

The cows and the poet in ancient Greece

by

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Abstract:

In his articles about the myth of Kerambos, Jesper Svenbro writes about the equivalence between a cow and a lyre. This equivalence can be seen in the Mnesiepes inscription from Paros, where the young Archilochus is exchanging his cow for a lyre that the Muses themselves give to him.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, from the other side, Apollo says to his brother that his song, the lyre he constructed with his own hands, is worth fifty cows, the cows of his own cattle that Hermes had stolen before. Jesper Svenbro transfers this equivalence to sheep, in the story of Kerambos, as told by Antoninus Liberalis.

But it seems that cows can be the equivalent of the lyre. It is because the poet must abandon the cows in order to become a poet. Archilochus exchanges his cow for his lyre. And Pindar is using the metaphor of «ploughing» for the march of the chorus that is executing the 6th *Pythian Ode*.

That means that the activity of poetry can be substituted by the one of agriculture. As cows are the animals that were used mainly for ploughing, if executing poetry=ploughing the fields, we can assume that a cow=a lyre. The poet has to offer to his city something that can replace agricultural activity. At the same time, cows are the animals that are used to carry the heavy marble blocks from quarries used to the building activity. And poetry is also compared by the poets themselves and especially Pindar as better than sculpture, or the poem itself is compared to a building whose facade is its *prooimion*, its first introductory part. This can be seen for example, at the beginning of the same 6th *Pythian Ode* where the poem is compared to a treasury on the Delphic street. The cows are then necessary for two very important economic and social activities, agriculture and building. Thus the poet must replace them by his song, a song integrated into the social, religious, economic life of the greek *polis*.

In an article on the myth of Kerambos,¹ Jesper Svenbro writes about the equivalence between a cow and a lyre. This equivalence can be seen in the Mnesiepes inscription from Paros,² but also in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo. Analysing the story of Kerambos, as told by Antoninus Liberalis (Anton.Lib.XXII), Jesper Svenbro transfers this equivalence to sheep. The story of Kerambos for him has to do with transhumance and a poet that is punished because he is not integrated in the life of the city. The poet, Kerambos, is not offering his poems to the community but he is singing them alone on the deserted mountains. The same couple of texts, the Homeric Hymn to Hermes and the Mnesiepes inscription of Paros has also been the object of analysis by the archaeologist who discovered the inscription, M. Kondoleon. The

argument of the archaeologist is that the exchange of cows to poetry is possible because the original nature of the Muses is pastoral, as we can also tell about Apollo and Hermes.

The Mnesiepes inscription was visible on two ὀρθοστάται marble blocks in the Archilochus temenos in Paros. Because the inscription was written in verse, it had the form of the open pages of a papyrus book. Were the blocks part of the wall enclosure of the open air archilocheian *temenos*, or part of a doric prostyle temple,³ this is not too important for our purpose. We may only say that the inscriptions were part of a monument that had to do with the making of poetry, being a poetic product by themselves. Mnesiepes, presumably a person who was the recipient of the apollonian oracle to build the sanctuary of Archilochus, is also a word that can be translated as «who has the memory of words».⁴ The sanctuary, where sacrifices had to be offered to gods, and was common to Archilochus, Apollo Mousagetes and the Muses, was constructed outside the city.⁵ This inscription, which starts enumerating the sacrifices that have to be performed, tells the following story:

“Archilochus, when he was younger, was sent by his father Telesikles to the fields (ἀγρόν), to the demos that is called Meadows (Λειμῶνες), in order to sell his cow. He rose early at night, when the moon was shining, to convey the cow for sale to the town. When he arrived to a place which is called Lissides, he thought that he saw women in crowds... They asked him if he was leading the cow for sale, and when he answered positively, they told him that they would give him a worthy value (τιμὴν ἀξίαν). When all that has been said, he was no longer able to see either them nor the cow, and in front of his feet he saw a lyre (λύραν). Being astonished, he realized after a while that it was the Muses that had appeared to him and that they gave him the lyre as a gift (λύραν αὐτῷ δωρησαμένας).” (l. 22-38).

In this small story we truly see a cow that is being exchanged to a lyre. The cow is considered to value a lyre, and the word that is used means both *worship*, *esteem*, *honour* and *price*. In this paper we will try to examine which were for the Greeks the cows' attributes that are close to poetry allowing the cow to be an object of exchange with the poetic gift.

