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THE *SKYRIANS* OF EURIPIDES
AND THREE ATTIC WORKS OF ART



Dedicated to a special friend, Konstantinos Vogiatzis

ABSTRACT: In the fragmentarily preserved *Skyrians* Euripides treats an episode related to the life of Achilles in Skyros. The young man is led to the court of king Lycomedes either by Peleus or by Thetis, in an attempt to be saved from his participation in the Trojan campaign and consequently from death. The young hero lives among the king's daughters disguised in female clothing until Odysseus arrives, manages to disclose the identity of the *ὠκύπους ἥρωας* ('fast hero') and persuades him to join the Trojan expedition. This article takes into consideration the preserved evidence for this play (its papyrus hypothesis in conjunction with the accounts of Ps.-Apollodorus and Hyginus), with the purpose of arguing in favour of its possible iconographic representation in three Attic works of art (figg. 1-3). In particular, in the two sarcophagi discussed in this article (figg. 1, 3) Achilles clearly reveals his identity by taking off his feminine garments. As regards the vase-painting (fig. 4), its role is probably ancillary, in that it might supplement a missing part of the tragic plot, i.e. the farewell of Achilles and Deidamia.

ACCORDING TO a tradition of *Cypria*, which is attested by ancient scholiasts of Homer,¹ Peleus, who knew that Achilles was destined to die in the Trojan campaign, disguised him as a woman and took him to Skyros, in order to grow up with the daughters of king Lycomedes. In the meantime, Achilles fell in love with one of Lycomedes' daughters, Deidamia, was uni-

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1. See Hom. *Il.* T 326 and Webster (1967) 95-97.

ted with her and married her.² The result of this union was Neoptolemus' birth. According to an oracle, Troy could not be conquered without Achilles' contribution. Therefore, Odysseus, Phoenix and Nestor set out for Skyros. To reveal the identity of the hero, they went outside the women's chamber and left weapons and baskets with tools for wool processing. The girls rushed to the baskets and Achilles to the weapons.

Euripides composed possibly early in his career³ a play entitled *Skyrians*, which has been fragmentarily preserved. A part of its hypothesis has been preserved in a papyrus fragment of the 2nd century AD (*PSI* 1286, col. ii, 9-27):

Skyrians, which begins, 'O daughter of Tyndareus from Sparta...; the plot is as follows: Thetis, having learned of (the destiny) of her son Achilles, wanted (to keep) him out of the expedition (against Troy), and so (she concealed) him in a girl's clothing (and deposited him) with Lycomedes the (ruler) of the Scyrians. Lycomedes was raising (a daughter) named (Deidameia) whose mother had died, and he brought (Achilles) up as a girl together with her, his real identity being unrecognized; and Achilles... seduced Deidameia and made her pregnant. Agamemnon and his comrades (were told) by an oracle not (to make their expedition) without Achilles...Diomedes...(they,) learning...⁴

It should be noted that the plot of the Euripidean play is clearly different from that of Sophocles' lost *Skyrians*; the latter concerns Neoptolemus, who overcomes the opposition of his mother Deidamia and his grandfather Lycomedes and joins the army at Troy.⁵

The testimonies of Ps. Apollodorus and Hyginus are especially helpful in reconstructing the plot-outline of Euripides' fragmentarily preserved drama.⁶ The former states that when Achilles was nine years old, Calchas predicted that Troy would not be conquered without him. Thetis, who knew that her son would die if he went to war, dressed him in women's

2. Argum. *Cypria* 39-40 Bernabé: Achilles arriving at Skyros marries Deidamia, Lycomedes' daughter. Cf. Verzina (2014) 3.

3. Webster (1967) 97; Jouan – van Looy (2002) 60-2; Kannicht *TrGFV* 667.

4. Transl. Collard – Cropp (2008). For the corruption of Deidamia by Achilles, cf. Σ D *Iliad* 19.326: φθείρας. See also Verzina (2014) 3.

