# NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

## AJAX'S WEAPON IN *ILIAD* 15. 674–16. 123

In *Iliad* 16. 114–23 Hector with his great sword cuts off the point of Ajax's δόρυ μείλινον, and Ajax is forced to withdraw, leaving the ship of Protesilaus to be fired. The firing of Protesilaus's ship marks the main turning point in the poem, the moment for which Zeus has been waiting, for it signals the fulfillment of his promise to Thetis to honor Achilles by causing a defeat of the Greeks, and means that from this time on the action will change in favor of the Greeks (cf. 15. 596–614). The Trojans will now be driven back from the ships by the Greeks under the leadership of Patroclus, whom Achilles sends into battle at the moment when Protesilaus's ship is being fired. The importance of Ajax's weapon is clear from the fact that its failure results in the firing of Protesilaus's ship. A question remains, however, as to the nature of this weapon. Is it an ordinary spear? Or is it still the same long ship-pike which Ajax first picks up at the end of Book 15? I will argue for the ship-pike, an object which can be thought of as symbolizing the final defense of the ships.

We are told in 16. 120–21 that Ajax, having lost the effectiveness of his weapon, realized with a shudder "the action of the gods: that loud-thundering Zeus was cutting off his devices of fighting and willing victory for the Trojans." J. Griffin, in his recent discussion of this passage under the heading "Symbolic Scenes and Significant Objects," remarks: "Ajax 'sees' the event as symbolic, and the poet agrees: Zeus is in fact urging on the Trojans and paralysing the Achaean efforts against them."[1] This is a perceptive comment, but Griffin says nothing about the question with which we are concerned, whether Ajax's weapon in Book 16 is still the ship-pike. If it is, the symbolism of the scene is enhanced, for the ship-pike is by its nature connected with the ships; and no other object seems better suited to symbolize their defense. M. Willcock assumes that Ajax's weapon is still the ship-pike,[2] and so does Eustathius, who notes in remarking on another symbolic feature of 16. 120–21: "the verb 'cut off' is nicely said, for the cutting off of the δόρυ is nothing other than Zeus fatefully cutting off the devices of fighting, one of which is the ναύμαχον δόρυ."[3] But neither Willcock nor Eustathius argues the matter.

In 15. 674–78 Ajax picks up a ξυστὸν ναύμαχον, a ship-pike twenty-two cubits (thirty-two feet) long, with a shaft composed of more than one piece of wood. Then, in 15. 730, 742, and 745 (the next-to-the-last line of 15), when he is fighting

1. *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), p. 44.

2. *A Companion to the "Iliad"* (Chicago and London, 1976), ad *Il.* 16. 114.

3. *Ad Iliadem* 1049. 20–25. We can compare πάγχυ μάχης ἐπὶ μήδεα κεῖρε/Ζεύς at *Iliad* 16. 120–21 with πάγχυ μάχης ἐπὶ μήδεα κείρευ/δαίμων at 15. 467–68, which is used of Teucer's bow when it falls from his hands, its new string having unexpectedly snapped.

from the central platform of one of the ships (presumably that of Protesilaus), his weapon is called simply an ἔγχος, "spear"; and finally, after an intervening passage at the beginning of Book 16 (1–100) in which Patroclus returns to Achilles, when Hector cuts off its point (114) it is called a δόρυ μείλινον, "ash spear."

The poetry of Homer, which consists in large part of formulas and themes, often describes the particular in general terms. This being so, the general terms ἔγχος and δόρυ μείλινον may very well refer to the ship-pike, which is a type of spear. Admittedly, one cannot be absolutely certain that such a reference is intended.[4] But we can put into the balance in favor of the ship-pike the fact to which Griffin has drawn our attention, namely, that Homer has a predilection for the special, significant object. One readily thinks of the shield of Achilles, the scepter of Agamemnon, the cup of Nestor, and the bed of Odysseus, and of such weapons as the bows of Odysseus and Pandarus and the great spear of Achilles. Why not also of the ship-pike of Ajax, the weapon that symbolizes the final defense of the ships?

