

Georg Danek

## Heroic and Athletic Contest in Bacchylides 17

*Summary* – The traditional myth of Theseus, Minos, and the Minotaur is the story of a heroic conflict ending with physical defeat. The conflict of Minos and Theseus, too, as it is told in Bacch. 17, starts like a heroic contest suggesting a physical fight with deadly consequences, but ends like an athletic contest when Theseus achieves the winner's prize. So the poem may be understood as a substitute for the traditional story of Theseus and the Minotaur.

The narrative of Bacchylides' poem Ἡήθει ἢ Θησεύς tells the story of a conflict between Minos and Theseus, the exact nature of which is not easy to define. At the beginning of the fifth century, the period of the performance of our poem,<sup>1</sup> this conflict would have been called ἀγών; but the word ἀγών could comprise a lot of different things: a deadly fight within a battle of war, a formal duel, an athletic contest or any kind of contest, or even a law suit.<sup>2</sup> So, what kind of ἀγών is described in Bacchylides 17? To come to terms with these questions, I will start with some general observations on the nature of the agonistic conflict in the archaic and classical periods.

The basic form of, or the roots of and the source of inspiration for, the agonistic conflict in Greek culture should be seen in the combat, the fight of man against man over life and death. This kind of conflict follows no fixed rules, as there does not exist an international war-law in antiquity. The only restrictions that exist are based on common religious rules, as for instance the *ἰκεσία*. But as soon as it comes to a fight of man against man, the confrontation regularly ends with the complete or partial physical defeat of one of the two opponents. In this form of conflict, the loser loses his life or at least his freedom, and the winner has the right to take everything that formerly belonged to the loser: his armour in the situation on the battlefield and, if seen in a larger context, all his goods, as

---

<sup>1</sup> For an early dating of Bacch. 17 (before 490 B. C.) cf. H. Maehler, *Die Lieder des Bacchylides*. Zweiter Teil. Die Dithyramben und Fragmente. Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar, Leiden - New York - Köln 1997, 174–184.

<sup>2</sup> For the broad spectrum of meanings of ἀγών, see I. Weiler, *Der Agon im Mythos. Zur Einstellung der Griechen zum Wettkampf*, Darmstadt 1974, 23–36.

well as his wife and his children who are to become his slaves. This is the law of war, the *δίκη πολέμου*.<sup>3</sup>

The agonistic contest on the other hand, i. e. the athletic contest, may be defined as a ritualised form, and a kind of substitute or surrogate, of this warlike *ἀγών*. I will not discuss the intriguing case of the formal duel in Homeric warfare which constitutes something in between the rule-less war combat and the riskless athletic contest. Maybe this ritually controlled form of fighting constitutes one of the roots and sources of the idea of athletic contests.

Regardless of its origin, in the athletic contest fight and defeat follow well defined rules, and thus are reduced to a more or less symbolic level. In this case the loser does not lose anything, neither his life or freedom nor his goods or women or children; and the winner receives his reward for winning the contest not from the loser, but from an impartial third party (a judge, or a panel of judges). The winner's award does not necessarily consist in an object of great value, although this case is by no means excluded;<sup>4</sup> his prize may be a purely symbolic object as well, like the famous olive garland of the Olympic Games. What counts in this form of contest is that the winner is officially called *ἄριστος*, that he is better than all of the contestants.

These preliminary definitions underly the following reflections on the conflict between Theseus and Minos in Bacch. 17. When talking about this conflict we should be aware that it is dealt with in two entirely different stories which must be kept apart from each other.

The first story is the traditional myth of the Minotaur: when King Minos overcame the Athenians, he forced them to send seven girls and seven boys to Knossos at regular intervals where he threw them in the labyrinth to be devoured by the Minotaur. But when Theseus accompanied such a young crew he managed to win the love of Minos' daughter Ariadne. She gave him a means to overcome the Minotaur and to find his way back out of the labyrinth. So Theseus killed the beast, led his companions out of the labyrinth and sailed away, taking Ariadne with him.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the story will not concern us here, as variants abound.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., *Iliad* 9, 592–594.

<sup>4</sup> Contrary to the purely symbolic prizes at the games of Olympia or Delphi, there are, e. g., the notoriously huge prizes at the Panathenaean Games. Cf. now O. Palagia - A. Choremi-Spetsieri (ed.), *The Panathenaic Games*, Athens 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Parts of the myth are mentioned in Homer (*Il.* 18, 590ff.; *Od.* 11, 321ff.); the story as a whole is first attested not before Pherecydes of Athens (*FGrH* 3 F 148). But there are numerous pictorial representations of the central theme (Ariadne assisting Theseus' fight with the Minotaur) from 670 B. C. on (*LIMC* III, s. v. Ariadne, No. 36).