A few lines below in the Mnesiepes inscription, Archilochus thinks of the action of the Muses as a giving of a present (λύραν αὐτῶι δωρησαμένως). That means in a way that the price (or the value) of the lyre (the poetic gift), in his opinion, exceeds the one of the cow. In another fragment Archilochus speaks of his poetry merely as the “beloved present of the Muses” (Archil. fr.7: Καὶ Μουσέων ἐρατὸν δῶρον ἐπιστάμενος). Poetry as a present from the Muses is well attested from Hesiod, shepherd of sheep (*Theog.* 22 ff, *Erga* 659 ff). But Hesiod receives the poetic gift without being obliged to give something in exchange. This doesn't happen with Amphion, who receives it by the exchange of an altar for Hermes.⁶ Solon also speaks about the teaching of Muses' presents (Sol. 13 Bergk, 51). For other poets these presents can be, as we have just seen ἐρατά, but also ἀγλαὰ (*Theogn. El.* 1, 250; *Anacr. El.* 2, 3). The expression reminds of the gift exchange in the epos, but also the *agalмата*, offerings in the sanctuaries, as they are designed by their inscriptions.

L. Gernet has described and analyzed the mythic notion of value by the use of objects that can be designed as *agalματα*.⁷ The cow and the lyre are indeed a certain type of *agalματα*, objects of value, objects that may embody at the same time a mythic and religious aspect, but also a social inner power. As happens with the lyre and the cow, their first significance and use is that of a gift; later they become objects of consecration. But why the Greeks can estimate the cows' value? An answer could be its utility for the farmer. As M. Detienne⁸ writes, «the ox for the plough is a member of the unity of the family, and of the economic unity that form the *oikos*: it lives in the same house as the farmer and it is his most loyal companion at work». In fact, Hesiod, in *Works and Days* (Hes. *WD* 405) advises Perses «to get first of all a house, and a woman and an ox for the plough (βοῦν ῥ' ἄροτῆρα)—a slave woman and not a wife, to follow the oxen as well». Aristotle quoting this verse of Hesiod is making the comment that «the ox serves instead of a servant (οἰκέτης) for the poor», (*Arist. Pol.* I, 2, 1252b11-12).

As for the inner social significance of the cow, J.-L. Durand⁹ has well proved that in the Athenian rituals of the Bouphonia and Bouzygia the oxen are used as protagonists linking together sacrifice and ploughing, and at the same time, ἀγρός (the fields), χώρα (the territory) and πόλις (the city). The role of the Bouzyges is to accomplish a «sacred ploughing» with a team of oxen, during which they are pronouncing a series of ἀραΐ, «curses»: three curses that target the man who refuses to give water to another, to allow fire to be kindled from his own, and to show the way to one who is lost:

⁶ Ὁ γὰρ Βουζύγης Ἀθῆνῃσιν ὁ τὸν ἱερὸν ἄροτον ἐπιτελών ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἄραται καὶ τοῖς μὴ κοινωνοῦσι κατὰ τὸν βίον ὕδατος ἢ πυρὸς μὴ ὑποφαίνουσιν ὁδὸν πλανωμένους.¹⁰

For J.-L. Durand this means that «the journey of the cows through the fields with the plough... turns the χώρα into a place that is now appropriate to human

activity because it presupposes the possibility of spatial orientation...The result of the activity of ploughing is an appropriation of the land that can be cultivated, it is its transformation into a territory».¹¹

From the equivalence between a cow and the musical instrument of the lyre itself, that is used as a symbol for the poetic gift, we turn now, through the ritual of the Bouzygia and the sacred ploughing, to the equivalence between the activity of singing poetry and the main activity in which the oxen are used, that is ploughing. And this is related to a way of appropriating space, through the movement of the animal on the earth. In the prooimion (1-9) of the VIth Pythian Ode of Pindar we have the poetic activity seen as a sort of sacred ploughing:

«Listen! For indeed we are plowing once again (*ἀναπολιζόμεν*) the field (*ἄρουραν*) of bright-eyed Aphrodite or of the Graces, as we proceed to (*προσοιχόμενοι*) the enshrined navel of the loudly rumbling earth, where at hand for the fortunate Emmenidai and for Akragas on its river, yes, and for Xenokrates, a Pythian victor's treasury house of hymns has been built in Apollo's valley rich in gold».