5. On the Sophoclean play see *TrGF IV* 418-19; Sommerstein (2012) 202.

6. For sources before and after Euripides see Webster (1967) 95-97; Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 55-56; Gantz (1996) 580-82.

clothing and took him to king Lycomedes. There he grew up with Lycomedes' daughter, Deidamia, and had a son, Pyrrhus, who was later named Neoptolemus. Odysseus was informed of the news by Lycomedes and tried to find Achilles by using a trumpet. After disclosing his identity, he persuaded him to come to Troy:

When Achilles was nine years old, Calchas declared that Troy could not be taken without him; so Thetis, foreseeing that it was fated he should perish if he went to the war, disguised him in female garb and entrusted him as a maiden to Lycomedes. Bred at his court, Achilles had an intrigue with Deidamia, daughter of Lycomedes, and a son Pyrrhus was born to him, who was afterwards called Neoptolemus. But the secret of Achilles was betrayed, and Ulysses, seeking him at the court of Lycomedes, discovered him by the blast of a trumpet. And in that way Achilles went to Troy.⁷

Hyginus⁸ narrates that Achilles was transported by Thetis to the court of Lycomedes in Skyros and that he grew up with his daughters, being named Pyrrha, because of his ginger hair.⁹ Then Odysseus came looking for Achilles and used the following trick: he placed female gifts on the royal threshold and put a shield and a spear¹⁰ among them. Afterwards, he started playing the trumpet and making noise with his weapons. Immediately Achilles

7. [Apolloclod.] *Bibl.* III, xiii, 8 (English translation: Frazer [1921]).

8. Hyg. *fab.* 96: "ACHILLES: When Thetis the Nereid knew that Achilles, the son she had borne to Peleus, would die if he went to attack Troy, she sent him to island of Scyros, entrusting him to King Lycomedes. He kept him among his virgin daughters in woman's attire under an assumed name. The girls called him Pyrrha, since he had tawny hair, and in Greek a redhead is called pyrrhos. When the Achaeans discovered that he was hidden there, they sent spokesmen to King Lycomedes to beg that he be sent to help the Danaan. The King denied that he was there, but gave them permission to search the palace. When they couldn't discover which one he was. Ulysses put women's trinkets in the fore-court of the palace, and among them a shield and a spear. He bade the trumpeter blow the trumpet all of a sudden, and called for clash of arms and shouting. Achilles, thinking the enemy was at hand, stripped off his woman's garb and seized shield and spear. In this way he was recognized and promised to the Argives his aid and his soldiers, the Myrmidons." [English translation: Grant (1960)].

9. Cf. Frazer (1921) II 73 n. 2. The name of Achilles during the period when he lived in Lycomedes' palace is attested by Suet. *Tib.* 70. Apart from the name Pyrrhus, other possible names associated with the young hero disguised as a woman were Cercysera and Issa: Ptolem. *Heph. Nov. Hist.* I (Westermann, *Mythographi*, p. 183).

10. The spear of Achilles is considered to be a phallic and paternal symbol as opposed to the influence of Thetis: Verzina (2014) 27. Cf. Eur. fr. inc. 880 Kann. (which has been assigned to the *Skyrians*) and Stat. *Ach.* 1.40–42: "There, if I mistake not, he plays at



Figure 1: Sarcophagus of Attic workshop of 240/250 AD. Marble. Rome, Capitoline Museum 218 [Ramage (2004) fig. 7.41].

thought it was an enemy attack and tore his women's clothes, grabbing the spear and the shield.

Apart from the literary sources, the contribution of ancillary sources, such as iconographic evidence, towards the reconstruction of the plot of *Skyrians* may also yield insight into particular aspects of the dramatic plot. Towards this direction it is worth taking into account the depiction of a sarcophagus of an Attic workshop of 250 AD (fig. 1).¹¹ In this iconographic representation Achilles brandishes the sword that Odysseus brought him and at the same time takes off the female clothes. In this articulate way he reveals his identity in front of everyone, responding to Odysseus, who rebukes him for extinguishing his family's bright light, albeit being born of the most glorious father in Greece (fr. 683a Kann.).¹² Although this composition is dated several centuries after the production of the Euripidean play, it seems to be connected with it through a later tradition reported by Hyginus, as mentioned

Lapith battles and already measures himself with his father's spear, the rogue. Ah pain, ah tremors too late in my mother's heart!" [English translation: Shackleton-Bailey (2003)].

11. Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 63 fig. 148; Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 2 72 fig. 148; Strong (1961) 101-102 Nr. 119; Giuliano (1962) 240-243 Taf. CV; Vermeule (1966) Nr. 8715; Sichtermann - Koch (1975) Nr. 3; Ramage - Ramage (2004) fig. 7.41.

12. "Odysseus (to Achilles): And you, extinguisher of your family's brilliant light, are you combing wool — you, born of the most valiant father in Greece?" [English translation: Collard - Cropp (2008)].