<sup>6</sup> For the inconsistencies of the variants cf. Plutarch, *Theseus* 20: Πολλοὶ δὲ λόγοι καὶ περὶ τούτων ἔτι λέγονται καὶ περὶ τῆς Ἀριάδνης, οὐδὲν ὁμολογούμενον ἔχοντες.

In Bacch. 17, we are confronted with a completely different story, although it covers a small segment of the plot of the first one: while the Athenian youths, accompanied by Theseus, are sailing from Athens to Crete, Minos tries to lay hands on one of the girls named Eriboia. Theseus reacts at once by warning Minos that, even if Minos is the son of Zeus, he himself, Theseus, is the son of Poseidon and Aithra who had received a certain golden object as a wedding gift from the Nereids.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Minos should stop using force against them, as Theseus is willing to use counter-force. By hearing this, Minos prays to Zeus to send a sign of his fathership, and challenges Theseus to dive into the sea and fetch a certain golden object from the sea, the house of his father Poseidon.<sup>8</sup> Following this “contract”, Zeus immediately sends a flash of lightning and Theseus jumps into the sea while the ship continues on its route to Knossos. Everybody expects Theseus to drown or get lost, but dolphins carry him to the palace of Poseidon. There he sees the Nereids with golden fillets in their hair,<sup>9</sup> and he comes to Amphitrite, Poseidon’s wife. She gives Theseus a purple-red coat and crowns him with a garland made of roses which has been given to her on her wedding day by Aphrodite.

At this point in the story, Bacchylides interrupts himself by introducing a γνῶμη, and so stops short his narration with a break-off formula which is typical for choral-lyric narrative in general, and specifically for Bacchylides’ narrative style.<sup>10</sup> He immediately resumes the narrative thread by stating that Theseus reappeared at the surface of the sea, right next to the ship, stopping short Minos’

<sup>7</sup> The papyrus reads χρύσειον ... κάλυμμα (36–38), which is one syllable short; Maehler (note 1, ad loc.) suggests χρύσειον ... περίπτυγμα. Even if we do not know exactly what kind of golden object is at stake, the point in the story is that the golden object would serve as the only existing proof for Theseus’ divine origin, but is not available in the immediate situation on board of the ship.

<sup>8</sup> Τόνδε χρύσειον χειρὸς ... κόσμον (60–62) may denote a finger ring or a bracelet. The poet does not tell us explicitly that Minos throws this object into the sea, but the deictic τόνδε sets this golden object in opposition to the other golden object that was mentioned first. So we are meant to understand that Theseus should repeat his proof of divine origin on the spot. Cf. J. Stenger, *Poetische Argumentation. Die Funktion der Gnomik in den Epinikien des Bakchylides*, Berlin-New York 2004, 100 note 152: the epithet “golden” is used in Bacchylides 21 times in connection with immortal beings, against 7 times without divine context.

<sup>9</sup> So the Nereids, who were called *ἰόπλοκοι* and gave Aithra a golden object, perhaps to be worn on the head (36–38), now wear *χρυσέοπλοκοὶ ταῖνια* (106f.) in their hair themselves. It is all the more remarkable that Theseus does not receive a golden object from them, as his mother did.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Rengakos, *Zu Bakchylides’ Erzähltechnik*, in A. Bagordo-B. Zimmermann (ed.), *Bakchylides. 100 Jahre nach seiner Wiederentdeckung*, München 2000, 101–112 (110–112).

expectations, and that the Athenian youths showed their regained confidence by shouting and/or singing the typical ὀλολυγή and παιάν. Then the poet, respectively the choir who are performing our poem, address themselves to Apollon of Delos to ask for success – maybe for success of the poem in the performance contest.<sup>11</sup>

When we compare these two stories, the first one, the traditional myth, has a strong beginning and a satisfying ending, even if the tradition contained several different – and ambiguous – endings, as far as the fates of Ariadne and Theseus' mortal father Aigeus were concerned. But as to the second story, Bacchylides apparently tells us an episode which seems to have no factual consequences for the story as a whole, as we experience no significant change of constellation from the beginning until the end of the narration: when the song starts, Minos is leading the young Athenians on his ship from Athens to Crete to put them to death,<sup>12</sup> when the song ends, Minos is still doing the same. From the perspective of the larger story, nothing has changed, and the problem which has been posed at the beginning has found no satisfying solution. We are left wondering what the story tries to tell us. And in fact it is this very problem that scholars have been wondering about since the Bacchylides papyri have come to light.

