in the archery test were equipped with a hole in the middle of the blade. Against this possible translation is the limited evidence in the archaeological findings and a lack of explication of the comparison with the boat supports (δρυόχοι, *drychoi*).
- 3.D.Page (1973) and A.Sacconi (1990) assert that the axe mentioned by Homer is a minoan votive ax, originating from the Archalochōrē's cave, on Crete.

Our research in fact arises from a revision of the mentioned studies and allowed us to propose a draft of translation , which we will attempt to motivate and examine: *Od. XXI*, 572-576: “I would like to summon the competition of the axes, which Odysseus used to line up at home, twelve all together, similar to supports used in boat constructions. He used to throw a dart through them from a considerable distance. Well, this is the test I will propose the Suitors”, and *Od. XXI*, 421-422: “the top of the handle of all the axes was not missing”.

It was necessary to make a linguistic analysis of the specific lemma's used (πέλεκυς, στείλειη), in order to elucidate the text and determine its intelligence: the research has been carried out through comparative and etymological dictionaries (Mayrhofer, 1992; Pokorny, 1989), specific lexicographical equipment (TLG; Gusmani, 1980-1986; Guterbock – Hoffner, 1980), historic-archeological assays (Evans, 1901; Cook, 2010) and historical manuals (Liverani, 2009), aiming to explain the linguistic and semantic evolution.

The reference to the twelve double axes lined up with the handles turned upwards, comparable to the supports used when building a wooden ship's hull (δρυόχοι, *drychoi*; cfr. Hom. *Od.* 19. 574) is fundamental to enlighten the type of weapon indicated by the author.

Relating also to other studies, we can recognize a semantic identity between the *pélekys* of the Homeric text and the Minoan-mycenaean double axe, named with the term *lábrys*, as the Greek historian Plutarch attested (Λυδοὶ γάρ 'λάβρυν' τὸν πέλεκυν ὀνομάζουσι, *Lydoì gár lábryn tòn pélekyn onomázusi*, Quaes. Gr. 45); in particular Sir Arthur Evans and Arthur Bernard Cook connect the palace of Knossos, the *labyrinthos*, to the double axe, which is represented in the palace itself, therefore definable as the “palace of the double axe”.

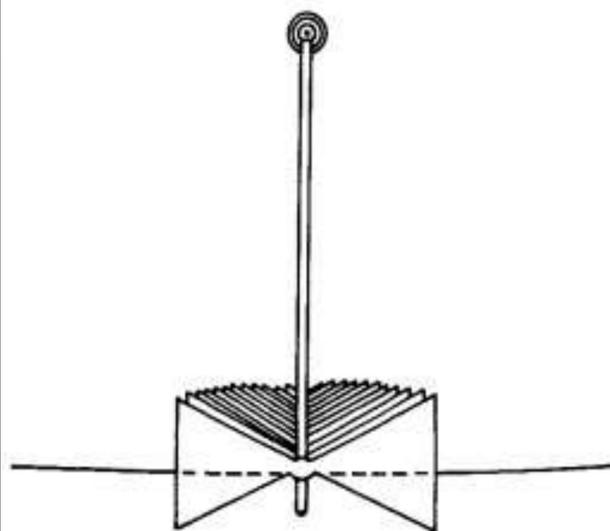
Results:

A common Indo-European root has been identified *p^helek^hu-, “axe”, which finds confirmation in myc. *pe-re-ke-we*, gr. *pélekys*, sscr. *parasu-*, and in tocA. *porat* and tocB. *peret*. The evidence in ancient sources, like the mycenaean and the indo-arian, proof a proto indo-european origin.

The only occurrence of the term *steileiēs* recurs in the *Od.* XXI, 422, where it indicates the top of the handle with the hole, used to hang up the double axe. This explains the performance of the archery; more favorable lemmas in Greek could be *steleón* and *steleós*.

Regarding the *lábrys*, Evans notices that the weapon was used as a fetish image of the main minoan divinities as well as the prevailing sign on the walls of the palace of Knossos. At the same time Cook claims that the double ax belongs to a divinity of the sky. Iconographically, we notice similar depictions in hittite Tashub (god of hurrian origin, belonging to the sumerian pantheon), which had a radical influence on caran territories, noticeable in temples built in honor of Zeus *Labrayndos*, of which we have many statments (Her., V, 119-121; Strab., XIV, 659; Plin., Naturalis Historia, XXXIII, 7; Aelian., XII, 30). Once the area of derivation was defined, the historical contest of Anatolia has been studied in order to identify a specific linguistic branch: thus in the Hittite the lessem *laparša-* has been identified, fitonym which created the carian toponym, *Labraynda*. The fito-toponomic interpretive analysis elucidated how the derivation of a toponym from a fitonym isn't linked to abstract types, but generally to concrete contingencies, like the appearance of that plant in that place by itself assigned (cfr. Stivala, 2004).

The Greek divinity closely related to *lábrys*, would stand for a subsequent synthesis between the masculine and feminine element, respectively personified by the god Kronos and the goddess Rea, embodied in Zeus. We can therefore suppose that Homer didn't use this lemma for two possible reasons: the first reason could be that the term *lábrys* didn't continue throughout Greek territory; the second instead considers that the epic poet already had a word which was historically and semantically more productive, that is *pélekys*.



(Heraklion Museum, Crete)

Conclusions:

On the grounds of the researches and considerations made, we confirm our first interpretation and translation of the Homeric text.

Translation *Od. XXI 572-576*: “I actually want to call for the axe test, which Odysseus used to line up at home, 12 all together, similar to supports used in boat constructions. He used to throw a dart through them from a considerable distance. Well, this is the test I will propose to the Suitors”.

Translation *Od. XXI 421-422*: “The top of the handle of all the axes was not missing.”

According to the analysis proposed, the competition with the bow between Ulysses and the Suitors suggested the lining up of twelve double axes, with the blade turned downwards and the handle upwards and the arrow thrown through the ring of the handle. This interpretation suggests that the axes used were the cultural double axes found in the palace of Knossos, common in Minoan civilization. As these types of arms were of ritual and religious use, it is plausible to believe that the axes were hung to a wall by rings attached at the top of the handle, also on the basis of the archeological findings. The connection with the thundering divinities of the skies could be therefore confirmed by the presence, in the Homeric text, of Zeus who lets lightnings drop from the sky to emphasize the greatness of Odysseus' efforts.

The historic origin of the worship of the god Labrandeus, provided with *lábrys*, has been identified in the carian and lydian civilizations, where Labranda is the site that hosted the temple, toponym deriving from the Hittite toponym *laparša-*.

The research carried out traces a diatopic and diachronic development of a lexeme that again develops a particular semantic, from a floristic Hittite meaning to a carian toponomic and a designation of a cultural arm that becomes an attribute of the palace of Knossos.

We finally want to conclude our script with the possibility of a subsequent analysis of the term *lábrys*, not with a direct Indo-European origin but eventually borrowed by the ancient Anatolian populations, especially Hittite, from languages not to each other related but territorially close.

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