Figure 2: Sarcophagus of Attic workshop, Roman Era, lost [*LIMC* (1981) I 1 65 fig. 165].

above.¹³ Of course, Hyginus mentions a spear and a shield among the gifts that Odysseus placed on the royal doorway,¹⁴ while the artist of this sarcophagus chooses to illustrate the sword. But, in any case, in both the literary evidence for the Euripidean play and this iconographic source it is the weapon that reveals the identity of Achilles. It is thus feasible that this rather late representation may originate in the version of the myth that became widely popular thanks to the Euripidean treatment. Similar versions of Achilles' adventures in Skyros (e.g. his revelation by Odysseus and his farewell to Deidamia) are depicted very often in various forms of art, such as Greek and Roman paintings, sarcophagi, mosaics, reliefs, metal artefacts, glass artworks and vases, transmitting the most popular aspects of this legend.¹⁵

In the vast majority of the depictions of this theme in sarcophagi, Achilles is always armed and disguised as a maiden.¹⁶ Kossatz-Deissmann has already underlined the possible relation of two Roman sarcophagi to the Euripidean *Skyrians*, on the basis of the particular manner in which Lycomedes is represented.¹⁷ More specifically, in a now lost sarcophagus (fig. 2) the king is depicted at the left wearing a tragic costume, according to the reasonable interpretation of Kossatz-Deissmann.¹⁸ The other sarcophagus discussed by Kossatz-Deissmann (fig. 1) has been connected with *Skyrians*, because Achilles reveals his identity clearly, by taking off his female clothes.

13. See n. 8 above.

14. "... Ulysses put women's trinkets in the fore-court of the palace, and among them a shield and a spear": Hyg. *Fab.* 96 (English translation: Grant [1960]).

15. See, for instance, Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 58-66, fig. 105-181.

16. Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 61-65 fig. 131, 137-140, 144, 155, 165; Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 2 70-72 fig. 131, 137-140, 144, 155.

17. Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 61, 65 fig. 131, 165; Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 2 70, fig. 131.

18. Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 65 fig. 165.



Figure 3: Sarcophagus of Attic workshop, Roman Era, Paris, Louvre, 2120 [*LMC* (1981) I 2 71 fig. 143].

This representation bears similarities with the iconographical theme of another Attic sarcophagus (fig. 3),¹⁹ which I consider to be related to *Skyrians*, in view of the articulate depiction of the disclosure of Achilles' identity, as attested in the literary evidence for the play. The young hero is presented as being armed with a shield and a sword, exposing his identity clearly, by taking off his feminine garments, as in the sarcophagus of fig. 1. The shield, in particular, is, according to Hyginus' aforementioned account,²⁰ one of the weapons that Odysseus placed on the royal doorway. Considering that Hyginus seems to largely reflect this Euripidean plot, the depiction of the shield is a further element that could associate this representation with *Skyrians*.

Let us now turn to the sequence of the dramatic plot, which involved the farewell of Achilles and Deidamia. None of the preserved fragments could be associated with this episode. Nonetheless, the latter forms the decorative theme of an Attic red-figure volute-krater of the "Niobid Painter",

19. Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 62 fig. 143; Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 2 71 fig. 143.