Nevertheless, most scholars have concentrated on secondary or purely technical questions: for instance, at what time the poem may be dated, that means, how we can relate the story of the poem to historical events,<sup>13</sup> if it was performed as a dithyramb, as the Alexandrian scholars thought, or as a paian, or as something else;<sup>14</sup> if Bacchylides used older sources for his stories or brought in new story elements, and if so, to what degree.<sup>15</sup> Questions concerning the narrative itself circled around minor problems, too: if Minos requests that Theseus bring back the golden ring/bracelet out of the sea, so why does Bacchylides not

<sup>11</sup> We lack any information on the historical performance situation, cf. Maehler (above, note 1), 167–170.

<sup>12</sup> It has been asked why Minos is on board of the ship anyhow; and, as the Athenians are here sailing on the Cretan king's ship, how will they arrange to escape from Crete to Athens again?

<sup>13</sup> See note 11.

<sup>14</sup> Dithyramb: B. Zimmermann, *Dithyrambos. Geschichte einer Gattung*, Göttingen 1992, 77–94; Paian: L. Käppel, *Paian. Studien zur Geschichte einer Gattung*, Berlin - New York 1992, 156–189; cf. S. Schröder, *Das Lied des Bakchylides von der Fahrt des Theseus nach Kreta (C. 17 M.) und das Problem seiner Gattung*, in Bagordo - Zimmermann (above, note 10), 128–160. For the ritual context of our poem cf. O. Lafrenz, *Die Dithyramben des Bakchylides. Dithyrambos und Initiationslied*, ARF 3, 2001, 37–66.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. E. Wüst, *Der Ring des Mythos. Zur Mythenbehandlung bei Bakchylides*, *Hermes* 96 (1968), 527–538; see now H. Maehler, *Bacchylides. A Selection*, Cambridge 2004, 174–176, who makes it plausible that Bakchylides invented the whole episode.

tell us that Theseus did so?<sup>16</sup> Should we conclude that our poet forgot the ring? Does that mean that Bacchylides is a mediocre poet?

Ruth Scodel was the first to suggest an interpretation that seems to give us a clue to a better understanding of the poem as narrative.<sup>17</sup> She points at the fact that the garland that Amphitrite gives to Theseus has originally been donated to her by Aphrodite on the occasion of her marriage. Now, when we remember the traditional story of Theseus and Ariadne, we come to conclude that it will be exactly these gifts by Aphrodite that make sure that Ariadne falls in love with Theseus.<sup>18</sup> And only due to Ariadne's love Theseus will be able to overcome the Minotaur, find his way out of the labyrinth, and escape from Minos on his ship, together with the fourteen girls and boys, and Ariadne herself. So, we might conclude, it is Minos himself who, first through his own ὕβρις – the transgression concerning a girl who is under Theseus' protection –, and then through his challenge of Theseus, sets in motion a process which will automatically lead to the loss of his own daughter Ariadne, and to his own destruction.<sup>19</sup>

Scodel's interpretation is corroborated by the fact that Bacchylides uses the same technique of breaking off his narrative of a mythical story before the end, in an almost regular way.<sup>20</sup> In other poems, too, the audience is forced to complement and complete the narrative by following the traditional storylines, in order to catch the point of the story, which would otherwise remain meaningless: In c. 5, the announcement of Heracles' marriage with Meleager's sister Deianeira looks forward at his fateful death and so brings down the "moral" of the epinician address to Hieron, namely that Hieron, like the greatest heroes of myth, should not expect to be lucky in every respect; in c. 15, Menelaus' warning against ὕβρις before the Trojan assembly foreshadows the fall of Troy; and

<sup>16</sup> For discussion cf. Maehler (above, note 1), 182f. Bacchylides is "corrected" in the mythographical versions of Pausanias 1, 17, 3 (Θησεία δὲ σφραγίδα τε ἐκείνην ἔχοντα ... ἀνελεθεῖν ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης), and Hygin. Astron. 2, 5 (... *ad Nereidas* ..., *a quibus anulum Minois ... rettulit*).

<sup>17</sup> R. Scodel, *The Irony of Fate in Bacchylides 17*, *Hermes* 112 (1984), 137–143.

