

The Myth of Philoktetes ¹

Elizabeth Craik

Summary

It is generally recognized that rationalizations of historical tradition and cult practice are important elements in Greek myth; and it is generally accepted that myths, superficially different, may nevertheless have common underlying import. In this paper, the myth of Philoktetes is explored through apparent 'doublets' in history and cult. Philoktetes is seen to be aligned with Jason, Theseus and other heroes, as well as with Hippolytos; Chryse is seen to be aligned with Medea, Ariadne and other nymphs, also with Phaidra and Aphrodite. It is argued that the theme of aberrant or ambivalent sexuality is an element in Sophokles' presentation of Philoktetes.

Vita of Philoktetes

The salient points in the *Vita* of Philoktetes are these. In genealogy he is son of Poias, variously a shepherd or a king (cf. ποιμήν and the Homeric ποιμήν λαόν), who was in turn son of Thaumakos (cf. Thaumakia, the region). The territory of Philoktetes according to Homer is Methone, Thaumakia, Meliboia, Olizon: that is, an area in the Magnesian peninsula (the modern Bay of Volos). In the Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2. 716-25) Philoktetes falls between Eumelos son of Admetos and Alkestis (from Pherai, Boibe, Glaphyrai and 'well-founded' Iolkos) on the one hand and the sons of Asklepios, Podaleirios and Machaon (from Triikka, Ithome and Oichalia) on the other. All are from the rural pastoral region later known as Thessaly. The territory of Philoktetes according to Sophokles is further south, the Oita region (*Ph.* 453, 479, 490, 664, 728, 1430), the land of Malis (*Ph.* 4, 725), by the river Spercheios (*Ph.* 726). Such slight variations in detail result from slight differences in authorial emphasis: in this case, the north-south shift suits Sophokles' stress on the association of Philoktetes with the funeral pyre of Herakles, on Mt Oita.

Philoktetes did not marry. The only recorded association with women is that he is named as one of Helen's suitors in Apollodoros' catch-all list (Apollod. 7. 3. 8) which follows the Homeric geography: thus, Philoktetes is placed between Podaleirios with Machaon on the one hand and Eurypylos son of Euaimon on the other. The list simply

provides a notional rationale for inclusion of heroes among those who embarked on the Trojan expedition. A fragmentary couplet allegedly addressed to Philoktetes in a dramatic citation of Plutarch (*Mor.* 789a) suggests that Philoktetes was unmarried: *τίς δ' ἄν σε νύμφη, τίς δὲ παρθένος νέα / δέξαιτ' ἄν; εὖ γοῦν ὡς γαμεῖν ἔχεις, τάλας*. These tantalizing lines may have come from Sophokles' *Philoktetes at Troy*, as Dindorf supposed; that play was probably tragic, but satyr drama or comedy cannot be ruled out. In any case, the context is quite uncertain and the words might refer simply to Philoktetes' rough appearance. But certainly in the extant play Philoktetes' longing for home is expressed not in the conventional heroic terms of longing for family and hearth, but rather of longing for father and locality, this though Philoktetes is a mature man, rivaling Odysseus as a potential father figure to the young Neoptolemos.

In exploits, Philoktetes – or in some versions his father Poias – is associated with Jason and the Argonauts; also with Herakles in both the first Trojan War (against Laomedon) and in lighting the celebrated funeral pyre. Philoktetes, a great archer, brings a large force of seven ships, each rowed by fifty bowmen, to Troy (*Il.* 2. 718-20; cf. *Od.* 8. 219) and as killer of Paris is crucial to the ultimate fall of Troy. But during the war Philoktetes is out of action: *ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐν νήσῳ κείτῳ κρατέρ' ἄλγεα πάσχων, / Λήμνῳ ἐν ἡγαθέῃ, ὅθι μιν λίπον νῆες Ἀχαιῶν / ἔλκει μοχθίζοντα κακῷ ὀλοόφρονος ὕδρου* (*Il.* 2. 721-3). Homer mentions only Lemnos and a watersnake; Sophokles is specific that Philoktetes was wounded at or by Chryse. Chryse is ambivalently a place or personal name. This double usage, place or nymph, is common in the case of islands, as for instance Lemnos itself (according to Steph. Byz.) represents the great goddess so called by the original inhabitants. The nymph is named from the region or the region from the Nymph, just as Ge can mean Earth as goddess or earth as land.

