

# XXIV. On the Episode of Onchestus in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo

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We read in the *Hymn to Apollo Pythius* the description of an amazing adventure of the charioteer coming on his car to the grove of Poseidon in Onchestus. Outlining the journey of the god from Delos to Delphi the poet mentions the visit of Apollo to Onchestus and relates what follows (229–38):

- 230 "Ενθεν δὲ προτέρω ἔκιες, ἑκατηβόλ' Ἀπολλον,  
 Ὀρχηστὸν δ' ἴξες, Ποσιδήϊον ἀγλαὸν ἄλσος·  
 ἔνθα νεοδμῆς πῶλος ἀναπνέει ἀχθόμενός περ  
 ἔλκων ἄρματα καλά, χαμαὶ δ' ἐλατὴρ ἀγαθός περ  
 ἐκ δίφρου τορῶν ὁδὸν ἔρχεται· οἱ δὲ τέως μὲν  
 κείν' ὄχρα κροτέουσιν ἀνακτορίην ἀφιέντες.  
 235 εἰ δέ κεν ἄρματ' ἀγῆσιν ἐν ἄλσει δενδρήεντι,  
 ἵππους μὲν κομέουσι, τὰ δὲ κλίναντες ἐώσιν·  
 ὥς γὰρ τὰ πρῶτισθ' ὁσίη γένεθ'· οἱ δὲ ἄνακτι  
 εὖχονται, δίφρον δὲ θεοῦ τότε μοῖρα φυλάσσει.

This puzzling story of the charioteer seems to point to a law which I would call a *lex sacra*, regulating the traffic in the grove around the sanctuary of Poseidon. The supposed law is only hinted at in the narrative<sup>1</sup> but can be uncovered with the help of similar rules known in other Greek sanctuaries.

This passage of the *Hymn* has been commented on by many scholars without their reaching agreement on the background of the story. For Böttiger, Baumeister and Bouché-Leclercq the episode reveals an oracular practice: if the young horses, allowed to go free, entered the grove, the omen was favorable; if they broke the car, the sign was averse.<sup>2</sup> Peppmüller thinks that the young horses, not used to a yoke, once let free, galloped into the grove

<sup>1</sup> Cf. line 237.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. T. W. Allen, W. R. Halliday, E. E. Sikes, *The Homeric Hymns*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1936) 236.

to find there an asylum, and they remained as sacred.<sup>3</sup> He accepts the correction of the text in line 235 as proposed by Barnes<sup>4</sup> and explains that the phrase ἐν ἄλσει should be linked with the clause ἵππους μὲν κομέουσι but not with the preceding one. This opinion seems not to agree with the statement in line 238, according to which the chariot alone was left in the grove and the horses were released. Allen views with favor the reading of Cobet and compares the driver's accident (parting of the car) with similar cases occurring in the hippodrome at Olympia.<sup>5</sup> It was there believed that, when Poseidon's anger was aroused by the wheeled traffic, he brought fear upon the horses, causing the chariots to break down. To prevent such an accident the drivers sought to appease the god with prayers. The reading ἀγῆσιν, which gives basis for his comment, does not fit the style of the narrative written in the present tense. The clauses in lines 235–36, summarizing the law of the sanctuary, call for the present rather than the aorist tense.<sup>6</sup> Allen, Halliday and Sikes in their edition of the *Homeric Hymns* comment at length on the Onchestus episode and think that the drive in the grove was not pure chance but a special rite performed upon a specific occasion.<sup>7</sup> The dedication of the chariot was made by the winner of the race at the festival of Onchestus. We know that Arcesilas and Euagoras offered their victorious cars to the gods at Olympia and Delphi.<sup>8</sup> M. P. Nilsson believes that the dedication of the vehicle was preceded by a test to discover whether Poseidon accepted or refused the offering.<sup>9</sup> L. Deubner thinks that the custom of Onchestus represents a rite of appeasement of Poseidon, who had been offended by the yoking of young horses.<sup>10</sup> A similar opinion was pronounced by H. Jeanmaire.<sup>11</sup>

It seems to me that these explanations in no way bring out the real background of the story. The related episode does not carry an oracular or ritual significance. It would be very strange for the winner of the race to make a dedication of his broken car; the

<sup>3</sup> *Philologus* 53 (1894) 257–60.