Ameis-Hentze reject δόρυ μείλινον in 16. 114 as a synonym for the ship-pike, apparently because they think it inadequate to describe the composite shaft.[5] But the shaft of the ship-pike can be thought of as being composed of pieces of ash wood; and δόρυ in the singular can be used of a composite, as it is of the Wooden Horse in *Odyssey* 8. 507. Perhaps the poet used δόρυ μείλινον in order to emphasize the wooden shaft because he was describing how Hector cut through it.[6]

W. Leaf has a more complicated objection to Ajax's weapon in Book 16 being the ship-pike. In 15. 677 Ajax is said to brandish the ship-pike ἐν παλάμῃσι, and in 16. 107 to be wearing his shield in front. Leaf interprets ἐν παλάμῃσι to mean "in both hands" and, apparently assuming that Ajax needs both hands to wield the ship-pike, concludes that he is unable to do this in 16 where he is wearing his great body-shield in front.[7] But must ἐν παλάμῃσι mean "in both hands"? Can it not mean "in hand"? We can compare the use of χείρ in the plural for a single hand, as in *Iliad* 3. 271: Ἀτρεΐδης δὲ ἐρυσσάμενος χείρεσσι μάχαιραν. And when Ares wields his huge spear ἐν παλάμῃσι (*Il.* 5. 594), and Diomedes' spear rages ἐν παλάμῃσι (*Il.* 8. 111, 16. 74–75), must we imagine them using both hands? It seems more likely that they are using one hand or perhaps now one hand and now the other. The same can be said of Ajax in Books 15 and 16. We can be sure that he needs only one hand to wield the ship-pike, for he is an enormously strong man who can hurl a rock the size of a millstone (*Il.* 7. 270). Moreover, the fact that his shield is not mentioned in 15 is no proof that he is not wearing it there as well as in 16, for this is one of the most memorable pieces of armor in the *Iliad* and Ajax usually fights with it.

If the poet has had Ajax exchange the ship-pike for an ordinary spear, he has done so silently, κατὰ τὸ σιωπώμενον. But I can find no other really comparable

4. On ἔγχος, see K. Ameis and C. Hentze, *Anhang zu Homers "Ilias,"* vol. 5 (Leipzig, 1897), p. 117; and on δόρυ μείλινον (also found in *Il.* 5. 66, 16. 814, and 21. 178) my discussion below.

5. *Homers "Ilias"* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1905), ad *Il.* 16. 114.

6. Cf. *Il.* 21. 178, where Achilles' great spear is referred to as a δόρυ μείλινον when Asteropaeus tries to break it.

7. *The "Iliad,"* vol. $2^2$ (London, 1900), ad *Il.* 16. 102. H. L. Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments* (London, 1950), p. 165, agrees with Leaf.

example of the situation we are thus required to imagine. There are two instances in the *Iliad* where the source of a hero's spear is not specified, but these give little support to the idea that here the poet, without even telling us that Ajax gets rid of his ship-pike, has had him exchange this formidable weapon for a less effective (and less symbolic) ordinary spear. In *Iliad* 3. 380 the poet does not say where Menelaus obtains the spear with which he pursues Paris after their duel, but we can easily imagine that it is the same spear, now retrieved, with which he pierced Paris's armor in the duel, or perhaps some other spear he has found on the ground.[8] And in *Iliad* 21. 67 we are not told where Achilles obtains the spear he wields against Lycaon, but it seems likely that it is the same spear, now retrieved, which he earlier left on the bank of the river (21. 17–18). In these instances, contrary to what happens if Ajax exchanges his ship-pike for a different, ordinary type of spear, we learn how the heroes first get rid of their spears: Menelaus by hurling his against Paris, and Achilles by leaving his on the bank of the river; and the spears they later have are the same ones, or at least of the same type, as those they earlier get rid of.

Two features of the scene in Book 16 become more understandable if Ajax's weapon is still the ship-pike: first, that Hector cuts off its point with a great sword; and second, that the point makes a resounding noise as it falls on the ground. Hector's cutting off the point of Ajax's weapon with his sword is a unique event in the *Iliad*.[9] At three places (13. 162, 13. 608, 17. 607) a man breaks his spear on his enemy's shield or breastplate, and at two places (3. 361–62, 16. 338–39) a man breaks his sword on his enemy's helmet, but only here is a man disarmed by having the point of his weapon cut off. Perhaps this uniqueness is due, at least in part, to Ajax's weapon being a ship-pike. The ship-pike is twice as long as Hector's spear (as described in *Iliad* 6. 319), and so Hector's only chance is to try to cut off its point with his sword. As to the noise made by the point as it falls on the ground, this is described by the formula *βόμβησε πεσοῦσα* (118), which in its two other occurrences in Homer is used of a very loud noise: that of a helmet as it falls on the ground (*Il.* 13. 530) and that of a wine bowl as it falls on the floor (*Od.* 18. 397).[10] It is easy to believe that the point of a large ship-pike, but not that of an ordinary spear, might make so loud a noise, giving an audible signal of Ajax's failure to defend the ships.