In the play, three passages are relevant to the representation of Chryse: first, *καὶ τὰ παθήματα κείνα πρὸς αὐτὸν / τῆς ὀμόφρονος Χρύσης ἐπέβη* (193-4, personal, with ὀμόφρων reminiscent of the Homeric ὀλοόφρων); second, *ἡνίκ' ἐκ τῆς ποντίας / Χρύσης κατέσχον δεῦρο ναυβάτη στόλῳ* (269-70, place, island); third, *σὺ γὰρ νοσεῖς τόδ' ἄλγος ἐκ θείας τύχης / Χρύσης πελασθεῖς φύλακος, ὃς τὸν ἀκαλυφῇ / σηκὸν φυλάσσει κρύφιος οἰκουρῶν ὄφης* (1326-8, personal, with precinct guarded by snake). The argument to the play is unhelpful. It is a good example of Alexandrian speculation allied with ancient tradition applied to various dramatic questions: who, what, how and why. Who or what, then, was Chryse? L's reading *ἐν χρυσῇ ἀθηνᾷ* is ungrammatical nonsense; if we read *χρύσης Ἀθηνᾶς*

with late mss the word becomes simply an epithet of Athena; if we adopt the emendation ἐν Χρύσῃ Ἀθηνᾶς we have Chryse, a place where Athena was worshipped. The motivation is explained as oracular and the means of information a previous visit of Philoktetes with Herakles. Other sources too disagree: Dio Chrysostom refers to the altar of Chryse, Philostratos to the altar of Chryse which Jason founded and Apollodoros to a shrine variously of Chryse or of Apollo, located on Tenedos or on Lemnos itself (Dio 59. 9; Philostr. *Imag.* 19; Apollod. *Epit.* 3. 26-8). Chryse is a place near Lemnos in Sophokles' *Lemniai* (fr. 384, Pearson II p. 51 *sqq.*) and apparently a place in the Troad in *Aichmalotides* (fr. 40, Pearson I p. 29 *sq.*).

After the pivotal encounter with Chryse, and possibly a brief ensuing visit to Troy, the wounded hero was abandoned, marooned on Lemnos. In Sophokles, Lemnos is a desert island and his isolation is complete. In Homer, Lemnos is inhabited and fruitful ('good', *Il.* 2. 722); it is a source of wine supply for the Achaean troops and so possibly neutral in the war (*Il.* 7. 468 *sqq.*; of which *S. Ph.* 714 *sqq.* may be a humorous reminiscence). In Euripides too the island is inhabited and Philoktetes has a companion, Aktor. That the wound was malodorous and suppurating is a constant feature of the tradition, found already in the *Cypria* and stressed in Sophokles' *Philoktetes* (*Ph.* 876, 890-1, 1032), also in *Philoktetes at Troy* (fr. 697) and Apollodoros.

In the tragedians, interest centres on getting Philoktetes from Lemnos to Troy: he is tricked, forced or persuaded (by application of δόλος, βία or πειθώ) by Odysseus with Neoptolemos in Sophokles, or with Diomedes in other versions. After reaching Troy, he is cured by Asklepios or by the Asklepiadai (his Thessalian neighbours); he returns safely home (*Od.* 3. 190) but does not remain there, settling instead near Kroton in south Italy. He goes to the help of the Rhodians under Tlepolemos and later dedicates his bow in the sanctuary of Apollo Alaios at Kroton (Apollod. *Epit.* 6. 15; cf. *Epit.* 3). Finally, after death, Philoktetes was worshipped in hero cults at Lemnos and at several places in Sicily.

Myth and History

Thessaly is Philoktetes' place of origin, Lemnos his place of association. Lemnos has several important Bronze Age sites. Archaeologically the culture of Lemnos has affinities with Troy – it is eastern rather than Mycenaean. Philologically too Lemnos is evidently non-Hellenic and alien: its name, with its –mn- formation, belongs to the 'Aegean' substratum of the Greek language; and even in the sixth century, shortly before

Miltiades secured the island for Athens, a non-Greek language was used there (IG 12. 8. 1 from south east Lemnos). Thessaly too has an important concentration of Bronze Age sites, especially at Iolkos, which is associated with Jason and the Argonauts. Traditions of early conquest – raids or settlement – are centred on heroes from north Greece, and especially from this region.²

The personal association of Philoktetes is with Herakles, a roving bandit who conquered, though he could not control, many regions of the Greek world and with Jason. Parallel myths to that of Philoktetes associate Jason with Lemnos: the Lemnian women failed to honour Aphrodite; Aphrodite being ‘slighted’ inflicted a foul smell on the women; the husbands had recourse to Thracian slave girls; the wives being ‘slighted’ killed the husbands; Jason and his men arrived, profited from this male-less situation and fathered a new population (Apollod. 1. 9. 17). In another version it is Medea, not Aphrodite, who inflicts the stench on the women (Myrsilos of Lesbos, *FGH* III. 477 F 1). There is some reference to the altar of Chryse which Jason ‘founded’ (Philostr. *Imag.* 17; cf. Dio 59. 9). And in an allusive Hellenistic poem Jason is said to be ἀίρας ‘lover’ of Chryse (Dosiadas, *AP* 15. 26. 5; for the erotic sense of the substantive cf. Theoc. 12. 14).