<sup>4</sup> ἀγῶσιν or ἀγάγῶσιν instead of ἀγῆσιν, MSS., and ἀγῆσιν, Cobet.

<sup>5</sup> *JHS* 17 (1897) 247. Cf. Gebhard, *RE*<sup>2</sup> 4 (1932) 2288–92, s.v. "Taraxippos."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Schwyzler-Debrunner, *Griech. Gram.* 2.684.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 2) 235–38. Cf. *JHS* 19(1899) xxxviii f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Paus.* 6.10.8; *Pind. Pyth.* 5.35 ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Griech. Feste* (Leipzig 1906) 70; *Gesch. gr. Rel.* (Munich 1955) 1<sup>2</sup>.447.

<sup>10</sup> *SB Berl.* (1938) 275–76.

<sup>11</sup> *REG* 73 (1945) 75–77.

narrative does not mention a course or race track but rather the road. The yoking of young horses is not essential for the story.

Before we turn to comment on the passage, let us cite what we know about the care of groves and about the regulation of traffic in Greek holy places. It was a constant concern of the religious and state authorities to preserve trees, bushes and lawns around temples. The destruction of greenery, the grazing, stationing and quartering animals on sacred ground were rigorously prohibited. We read in a decree in honor of the judges of Magnesia the following statement<sup>12</sup>:

νόμοις γὰρ ἱεροῖς καὶ ἀραῖς καὶ ἐπιτίμοις διεκεκώλυτο ἵνα μηθεὶς  
ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Δικταίου μήτε ἐνέμηι, μήτε ἐναυλοστατῇι,  
μήτε σπείρηι, μήτε ξυλεύηι.

The regulation concerning the grove of Hecate in Lagina (Caria) contains the following prescription<sup>13</sup>:

ἐὰν δὲ εἰσάγηι τις κτήνος καὶ νέμη ἢ βλάβῃ ἥτινι οὖν αἰτία τὸ ἱερόν,  
ἀποτεῖσα αὐτόν ἱερὰς Ἑκάτης <φ> ἄστινας καὶ πράσσεσθαι αὐτόν—  
πωλεῖσθαι δὲ καὶ τὰ εὐ[ρ]εθέντα κτήνη ὑπὸ τῶν ταμιῶν.

It was prohibited to bring into the sanctuary of Alectrona in Rhodes horses, donkeys, mules and other transport beasts.<sup>14</sup> There was usually in the neighborhood of the temples a special field or meadow where the animals needed for transport or cult purposes had to be tended and fed. Xenophon made such an arrangement on his estate: the animals were grazed on the meadow and in the forest around the grove of Artemis.<sup>15</sup> Two fragmentary inscriptions from Athens mention an area outside the sanctuary where animals designated for cult purposes had to be kept.<sup>16</sup> The *lex sacra* of Athena Alea of Tegea contains specific prescriptions regarding the pasturing of victims, herds and transport beasts.<sup>17</sup>

We can consider the episode of Onchestus in the light of the above regulations. The entrance of the chariots and horses into the grove of Poseidon was surely liable to impede the traffic, to

<sup>12</sup> SIG<sup>3</sup> 685.80. Cf. No. 1157.80–82.

<sup>13</sup> BCH 44 (1920) 78, No. 11d.5–8. Cf. SIG<sup>3</sup> 963.35–36.

<sup>14</sup> L. Ziehen, *Leges Graecorum sacrae* 2, No. 145.

<sup>15</sup> *Anab.* 5.3.11–12.

<sup>16</sup> IG II<sup>2</sup>.295 and 310.