There is one other explicit reference to the ship-pike in the *Iliad* besides that in 15. 674–77, where Ajax picks up his. In 15. 387–89, when the Trojans finally reach the ships, the Greeks are said to ward them off with ship-pikes they find lying nearby. It is arguable that this passage was composed in anticipation of Ajax's use of the ship-pike later in 15—and also in 16. Willcock comments that it "foreshadows" Ajax's later activity.[11] This is an understandable interpretation,

8. See P. von der Mühll, *Kritisches Hypomnema zur "Ilias"* (Basel, 1952), p. 73. A different—in my opinion, erroneous—interpretation is given by G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 191.

9. On typical features in *Il.* 16. 102–24, see B. C. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the "Iliad,"* Hermes Einzelschriften 21 (Wiesbaden, 1968), p. 190.

10. *βομβέω* (without *πεσών*) is used of a great stone discus as it falls on the ground (*Od.* 8. 190) and of oars as they fall on the water (*Od.* 12. 204).

11. *Companion,* ad *Il.* 15. 385–89.

but the term *foreshadowing* seems not entirely appropriate, for there is no clear reference forward to Ajax, and the two scenes are not exactly similar. A term used by the scholia (though not on the present passage) seems preferable: προοικονομία, which describes the anticipation of a future event or the preparation for it, and which can be distinguished from προαναφώνησις, "foreshadowing" in the strict sense of the word.[12] The poet has anticipated Ajax's defense of the ships with a ship-pike and prepared us for it by telling us that other Greeks have defended the ships with ship-pikes. But why should we think that this anticipation extends to 16? The answer to this question involves several related passages.

The passage in 15 on the Greeks defending the ships with ship-pikes immediately precedes that in which Patroclus leaves Eurypylus's hut to return to Achilles (390–405). I suggest that the poet has associated these passages in anticipation of Patroclus's return to Achilles while Ajax is defending the ships with a ship-pike. He has foreseen that these events will be contemporaneous and closely connected with each other. If this is so, it seems likely that Ajax still has the ship-pike in 16, for Patroclus returns to Achilles at the beginning of 16, and the description of their meeting in 16. 1–100 and 124–39 (where Achilles notices the firing of Protesilaus's ship and sends Patroclus into battle) is interwoven with the description of Ajax defending the ships in 15. 674–746 (where his weapon is called a ξυστὸν ναύμαχον and an ἔγχος) and 16. 101–23 (where it is called a δόρυ μείλινον).

We can interpret another passage in 15 as complementing the Greeks' defense of the ships with ship-pikes, and as corroborating the above interpretation. In 15. 414–18 we are told how Ajax and Hector fight over one of the ships—a scene which, as Willcock comments,[13] apparently foreshadows their later fighting over the ship of Protesilaus. Here the term *foreshadowing* seems justified because of the close similarity of the scenes. Now this passage, like that on the Greeks defending the ships with ship-pikes, is also associated with the passage in which Patroclus leaves Eurypylus's hut to return to Achilles, for it comes immediately after it. Again we have the same association, and we can explain it in the same way. The poet has anticipated Patroclus's return to Achilles while Ajax and Hector are fighting over the ship of Protesilaus. That these events have been so anticipated, and with them Ajax's use of the ship-pike, is not hard to believe, once we remember that the firing of Protesilaus's ship, which the failure of Ajax's weapon makes possible, marks the main turning point in the poem, the moment when Achilles sends Patroclus into battle to drive back the Trojans.[14]

R. M. FRAZER
*Tulane University*

12. See G. E. Duckworth, "Προαναφώνησις in the Scholia to Homer," *AJP* 52 (1931): 320–38, esp. 323–25; and N. J. Richardson, "Literary Criticism in the Exegetical Scholia in the *Iliad:* A Sketch," *CQ* 30 (1980): 265–87, esp. 267–69. An example of προοικονομία similar to ours is noted by schol. bT on *Il.* 4. 90, where Pandarus is described as being surrounded by men bearing shields; later, in *Il.* 4. 113–14, these men give him cover with their shields as he shoots his arrow against Menelaus.

13. *Companion,* ad *Il.* 15. 416.

14. The same technique of anticipation is also found in *Il.* 12. 1–8, where the carrying of the Greek wall is anticipated in association with a description of Patroclus's stay in Eurypylus's hut; it is the carrying of the wall that later, in *Il.* 15. 390–98, causes Patroclus to leave Eurypylus's hut.

I am grateful to C. E. Mace, J. P. Poe, and the anonymous referees of *CP* for suggesting improvements, and to R. Janko for providing a helpful reference.