<sup>18</sup> Amphitrite's garland was associated with Ariadne in a different way by Hyginus, *Astron.* 2, 5: *Alii autem a Neptuni uxore accepisse dicunt coronam; quam Ariadne Theseus dono dicitur dedisse, cum ei propter virtutem et animi magnitudinem uxor esset concessa; hanc autem post Ariadnes mortem Liberum inter sidera collocasse*.

<sup>19</sup> G. Ieranò, *Il filo di Eriboia* (Bacchilide 17), in Bagordo-Zimmermann (above, note 10), 183–192, suggests that Amphitrite's wedding garland hints at Theseus' forthcoming wedding with Eriboia whose name is attested as the name of a legal wife of Theseus. But this would mean that we ignore Ariadne's part in the story. Herwig Maehler suggests to me that Bacchylides simply took one of the traditionally given names of the Athenian girls (Επιβοία is attested on the François Krater) because it allowed a pun on her name (verse 14 βόασε τ' Ἐπιβοία).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Rengakos (above, note 10), 110–112.

in c. 18, the reported deeds of the unknown young hero foreshadow the coming of Theseus.

Scodel's interpretation may be challenged or modified for two reasons. First, we may ask why Bacchylides, after breaking off the narrative with the gnome ἄπιστον ὃ τι δαίμονες θέωσιν οὐδὲν φρενοῦραις βροτοῖς (117f.), resumes it again.<sup>21</sup> Our answer might be that by this way we receive, in a certain manner, two different endings of the narrative; Scodel's explanation applies only to the first ending, the gifts which Theseus receives from Amphitrite, not the second ending, his reappearance before Minos and the Athenian youths.

Secondly, it is not satisfying to search for the meaning of the poem exclusively outside of the part of the story which is narrated within the poem. So it is preferable to look at the story that is told in our poem, not as an episode taken from a larger context, an episode which is meaningless by itself, but as a story in its own right. Thus we should ask once again what kind of conflict is described in each of the two stories.

In the traditional myth we find a fight with deadly consequences, as Minos wants to put the Athenian youths to death by having them devoured by the Minotaur who is, typologically spoken, simply a monster, but in terms of genealogy something like Minos' stepson,<sup>22</sup> and therefore a kind of family related surrogate warrior for the king. Seen from this point of view, the myth contains the typical pattern of a war-like combat, if only in a derivated form: Theseus overcomes his enemy by killing his stepson (who just happens to be a monster as well), and as a consequence takes away his defeated enemy's daughter without – and this may be relevant as well – making her his legal wife.<sup>23</sup> In the traditional myth, the typical pattern of a war-like conflict transpires.

In our poem, too, we are made to expect a physical confrontation: Minos touches the girl (θίγειν, verse 12), and Theseus protests against the king's βία (verse 23) and ὕβρις (verse 41) lest he will show χειρῶν βία, too (verse 45). Our expectation of a war-like conflict is corroborated by two further facts. First, we find some vocabulary that underlines the warrior qualities of both Theseus and Minos, most prominently in the epithets attached to the heroes: Theseus is called μενέκτυπος (verse 1), χαλκοθώραξ (verse 14), ἀρέταιχμος (verse 47), and he possesses ὑπεράφανον θάρσος (verse 49). Minos is called πολέμαρχος (verse

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the similar transition in 3,57f., ἄπιστον οὐδὲν, ὃ τι θ[εῶν μέ]ριμνα / τεύχει, with Maehler's remark (2004): "In Pindar, this topos functions as a transition from the mythical narrative to the victor's praise or vice versa."

<sup>22</sup> Numerous early pictorial representations show the Minotaur with a human body and a bull's head and so express his composite character.

<sup>23</sup> This dark aspect of the story is mirrored in the fact that Theseus leaves Ariadne on Naxos and does not bring her home with him.

39), *μενεπτόλεμος* (verse 73),<sup>24</sup> *στραταγέτας* (verse 121), and his actions are called *ὑβρις πολύστονος* (verse 40), an epithet which Homer uses to describe the goddess Eris (11, 73), deadly arrows (15, 453), or the sad consequences of war (1, 445).

Secondly, the verbal exchange between Theseus and Minos follows a well attested speech type of the Iliad which could be called “genealogical boasting.”<sup>25</sup> Theseus tells Minos that he should not trust in his superiority because he is the son of Zeus, for he himself, Theseus, is the son of a god, too. With these words Theseus suggests that a fight between the two heroes will be a deadlock, and that the decision will be brought about not through the superiority of origin, but through fate, as they will be equals in fight. Consequently, Theseus concludes, Minos should stop using force against the Athenian youths to avoid a fight. But Minos does not give in, instead replies by continuing the talk about their divine ancestors.