20. See n. 14 above.

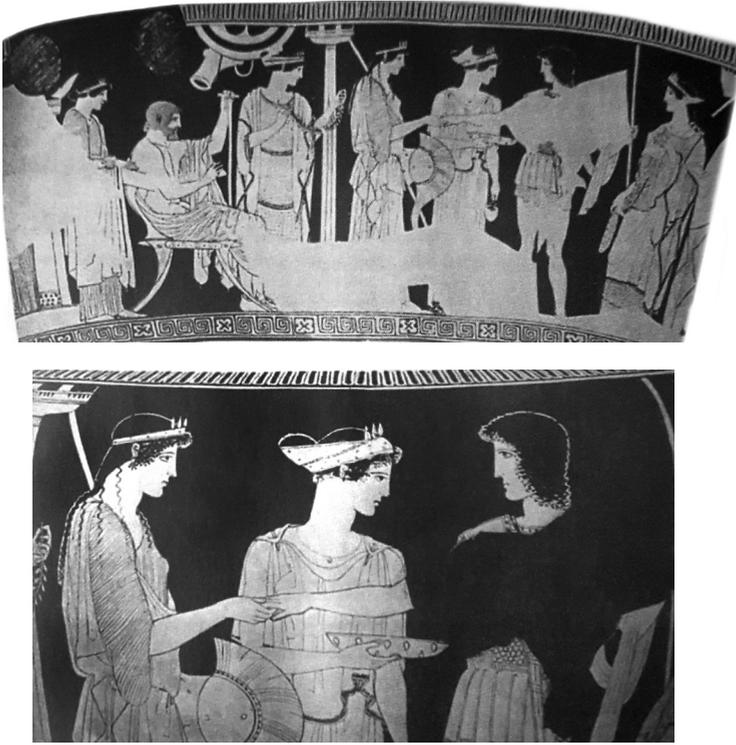


Figure 4: Attic red-figure volute-krater of 450 BC, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 33.56, of the “Niobid Painter” [*LIMC* (1981) I 2 74, fig. 176].

which dates back to 450 BC (fig. 4).²¹ The action takes place outside the palace of the king of Skyros, Lycomedes. The palace is represented by a column and a gate, which is located on the left side of the composition. The column and the gate as elements of the scenery could be suggestive of the association of this specific vase-painting with tragedy.²² Lycomedes is depicted sitting with his sceptre in his left hand. Behind him, one of his daughters is leaning at the back of his seat. Right in front of him another daughter is carrying a laurel for the warrior who is about to leave. Deidamia wears a *chiton* reaching to the feet and a *himation* with a belt on top, a dress with which the brides were represented in the vases of the Classical Period.²³ With her right hand she is holding the right hand of Achilles, looking into

21. Simon (1963) 57-59 fig. II, 7-8; Mimidou (2013) 453-454 fig. 350.

22. See esp. Pickard-Cambridge (1946) 82-99, Taplin (2007) 38-39.

23. See Hahland (1930) fig.4.

his eyes. The gesture between Achilles and Deidamia may reflect the speaking gestures of tragic theatre.²⁴ With the left hand she is holding a spear and a helmet that she is about to give to the young man. Achilles has a second spear in his left hand. Between the two youths, one of the sisters of Deidamia is holding an *oenochoe* and a *phiale* and is preparing the libations of the farewell. The composition is completed with another sister of Deidamia with a veil in her hand.

According to Simon's interpretation,²⁵ this representation depicts the departure of Achilles from Skyros and his wedding to Deidamia. Simon supports her view on the basis of a rational combination of elements: Lycomedes' presence, the fact that Deidamia holds the right hand of Achilles, the laurel on Achilles' head, the offering of a veil for Deidamia and utensils – *oenochoe* and *phiale* – for the libations of the farewell. In the play of Euripides, Achilles' decision to leave Skyros and consequently Deidamia must have been announced at the part of the plot where Odysseus urged him to come and fight in Troy (the aforementioned fr. 683a Kann., as well as fr. inc. 880 Kann., which probably comes from *Skyrians*, seem to belong to that episode).²⁶ Although the wedding of the young couple is not mentioned in the preserved fragments of *Skyrians*, I would not exclude that Euripides may have reiterated this theme under the influence of the epic tradition.²⁷ The aforementioned theatricality of this iconographic representation could be suggestive of a tragic treatment, and the possibly early date of Euripides' *Skyrians*, the sole tragedy attested to have dealt with this topic, could tell in favour of its association with the present vase-painting.

These three iconographic representations could thus be suggestive of the popularity of the fragmentarily preserved *Skyrians*. The sarcophagi (fig. 1, 3) have been connected with the specific play because of their theatricality and their articulate depiction of the disclosure of Achilles' identity, which is attested by the relevant evidence for this tragedy. The vase-painting (fig. 4) might shed further light on the plot of *Skyrians*, especially the

24. Green (1999) 41-42; Green – Handley (1995) 69.

25. Simon (1963) 59. This view is also supported by Kossatz-Deissmann, provided that the episode of the farewell and that of the wedding of the two youths were linked: Kossatz-Deissmann (1981) I 1 68-69 fig. 176.

26. Fr. inc. 880 Kann.: "Young men should get honours not amongst women but amidst arms and weaponry." [transl. Collard – Cropp (2008)]. The model of the specific vase-painting of the "Niobid Painter" must have been a painting by Polygnotus: see Simon (1963) 59 and Paus. 1.22.6: "a stay of Achilles in Skyros with the girls, which was also depicted by Polygnotus".

27. For the epic tradition see n. 1 and 2.

final part of the farewell of the two youths. Although aspects of this dramatic plot still remain obscure, particular elements of the Euripidean version evidently exerted a shaping influence in mythography and iconography, bringing forward the continuing appeal of the play.

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