Here, the march of a chorus that is executing the epinician ode is compared to the activity of the oxen which are ploughing a field. The processional reciting of the song is thought to be similar to the movement of the oxen that is tracing the earth. The song is presented at the beginning of the passage as the movement of the chorus and, a few lines further, as the front elevation of the treasury house of Akragas on the Delphic sacred way. To summarize, here we have the poetic activity seen as ploughing, movement and tracing of the earth, and the poem itself as a building, an *agalma*. Pindar in several other instances has the metaphor of the poem as an *agalma*, or a statue,¹² and of the poetic activity as the movement on a street.¹³ We know the very important role oxen had in building activity: their relationship to *agalματα* such as treasuries, temples or altars like the one Amphion gave to Hermes in exchange to the poetic gift, could also be that “Building was an occasional activity which relied heavily on casual labour...Moving stone required great teams of oxen: up to thirty-three yoke of oxen were employed to pull a single column drum from Pendele to Eleusis. Animal power in such quantities would simply be unavailable when harvesting, threshing, or ploughing were taking place”.¹⁴ Another new element here for Pindar's poetic metaphors is that of ploughing. Ploughing, besides its relationship to oxen and building activity, leaves behind the plough its tracks, its traces as lines on the earth ground, and here we have another element that comes inside our poetic metaphors, that of writing.

When Pausanias, visiting the sacred precinct of Olympia, he describes the chest of Cypselus, he writes:

«Most of the figures on the chest have inscriptions attached to them in the ancient letters: some of the inscriptions run straight down, but others are in the form which the Greeks call *boustrophedon*. It is this: the second line turns round from the end of the first as in the double race-course» (Paus. 5, 17, 6, transl. by Frazer).

The movement of the oxen for the plow is indeed used by the Greeks to describe a certain, very ancient, way of writing.¹⁵ In the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, because Hermes is aware of the footprints of the animals, when he steals Apollo's cattle, 50 female cows, he is thinking of a special trick to hide them: «Of these the Son of Maia, the sharp-eyed slayer of Argos then cut from the herd fifty loud-lowing kine, and drove them straggling-wise across a sandy place, turning their hoofs-prints aside. Also, he bethought him of a crafty ruse and reversed the marks of their hoofs, making the front behind and the hind before, while he himself walked the other way» (*H.H. to H.*, 74-78). It is these cows that Apollo will finally exchange to the lyre, the first lyre that the new-born god had manufactured with a tortoise shell.

While Hermes is playing the lyre, his brother «seized with a longing not to be allayed, opens his mouth» and says:

“What skill is this? What song for desperate cares? What way of song (*τις τριβος*)? And though I am a follower of the Olympian Muses who love dances and the bright path of song (*ἀγλαός οἶμος ἀοιδῆς*) -the full-toned chant and ravishing thrill of flutes-I am filled with wonder, O son of Zeus, at your sweet playing” (447-452).

Hermes finally gives his brother the lyre and promises him that in the same day he will teach him how to play it, and “he, for himself will graze down with wild-roving cattle the pastures on hill and horse-feeding plains” (491-492). The ending of the Hymn means that for both Hermes and Apollo, this exchange is valuable and that Hermes had accepted what Apollo was telling him before, that “this song of yours is worthy fifty cows” (437). Apollo.

Here, in this hymn, we have together the whole range of analogies we presented before: the lyre, or the poetic gift seen as a process, as an activity, and as a valuable object that is given as a present. The song of Hermes is presented by terms of activity, of movement (*τις τριβος-τέχνης ἡμετέρης ἐπιβήμ εναι*), as a way, a way of song that is *aglaos*, bright and joyfull. And this brings us back to the double metaphor of Pindar, where the march of the chorus represents both a ploughing of the earth, and a treasury house. But also it brings us back to the fact that the cows are *agal mata*, valuable objects that can be exchanged. The lyre itself is conceived by Hermes as an object of exchange, an *agalma*, an object that he will sell. When he first meets the tortoise, and before killing it to manufacture the lyre, he tells it:

“You shall help me and I will do you no disgrace, though first of all you must profit me” (Homeric Hymn to Hermes, 34-35).

We see that the ox for the plough is operating in different levels: it has an economic value due to its agricultural role, but also to its use in building activity and it can be an object of exchange. But also it operates as an appropriator of the space by the civic community, by moving in it and marking in out while ploughing. This movement is thought as equivalent to the “way

of song”, that the Muses are teaching to the poets, or Hermes to his brother. Can this mean that the role of the oxen in sacrifice and ploughing can be exchanged to that of the poetic activity? The poetic activity in fact takes place inside the Greek city. Archilochus is so well accepted by the city of Paros that for him a *temenos* is constructed and on an altar of this *temenos* he receives the honours of a hero. These honours are sacrifices, first of all to the Muses, to Apollo Mousagetes and Mnemosyne. In another way than the ox for ploughing operates in rituals as the *Buzygia*, the poet is operating inside the social system of the city.

But Archilochus understands the exchange of the cow to a lyre as a gift exchange.