In the Iliad this type of dialogue usually leads directly to a decisive fight between the two opponents. In Iliad 21, Achilles challenges Asteropaios by asking him: ‘Why do you confront me? Who are your ancestors?’ Asteropaios answers: ‘I am the grandson of the river god Axios, so come and fight!’ Achilles does not answer at once, and so they fight until Asteropaios lies dead on the ground. It is only then that Achilles comments: ‘So be dead, because even if you boasted to be the son of a river god, I am the great grandson of Zeus who has more might than all the rivers of the whole world!’ (21, 140–201).

In a similar way, Tlepolemos challenges Sarpedon by boasting: ‘Why don’t you fight? You cannot be the real son of Zeus. Instead, my father Herakles, who captured Troy for the first time, was a real son of Zeus! So I will kill you!’ Sarpedon replies: ‘Herakles could take Troy only because king Laomedon was a *hybristes* (who cheated not only Herakles, but the gods, too). But I will kill you now!’ Then they fight, and of course Zeus’ son will prove better than his grandson and kill his opponent (5, 628–698).<sup>26</sup>

With these two cases, the underlying principle of the type scene “genealogical boasting” comes forth most clearly: epic heroes talk about their divine

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Maehler (2004), ad verse 73 (*μενεπτόλεμος*): “The audience is consistently led to expect a fight, a violent clash – instead, the conflict is resolved on a different level.”

<sup>25</sup> The Iliadic type scene “genealogical boasting” may be labelled as a sub-type of the pattern “verbal exchange between enemies before / during a combat”, for which “the poet clearly had no fixed pattern”: see B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad*, Wiesbaden 1968, 101 (cf. 32; 161f.).

<sup>26</sup> For this scene see Fenik (above, note 25), 66f., who accepts only the rebuke pattern, and not the challenge pattern, as the basic form of the Iliadic type scene. But in the examples listed below “rebuke” should be understood as “challenge in disguise”.

ancestors because they are convinced of the principle that, the more divine their origin is, the more they will overcome their opponent in fight.<sup>27</sup> Direct comparison offers the best criterion for heroic valuation: an offspring of Zeus will necessarily prove better than a minor deity's son; the offspring of any god will prove better than a hero without divine ancestors.

Starting from this principle, we can explain several variations of "genealogical boasting" in the *Iliad* as being exceptions from the basic form, caused by individual circumstances. In book 13, when Idomeneus in the course of his minor *aristeia* meets with the opposition of Deiphobos, he challenges him by boasting to be the great-grandson of Zeus (13, 446–454). Deiphobos does not reply but retreats behind the lines to find a helping comrade – and comes back together with Aineias who is, as we all know, the son of Aphrodite.

Other cases of one-sided genealogical boasting may be explained in a similar way: Diomedes challenges Glaukos to fight, if only he is not a god; Glaukos gives his full genealogy, but is not countered because Diomedes stops short the duel (6, 123–236). Aineias gives Achilles a full account of his divine origin, but Achilles does not reply – and we do not need a decision between the two heroes on the genealogical level, because the gods break off the fight before the decisive blows (20, 158–352).<sup>28</sup> Lykaon gives his genealogy, but passes over his divine ancestors; Achilles replies by mentioning his divine mother, and kills the young Trojan (21, 34–125).

In this way, we can explain most cases of genealogical boasting in the *Iliad* as variations of an underlying type scene that may have sounded traditional, and familiar, to Homer's audience: 'Fight with me! (or: Don't fight with me!) My (divine) ancestors are better than yours!' When we come back to Bacchylides, we find that our poet sticks close to the *Iliad*'s basic model, only in a slightly modified form: Theseus says 'Don't fight with me! Our divine ancestors are equals!' This means that Bacchylides presupposes the knowledge of the *Iliadic* pattern and plays with the audience's expectations: following the *Iliadic* model, Theseus' first speech makes us expect a reply of Minos in which he accepts the

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Fenik (above, note 25), 67: "... the greater the father, the greater the son. With one exception, this always works when put to the test." (Fenik's examples include only divine fathers.)