<sup>17</sup> Ziehen (above, note 14) No. 62 (= IG v.2.3).

incommode the pedestrians and to do damage to the surrounding greenery. The penalty provided for such misdeeds was usually the seizure of the animals or the cars. Greek penal law provided for the seizure of objects which caused damage or were prohibited from being brought in.<sup>18</sup> The fine for polluting the garden of Heracles in Thasus was the confiscation of the vessel in which the rubbish had been carried out.<sup>19</sup> Contamination of the fountains in Pergamum involved the penalty of seizure of any clothes and vessels which had been washed there.<sup>20</sup> The cult regulation of Despoina in Lycosura prohibited the ladies from entering the temple in luxurious robes and ornaments; the penalty for a breach of the rule was confiscation and dedication to the goddess.<sup>21</sup>

When the chariot entered the grove of Poseidon in Onchestus, the driver committed an infraction of the rule concerning traffic. That such rules existed in the Greek sanctuaries we learn from the above *lex sacra* of Tegea in which we read the following prescription<sup>22</sup>:

εἰ κ' ἂν παραμαξεύε θυσθεν τᾶς κελε[ύθ]ο τᾶς κακειμέναν κατ'  
'Αλέαν, τρίς ὁδελὸς ὀφλὲν [ἂν] τι φεκάσταν.

A fragmentary cult regulation of Apollo Lycaeus contains the prohibition: *μηδ' ἱππεύεσθαι*. The meaning of this rule is not fully clear; nevertheless the forbidding of riding on horse or car seems to be herein set forth.<sup>23</sup> The law regulating the procession from Athens to Eleusis during the Mysteries mentions riding on vehicles and requires that cars be left at a place close to the sanctuary called *χωρίον*.<sup>24</sup> This regulation must be very old because a similar question is treated in a fragmentary text of the fifth century B.C.<sup>25</sup> We can suppose therefore, I think, that such a law forbade charioteers from entering the grove of Poseidon in

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. Wilhelm, *Jahresh. d. oesterr. arch. Inst.* 12 (1909) 144.

<sup>19</sup> Ziehen (above, note 14) No. 110 (= *IG* XII.8.256), 6.

<sup>20</sup> *SEG* 12.521.184-87 and 191.

<sup>21</sup> Ziehen (above, note 14) No. 63.

<sup>22</sup> Ziehen (above, note 14) No. 62.23-24. The meaning of the adverb *θύσθεν* is not clear. Ziehen and Bölte think that it has the same significance as *ἔξω*. W. Vollgraff believes that the word should be read *θ' ὕσθεν* and signify "la partie de la route défoncée par les pluies." Cf. *BCH* 70 (1946) 625. M. Guarducci seems to accept the opinion of Ziehen. Cf. *Riv. di filolog. e di istruz. class.* 30 (1952) 64-65.

<sup>23</sup> Ziehen (above, note 14) No. 51.3.

<sup>24</sup> *Hesperia* 10 (1941) 67, No. 31.39.

<sup>25</sup> *IG* I<sup>2</sup>.183.

Onchestus. In this connection the reading *ἄγῳσι*, as Barnes proposed, is preferable.

The story described in the *Hymn* can then be outlined as follows. The charioteer on his way to the sanctuary of Onchestus approaches the grove of Poseidon. Before entering the sacred precinct, he jumps down from his car and proceeds on foot, leaving the vehicle somewhere close to the grove. I do not think that the horses were free to gallop where they liked; the expression "they rattle the empty car" here as elsewhere <sup>26</sup> does not point necessarily to a fast motion, but it emphasizes rather the emptiness of the car. To give a reason for the charioteer's behavior, the poet cites the law regulating the traffic in the grove of Poseidon: if anyone drives a chariot within the area of the grove, he is allowed to keep his horses, but he must overturn the car and leave it there. The story of Onchestus aims to extol the splendor of the grove of Poseidon by reporting the custom, still observed in the poet's time, of walking and not riding in the holy place.

<sup>26</sup> *Il.* 11.160; 15.452.