Marauding expeditions, sometimes followed by settlement, short-lived or long-lasting, feature strongly in mythic representations of early history. Many ‘doublet’ stories represent the attempts of Mycenaean from the north and west to overthrow or plunder peoples of the south and east: Minoans in Crete and various peoples of the Asiatic coast. In such myths, the Greek hero is often aided by a local princess or by an eponymous nymph of the region.³ The myth of Philoktetes’ assault on Chryse of Lemnos may be seen as a ‘doublet’ of relations between Theseus and Ariadne at Crete, or Iphiklos and the daughter of Phalanthos at Rhodes, or Jason and Medea at Kolchis. An associated myth tells of hostilities between Poias and Talos, variously a bronze man or a bull, at Crete (Apollod. 1. 9. 26). The Golden Fleece sought by Jason is, in allegorical representation, a quest for plunder. The name Philoktetes ‘gain-lover’, ‘gain-seeker’ suggests a marauder and the name Chryse ‘golden’ evokes the symbolism of the Golden Fleece.

The web is complex, with many related strands: Aphrodite or Medea inflicts a bad smell on the women of Lemnos; Chryse inflicts a bad smell on Philoktetes; Jason (lover of Medea) may be lover also of Chryse; Chryse is hostile to Philoktetes.

Myth and Cult

The author of the hypothesis evidently identified Chryse with Athena. This is surely wrong as Jebb argues (on *Ph.* 1327): the error may have arisen through familiarity with the sacred snakes of the Erechtheum. Jebb himself mooted identification with Bendis (Introduction p. xl). A quite different view is advanced in this paper. A Homeric epithet of Aphrodite is 'golden' (*Il.* 3. 64, *Od.* 8. 337).⁴ The adjective 'golden' is applied also to the heavenly bodies, especially the Sun and the Moon, and especially when these are personified (*Pi. P.* 4. 144; *S. OT* 188; *E. Ph.* 176, 191). Medea, Chryse's analogue in the Jason myth, is descended from the Sun, and the sun's agency is important at the end of the Euripidean play. The Cretan analogues Ariadne, Phaidra and Pasiphae have similar origins. These are significant names: Ariadne was known as Aridelos 'very visible'; Pasiphae is 'all-shining' and Phaidra is 'bright'. All are female powers, semi-divine, subsequently either worshipped themselves or represented as introducing cults to Greece; they are commonly associated or conflated with Aphrodite or Artemis and have solar or lunar characteristics. Medea established a shrine of Aphrodite Kypria at Corinth (*Plu. Mor.* 871b); there was a cult of Aphrodite-Ariadne at Amathous in Cyprus. By such steps, Greek polytheism accommodated alien cultural elements and cult practices.

That sacrifice to Chryse is depicted in several vase-paintings of the late fifth to early fourth centuries, is an indication of renewed interest in the myth at this date, possibly stimulated by dramatic treatments. The representation is remarkably consistent and in its salient characteristics is in accord with Sophokles' description. The sacrifice takes place at an altar of rough-hewn stone (cf. hypothesis l. 1) in the open air (cf. *Ph.* 1327-8) and, in one case, by a tree. The figure of Chryse is represented on a pillar or even by a pillar alone; the serpent is on the ground close to the altar (cf. *Ph.* 1328). The scene recalls features ubiquitous on Minoan artifacts: aniconic tree and pillar cult and the familiar representation of a female figure accompanied by a snake. The stark primeval features are striking in this material of the classical period. In artistic presentation, Chryse has evident affinities with the great goddess of pre-Greek culture, the earth-mother of Asiatic cult. This evidence corroborates the argument that in its core, the myth of Chryse from Lemnos should be seen – like those of eastern Medea and Cretan Ariadne or Phaidra – as a representation of Greek contact with the great primeval female nature deity of the east.⁵

But the case of the wounded Philoktetes is unique. Why is Chryse so hostile to Philoktetes with none of the usual ambivalence? In the basic mythical substratum, he surely brought his sufferings on himself. The analogy of the delay of the Greek troops at

Aulis is instructive: there is some reason, however oblique and tenuous, for Artemis' anger against Agamemnon.

Sophokles' Treatment

The play is commonly interpreted in terms of the will of the gods. Philoktetes' sufferings on Lemnos are part of the divine plan (*Ph.* 1326): Troy must not fall too soon and so the Greeks are deprived of Philoktetes who is himself blameless (*Ph.* 684 *sqq.*). But the prominence of oracles is undoubtedly a late and intrusive excrescence in the elemental myth, explored above.