<sup>28</sup> The two heroes' origins have already been compared before: Apollon encourages Aineias to challenge Achilles as his mother Aphrodite is mightier than Achilles' mother Thetis (20, 104–109). Cf. Fenik's comment (above, note 25, 67): "Normally this should have worked, but Apollo and Aeneas both seem to forget that there had been a special prophecy about Thetis' son." We could say, as well, that Achilles in the *Iliad* behaves very much like he is Zeus' son, and that he will only be killed through the personal intervention of the god Apollon. For the structural unity of the sequence see D. Lohmann, *Die Komposition der Reden in der Ilias*, Berlin 1970, 161–169.



challenge, and consequently some kind of physical combat between Minos and Theseus.

On the other hand, this expectation contradicts the audience's expectations caused by the traditional myth: both Minos and Theseus must arrive safely in Crete to bring the story to its prescribed end, and so the two heroes are not allowed to kill each other. Of course this is exactly what will happen in the end of our poem: when the narrative comes to its conclusion, nobody has been defeated, and nobody has won the power over his opponent's possessions. So we are left with two questions: When, and how, is the typical Homeric pattern "genealogical boasting leading to a combat" stopped short? And, what is it changed for?

Let us start with the second question by taking a closer look at the end of the poem. The outcome fits well in the pattern of an agonistic contest as I have tried to describe in the beginning of this paper: although nobody has been killed or wounded, it is obvious that Theseus, by miraculously emerging from the depth of the sea, has proven *ἄριστος*. Minos is disappointed; Theseus is welcomed by his compatriots with a *paian*, the typical song of triumph and success.<sup>29</sup> We can better grasp in detail the signals of an agonistic, i. e. athletic context when we compare parallels in typical epinician speech, concerning three motifs: gleam, shout, garland.

Gleam: Theseus appears as winner gleaming with the gods' gifts (123f. *λάμπει δ' ἀμφὶ γυίοις θεῶν δῶρα*). Gleam as sign of a winner is a regular feature in Pindar,<sup>30</sup> and it is explicitly called a gift from the gods.<sup>31</sup> With Bacchylides, we find the motif only once, reduced to the formula *σὺν ... τε Νίκα / σὺν Ἀγλαΐα τε* (Bacch. 3, 5).

Shout: The winner Theseus is welcomed by his comrades with a ritual cry, the *ὄλουγή* of the girls, and the *παιάν* of the boys. We find several instances of shouting at the decisive moment of an athletic contest as a spontaneous reaction of spectators, in Homer<sup>32</sup> as well as in Pindar<sup>33</sup> and Bacchylides.<sup>34</sup>

Garland: Theseus reappears with a garland on his head. The garland is the most important visible sign of the winner. It appears several times in Pindar,<sup>35</sup> but it is only with Bacchylides that it is systematically employed: We get the

<sup>29</sup> For the ritual function of the *paian* see Käppel (above, note 14), 43–65.

<sup>30</sup> Pind. I 1, 22, *λάμπει δὲ σαφῆς ἄρετά*.

<sup>31</sup> Pind. P 8, 96f., *ἀλλ' ὅταν αἴγλα δίοσδοτος ἔλθῃ, / λαμπρὸν φέγγος ἔπεστιν ...*

<sup>32</sup> *Iiad* 23, 847, 869.

<sup>33</sup> Pind. O 10, 72f., *καὶ συμμαχία θόρυβον / παραίθυξε μέγαν*. O 9, 93, *διήρχετο κύκλον ὄσσα βοᾷ*.

<sup>34</sup> Bacch. 3, 9, *θρόση δὲ λ[ι]αός*. 9, 35, *βοᾶν ὤτρυνε λαῶν*.

<sup>35</sup> Pind. I 1, 21f., *γευσόμενοι στεφάνων / νικαφόρων*, etc.

mention of a winner's garland in every single epinician poem which offers us a few lines of text, at least.<sup>36</sup> Amphitrite crowns Theseus with a ἀμεμφέα πλόκον ... ῥόδοις ἐρεμνόν which comes from Aphrodite. So of course there is only a secondary association with a winner's garland which is coupled with the relevant gods of the respective contests (Olympia: olive branch; Pythia: laurel, etc.).

If this association is correct, we can explain the mysterious αἴων πορφύρεη (verse 112),<sup>37</sup> too: in Nemean 10, Pindar gives a list of contests which his addressee Theaios of Argos has won: He won at Delphi; he achieved a garland on the Isthmos and in Nemea (25f.), and he received vases filled with olive oil in Athens (34–36). His relatives won several times, too, at the Isthmia and the Nemean Games, and brought back silver drinking cups from Sikyon and soft coats draped around their necks from Pellene (41–44), besides a lot of bronze from Kleitor, Tegea, and Achaean towns. This catalogue of contest awards through Greece includes woollen coats.<sup>38</sup> So my guess is that the αἴων which Amphitrite wraps on Theseus may have opened similar associations to a contemporary audience: Theseus, as winner, gets the winner's coat and the winner's garland, both objects of a purely symbolic or representational value.

