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 where 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 who’s facade is its prooimion, its first introductory part. This can be seen for example, at the beginning of the same 5th 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.

In this small story we truly see a cow that is been 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 (λάρυν αὐτῶι δορσαμένας). 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 an another fragment Archilochus speaks of his poetry merely as the “beloved present of the Muses” (Archil. fr. 7: Καὶ Μουσέων ἑρατον δόρον 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. Solon also speaks about the teaching of Muses’ presents (Sol. 13 Bergk, p. 51). For other poets these presents can be, as we have just seen έρατι, but also άγλαι (Theogn. El. 1, 250; Anacr. El. 2, 3). The expression reminds of the gift exchange in the epos, but also the agalmata, 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 designated as agalmata. The cow and the lyre are indeed a certain type of agalmata, 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. Detienne 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 (Βοῦι τ’ ώρφητα) – 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. Durand 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, ἄγρεια (the fields), χώρα (the territory) and νόλις (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 φρασι, «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:

Ο γάρ βουζύγης λαθίσαν τὸν ἵεραν ἄροτον ἐπιτελών ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἄρασι καὶ τοῖς μὲ κοινωνίας κατὰ τὸν διὸν ἱδαίος ὑπὸ ἕκαστον οὐδὲν ἐπισκέπτετο (Paus. 5, 17, 6, transl. by Frazer).

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».

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 Fifth Pythian Ode of Pindar we have the poetic activity seen as a sort of sacred ploughing:

«Listen! For indeed we are plowing once again (δ ναπολίζομεν) the field (δ ναμαρέαν) of bright-eyed Aphrodite or of the Graces, as we proceed to (προσακομένας) the enshrined navel of the loudly rumbling earth, where at hand for the fortunate Emmenidai and for Akragas on its river, yes, and for Xenocrates, 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, and of the poetic activity as the movement on a street. We know the very important role oxen had in building activity: their relationship to agalma 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”. 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. 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 τρίβος] ⁸\. 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-rolling 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 beforehand, 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 of an object that he will exchange to the lyre, the first lyre that the new-born god had manufactured with a tortoise shell.

The reason is perhaps, the oracle given by Apollo to his father, to whom it has been said: «Your son will be immortal (ἄθανατος) and famous in song (δοιδήμος)». In that way Archilochus will realize his father name, Telesicles, «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” (ἄθανατον ἄγαλμα) (Επ. 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 interprets Mnesiepes as “he who remembers the words”.
6 Philostr.10: τῆς λύρας τὸ σώφισμα πρῶτος Ἑρμῆς πήξασθαι λέγεται... καὶ δοῦναι μετὰ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνα καὶ τοῦ Μούσας Ἀμφίων τῷ θεότοκῳ τὸ δόρο, Paus. IX, 5,8; ὁ δὲ τὰ ἐπὶ τὰς ἑταίριος ποιήσας φιλοσοφήσα τὸν ἅγιον Ἐρμοῦ διδάξαντος... Ἐρμή διδασάμενος φιλοσοφήσα καὶ ἄνων λύραν παρ’ αὐτοῦ λαβεῖν.
7 Gernet 1968, 121-179.
8 Detienne 1989, 105.
9 Durand 1986.
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” (ὁθάνατον Μουσᾶν δάγκλο) (Bacch. Ep. X, 9), or a λίθος Μουσαίων, (Pind. Nem.VIII, 47). In the prooimion of the Fifth Nemean Ode Pindar is denving 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 Giannissi 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.

Bibliography

Kontoleon 1950 M. Kontoleon, Prakt, 1950 (pr.1951), 258-261