We have seen that Chryse is analogous to Cretan Phaidra. In the myth of Phaidra and Hippolytos, most familiar from Euripides' play of 428 BC, Hippolytos offends Aphrodite through excessive devotion to Artemis, and Aphrodite takes revenge through Phaidra, her human or personified representative. Perhaps, like Hippolytos, Philoktetes paid too much honour to Artemis. Philoktetes' weapon, like that of Hippolytos, was the bow, emblem of Artemis. With the bow Philoktetes killed Paris, who was Aphrodite's favourite, and by its agency Troy, which was favoured by Aphrodite, was to fall. If, in honouring Artemis excessively, Philoktetes offended Chryse-Aphrodite, her revenge would be explicable. We recall that, alone among the heroes at Troy, Philoktetes remained celibate.⁶ Or perhaps Philoktetes was over familiar with Chryse.⁷ Other men were punished for the presumption of making sexual advances to divinities. Among them was another Thessalian hero Ixion, whose approach to Hera is the subject of a lyric in Sophokles' play (*Ph.* 676 *sqq.*). This passage, apparently tangential, becomes explicable as an allusive reference to conduct parallel to that of Philoktetes.

These two, apparently conflicting, interpretations are two sides of the same coin. Artemis and Aphrodite are not polar opposites. Even in Euripides' *Hippolytos*, there is a powerful rapprochement between the two goddesses. Chryse evokes them both. In a short but richly vivid lyric stanza of Sophokles' play the mountain-ranging, all-nurturing eastern Earth goddess, mother of Zeus, living by Paktolos, rich-in-gold is invoked (*Ph.* 391 *sqq.*). The dramatic relevance of this stanza, a strong expression of syncretism in its invocation of Ge-Rhea-Kybele – and all such female powers – is readily understood in the light of the numinous and brooding presence of Chryse. This is possibly reinforced by contemporary interest in eastern cults in the late fifth century. Nymphs too are important in the play's allusive

penumbra: Philoktetes' longed-for home is the haunt of the Malian Nymphs (725); Philoktetes invokes the Nymphs (1454) and the chorus finally pray to the Nymphs of the sea for a safe return (1470). Nymphs, women or female powers more than women, may be perceived as benign or malevolent. With their strong local and rural character they represent conditions of the desert place, sometimes the (erotic) meadow, sometimes the dangers of nature, as opposed to culture, sometimes negation of civilized and civic values. Nymphs may be murderous monsters: τῆς ἀνδροφθόρου / πληγέντ' ἐχίδνης ἀγρίῳ χαράγματι (S. *Ph.* 266-7; cf. the very similar language applied to the Hydra of Lerna, S. *Tr.* 574 and descriptions of monsters at Thebes in E. *Ph.* and elsewhere). Snakes, symbolic of dangerous sexuality, are commonly associated or equated with Nymphs.⁸ Through supernatural anger, Philoktetes is condemned to remain in the wilderness of Lemnos, denied a transition from primeval danger to the civic and social norms embraced by Odysseus (though, paradoxically, these are far from reputable).

In this late play Sophokles shows Euripidean influence in many different aspects: setting (distant hillside), staging (use of skene roof), characterization (hero in rags), language (colloquialisms), plot (humorous elements), lyric (absence of regular stasimon form). A further resemblance is here traced: tragedy is precipitated by inappropriate sexual behaviour.

¹ It is an honour to dedicate this piece to Tetsuo Nakatsukasa, whose knowledge of myth far exceeds my own.

² Sinties, Minyans, Pelasgoi are recurrent names (*Il.* 1. 594; *Od.* 8. 294; *Hdt.* 4. 145; *Str.* 5. 2. 4, 8. 3. 19, cf. 10. 3. 7; *Hellanikos FGH* 4 F 71; *Paus.* 7. 2. 2). The Sinties are frequently linked or identified with such bands as the Rhodian Telchines, Cretan Kouretes and Idaian Daktyloi (cf. Kabeiroi of Imbros and Lemnos, *Str.* 10. 3. 21).

³ The outcome is usually problematic. In fifth century terms, this is a reflection of social difficulties arising from foreign liaisons and psychological conflicts between natal and marital loyalties.

⁴ Gold is regularly used of divine accoutrements such as throne, sandals etc. and gods, especially Apollo, are commonly described as χρυσοχαίτης, χρυσοκόμης 'golden-haired'.

⁵ Perhaps Chryse can be seen as the precursor of the Thracian Aphrodite honoured in an inscription from Lemnos.

⁶ A failure to make the appropriate transition from love of boys to love of women may be implied at 1452 in the strange expression, of the sea, *κτύπος ἄρσην*.

⁷ The verb *πελασθεῖς* at 1327 is suggestive.

⁸ Snakes occur in several of the mythical doublets discussed, generally symbolizing danger to be overcome. An extreme case is that Rhodes was once known as Ophioussa ‘snake-island’.