The development from warlike conflict to agonistic contest is signalled by a further motif: three times in our text we are told that somebody is astonished. The girls and boys on ship are astonished on account of Theseus' θάρσος (verse 47 τάρφον); Minos is astonished as Theseus jumps into the sea (verse 86 τάφεν); and when Theseus reappears from the depth of the sea close to the ship, he is a θαύμα πάντεσσι (verse 123). In Homer, astonishment is the typical reaction of heroes who are not active, i. e., spectators of preeminent deeds both in fighting<sup>39</sup> and in athletic contests.<sup>40</sup> In our poem, the Athenian youths first admire Theseus' fighting spirit in his heroic quarrel with Minos which they cannot interfere in. But in the second instance, it is Minos, Theseus' opponent, who is astonished. This signals that, at this point of the plot, Minos has been reduced to, or degraded to, a spectator of Theseus' heroic actions without being able to intervene any more. This constellation fits well in the pattern of the athletic contest: for instance, when one of the competitors grabs the discus, the other ones are not allowed to intervene but must wait for the result.

<sup>36</sup> Στέφανος (or similar expressions): Bacch. 1, 158; 2, 10; 3, 8; 4, 16; 6, 8; 7, 11 (στε]φά-ν[οισι]); 8, 30 (ἀνδημ' ἐλαίας); 9, 23; 10, 16 (ἀνθεσιν); 11, 28; 13, 69; 13, 197; 14B, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Maehler (2004), ad loc.: "a piece of cloth, a shawl or cloak" (suggesting Egyptian origin); J.F. Gaertner, *Bakchylides 17, 112, Hesych ε 2225 und die Geschichte des Wortes αἴων*, *WSt.* 116 (2003), 71–75, votes for one of the old conjectures *ώϊαν* (Ellis) oder *ειανόν* (Jebb) while adhering to the meaning "cloak".

<sup>38</sup> Pind. N 10, 44, ἐκ δὲ Πελλάνας ἐπιεσσάμενοι νῶτον μαλακάσι κρόκαις.

<sup>39</sup> *Iliad* 3, 42, θάμβος δ' ἔχεν εισορόωντας.

<sup>40</sup> *Iliad* 23, 881.

Our next question: How, and at which place within the narrative, has the plot of a typical Homeric fight been changed and transformed into the plot of an agonistic contest? Several stages lead from the beginning of the narrative, with its signals of a war-like fight between Minos and Theseus, to the end, with its contest-like character:

- The boasting match of Theseus and Minos should lead to a fight.
- Minos transforms the boasting match into a mutual challenge, defining special conditions, so that the confrontation now looks like a formal duel following well defined rules, (who shoots first?), or a contest (what precisely has to be done by each contestant to win the pre-defined award?).
- If Theseus is able to fulfil his part of the contract, he will be recognized as an equal. But the feat which he has to perform is an evidently impossible feat which, in case of failure, will automatically lead to his death.
- When Theseus accepts the conditions defined by Minos, the boasting-leading-to-fighting match finally has become an agonistic contest.
- Theseus does not fulfil the impossible human action (bring back the ring) but, instead, has an unbelievable personal meeting with the gods and brings back to the ship the proofs of this meeting.
- Thus, Theseus proves his divine origin in a much better way than Minos had asked him to do. Therefore, he is not only equal to Minos, but much better, as his divine contacts are much closer than Minos’.
- Theseus proves better, i. e. winner of the contest, whereby the deed which defines his victory is identical with his acquiring the winner’s awards: the garland and the coat.

And there is a final question: what does Theseus’ heroic, and at the same time athletic, feat consist in?

Theseus’ mission consists in repeating the initial act of proof of his divine fatherhood, namely the donation of a golden object to his mother by his father’s representatives, the Nereids. When Theseus comes down to the Nereids, they are still responsible for the motif “gold in divine hands”, when the poet describes them wearing golden fillets in their hair. Theseus gets frightened when he sees the Nereids with their more than human gleam. This represents the critical moment of Theseus’ ἀγών, the challenge to overcome. The danger, however, exists only on a symbolic level, because there is no physical aggression coming from the Nereids’ part. This is made visible when the poet changes his perspective from the dangerous gleam to the lovely sight of the Nereids’ dance.