The reason is perhaps, the oracle given by Apollo to his father, to whom it has been said: «Your son will be immortal (*ἀθάνατος*) and famous in song (*ἀοιδίμος*)». In that way Archilochus will realize his father name, Telesikles, «who has his accomplishment (*τέλος*) in fame (*κλέος*)». ¹⁶

The poet has *κλέος*, fame, and this will offer him a kind of immortality, of perpetual memory, Mnemosyne, through song. That is the reason why the citizens must sacrifice to the poet but also to Apollo Musagetes and Mnemosyne. This immortal fame has to do with poetry but also to the life of the community, the life of the polis. It is not without importance that Bacchylides speaks of his song as an “immortal *agalma*” (*ἀθάνατον ἄγαλμα*) (*Ep. X*, 9). For the same reason Pindar, in the continuation of his 6th Olympian Ode, compares his treasury of the hymns, which means his own poem, to a normal treasury building, that receives the damaging effects of weather and time, and he is concluding with his own products' immortality. The altar of Amphion, the statue of a sculptor, are objects that can be destroyed, as a cow is an animal, a mortal being. But poetry's immortality gives to the poet a fame that will last for ever, a fame that is generated from a mortal body with the aid of the Muses, exactly the same way, bees are coming out from the cows' dead body, a proof that it deserves our praise:

“And even when dead the ox is a splendid creature deserving our praise. At any rate bees are begotten of his carcass-bees, the most industrious of creatures, which afford the best and sweetest of fruits that man has, namely honey” (*Ael. On animals*, II, 57).

Bees from the carcass of the ox, bees that produce honey, honey as sweet as the song the Muses put in the mouth of the poet (*Hes. Theog.* 96-97).

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¹ Svenbro 1999, 133-147.

² Mnesiepes Inscription, Archilochus T4, Tarditi.

³ These two possibilities of reconstruction can be seen in: Kontoleon 1952, 39-95 and Ohnesorg 1982, 271-290.

⁴ See Nagy 1979, 303-308, where he interpretes Mnesiepes as “he who remembers the words”.

⁵ Kontoleon 1950, 258-261; Kontoleon 1964, 37-73; Orlandos 1960a, 246-257; Orlandos 1960b, 176-185; Orlandos 1961, 188-196; Lambrinouidakis & Wörle 1983, 283-368.

⁶ Philostr.10: τῆς λύρας τὸ σόφισμα πρῶτος Ἑρμῆς πῆξασθαι λέγεται.... καὶ δοῦναι μετὰ τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα καὶ τὰς Μούσας Ἄμφιονι τῷ Θηβαίῳ τὸ δῶρο; Paus. IX, 5,8: ὁ δὲ τὰ ἔπη τὰ ἐς Εὐρώπης ποιήσας φησὶν Ἄμφιονα χρῆσασθαι λύραι πρῶτον Ἑρμοῦ διδάξαντος.... Ἑρμῆι βωμόν φησι ἰδρῦσασθαι καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦτοι λύραν παρ’αὐτοῦ λαβεῖν.

⁷ Gernet 1968, 121-179.

⁸ Detienne 1989, 105.

⁹ Durand 1986.

¹⁰ Paroemiogr. Gr. I, 388 (Leutsch-Schneidewin). For the Buzygai see also: Plut. *Praec. Coniug.* 144a, Ael. Arist. *Or.* 2.1.20 Dind, Diphilus fr.62 Kock, Antipatros *SVF* III 253=Cicero *Off.* 3.54, Clem. *Strom.* 2.139.1. For the rituals of

Buphonia and Buzygia, see, among others: Burkert 2001, 85-96.

¹¹ Durand 1986, 179.

¹² The poem can be a monument, a μνῆμα (Pind.*Is.* VIII, 61-62), or for Bacchylides an «immortal agalma of the Muses» (ἄθάνατον Μουσῶν ἄγαλμα) (Bacch. *Ep.* X, 9), or a λίθον Μοισαῖον, (Pind. *Nem.* VIII, 47). In the *prooimion* of the *Fifth Nemean Ode* Pindar is denying the similarity to his work of that of a manufacturer of statues, that have the disadvantage of immobility. (*Nem* V, 1-6).

¹³ For the metaphor of poetry as a way, see Giannisi *forthcoming*.

¹⁴ See Osborne 1987, 14-16.

¹⁵ At the same time this line of writing on the earth has for the Greeks a constant need of renewal. And to do the sacred ploughing means to confirm each year the rules of the group’s life: Durand 1986, 187.

¹⁶ G. Nagy thinks that Telesikles as a name “combines the notion of poetic fame or *kleos* with the notion of rites as conveyed by the element *telesi-* (related to *telea* ‘rites’)", Nagy 1990,43. For the Mnesiepes, see also: Nagy 1990, 363-364.

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