When Theseus has passed by the “dangerous” Nereids, he meets Amphitrite, his divine father’s wife. Thus he has reached a god who is much closer to the ideal goal of his journey, Poseidon himself, than the Nereids. If we take this into account, we understand that Theseus gets a much better proof of his father’s

identity, too, than his mother had got, as well as a proof that is much more personal and individual than the proof which Minos has got from his divine father Zeus.

The whole action works only on a symbolic level: Minos' challenge that started as a physical act is changed to a symbolic action. Instead of killing Minos' "stepson", Theseus manages to get in touch with his own divine "stepmother", and instead of (re)gathering golden objects he receives proofs of his divine origin which have a hidden significance, one that reminds us of awards in athletic contests: the garland, and the coat.

So, let us conclude. If we agree that Bacchylides' story can be seen as kind of an agonistic contest, what does this mean for an understanding of the poem as a whole? Athletic contests can be labelled, as we have seen at the beginning of my paper, as a ritualistically formalized substitute or surrogate for a fight at war. The traditional myth of Theseus and the Minotaur is the story of a physical conflict that ends with the death of one of the opponents (viz., his surrogate) and the abduction of the king's daughter. Consequently, the story of our poem can be understood as a substitute of the traditional myth. It is not an isolated episode taken from a larger context, but a *pars pro toto* for this very myth. The narrative of our poem helps us better understand what really counts in the conflict between Theseus and Minos: it is not the fact that Theseus overcomes the monster Minotaur, but the observation that Theseus is a better hero than Minos, even before he performs the more famous deeds of his career. What really counts is not, to do this or that, but to be ἀριστος by nature.

#### Appendix A: The text of verse 74f.

The text of Pap. A, Θησεῦ, τάδε μὲν †βλέπεις†, is one syllable short. Maehler (ad loc.) rejects the conjectures ⟨σὺ⟩ τάδε μὲν βλέπεις (Kenyon) and τάδ' ἐ(μὰ) μὲν βλέπεις (Platt), and suggests, as a guess, τάδε μὲν ἔδρακες. I propose to add a simple γε:

Θησεῦ, τάδε ⟨γε⟩ μὲν βλέπεις

#### Appendix B:

In the new museum of Kerameikos, we find the following red figured vase painting:<sup>41</sup>

A man riding on a dolphin, looking to the left. He wears a long cloak to his legs, and a helmet which makes it impossible to decide if he has a beard or not,

<sup>41</sup> Vitrine 11, object no. 15 (no. T 278/VK), labelled "Lekythos", dated to the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B. C.

and has two spears in his hand. In front of him stands a second man, looking to the right, so to confront dolphin and rider, and playing the aulos.

The common motif “man on a dolphin” should not be registered as representation of a mythological story (or a historical, i. e. Arion) without additional signals. In this case, however, things are different: The rider on the dolphin is an ambivalent figure as he wears, on the one hand, the civil cloak, and on the other hand weapons of war. Could this be a hint at Theseus, who was both the representative of the city of Athens, and a war hero? Or may we take the cloak as a hint at the motif “warrior on journey”? Anyhow, the presence of the *auletes* suggests that the content of the story represented in the painting is part of a poem, viz. the performance of a choral poem which is accompanied by the *aulos*. Could this be a representation of the performance of our poem, Bacch. 17?

Maehler discusses all representations of the motif “Theseus’ journey to the bottom of the sea”, starting from the krater of Euphronios of about 500 B. C.,<sup>42</sup> but he lists only paintings which allow an easy identification: a young hero, who is often carried by the Triton, and welcomed by Amphitrite. Most of these paintings differ in one or more details from the story as it is given by Bacchylides. I suggest that we take the *lekythos* of the Kerameikos as an early testimony, not only of the mythological story of “Theseus beneath the Sea”, but of the performance of Bacchylides’ Ἡΐθεοι ἢ Θησεύς. This might corroborate Maehler’s early dating of the poem’s performance before 490 B. C.

Georg Danek  
 Universität Wien  
 Institut für Klassische Philologie, Mittel- und Neulatein  
 Dr. Karl Lueger-Ring 1  
 1010 Wien

e-mail: georg.danek@univie.ac.at

---

<sup>42</sup> Maehler (above, note 1), 179–184. Cf. Maehler 2004 (above, note 15), 174f.