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„THE EVIL HERB” OR THE SCISSORS OF QUEEN BERENICE.  
REMARKS ON *THE LOCK OF BERENICE*  
(CALL. 126 ASPER, 110.43–78 PF.)

In the poem *Coma Berenices*, which afterwards became an integral part of the 4<sup>th</sup> book of *Aetia*, Callimachus puts into the mouth of a personified lock a complaint against the scissors, which separated hair from the head of the beloved queen<sup>1</sup>. The scissors were made of iron defined by the poet as κακὸν φύτον. The lock swears that it has left the head against its will, but it could not oppose, because even huge mountains were unable to oppose the power of iron when, at the command of Xerxes, the king of Persia, a canal through Isthmus near the mount of Atos was constructed, which made it possible for the Persian army to cross it. Berenice's separated lock curses the perpetrators of this disaster (V. 6-8): Χαλύβων ὡς ἀπόλοιτο γένος, / γειόθεν ἀντέλλοντα, κακὸν φύτον, οἱ μιν ἔφηναν/ πρῶτοι καὶ τυπιδῶν ἔφρασαν ἐργασίην<sup>2</sup>.

The commentary on this verse, included in the latest (NB. excellent) edition of Callimachus' works<sup>3</sup> says that the poet considered the ore of iron as φύτον, „Gewächs”, *i.e.* „a plant”. Also the translation of the work done by the editor Markus Asper defines the expression used by Callimachus, κακὸν φύτον, in the following way: it was translated into German as „Gewächs” *i.e.* something that grows. Callimachus intensified this expression by an apposition: γειόθεν ἀντέλλοντα, κακὸν φύτον, owing to which the matter might seem to be clear enough: the iron ore means a plant emerging from the earth. *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* explains<sup>4</sup> that φύτον, denoting the ore of iron, appears in Callimachus' work as an exception

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<sup>1</sup> Fragment 126 Asper-110.43–78 PF.

<sup>2</sup> „May the tribe of Chalybes perish, who first discovered what emerges from the earth, this evil plant, and first learned the smith's trade...”

<sup>3</sup> *Kallimachos Werke. Griechisch und deutsch*, ed. and transl. by M. Asper, Darmstadt 2004, p. 172–177.

<sup>4</sup> *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H. G. Liddel and R. Scott, Oxford 1968, s.v.

to the rule. For the iron was generally defined as σίδηρος (Eur. *Alk.* 980; *Sch. Eur. Eis Alkestis* 980; Xen. *An.* V 5, 1; Aisch. *Prom.* 714 σιδηροτέκτονες; *Scholia Arg.* II 1007; Ap. R. *Arg.* II 1007 σιδηροφόρον). The ancient authors do not give information saying that the iron ore might have been associated somehow with beings of vegetal character. The question then arises whether Callimachus really thought that the iron ore was a kind of plant or κακὸν φυτόν might be interpreted in a different way.

Let us, then, take a brief look at what the ancients, including Callimachus, handed down to us about the iron ore.

According to mythological sources, Cyclops and Dactyls<sup>5</sup> were the first experts in ironworking. Hesiod, in his work *Theogony*, writes about Cyclops as excellent blacksmiths (*Theog.* 146). Orphic theogony (FRG. 92 Abn. = Prokl. *In Plat. Tim.* I p. 327 Diehl) maintains that it was Cyclops who had taught ironworking to Hephaestus and Athena<sup>6</sup>. We can find references to those mythological versions with Euripides (*Alk.* 5), Apollonius of Rhodes (*Arg.* I 510; 730), and also with Vergil (*Aen.* VIII 427, *Georg.* IV 170); Ovid (*Met.* I 259; III 305), Diodorus (IV 71); Quintus of Smyrna (XIV 445 f.) while in the scholia to *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes (I 1129) some verses survived from the epos *Phoronis* (Kinkel *Epic. Gr.* 211 frg. 2), which tells about Dactyls as the inventors of ironworking art. Callimachus recognized Chalybes as inventors of iron<sup>7</sup>. The ancients did not define precisely their abodes. For the most part the sources inform that they were situated on the Asiatic coast of the Black Sea<sup>8</sup>. Heketaios of Miletus<sup>9</sup> imparted information that their main town had been Stamene, the πόλις of Chalybon (....) is ἔθνικὸν Σταμεναῖος καὶ Σταμένιος. More precisely the place of their abodes is determined by *scholia* to *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius: this Scythian tribe lives in the vicinity of the Thermodon river<sup>10</sup>. Their neighbours are the Tibarenes and their name is derived from Chalyps, the son of Ares<sup>11</sup>. According to Mela

<sup>5</sup> O. Kern, *Daktyloi*, RE IV (1901), col. 2018–2020; B. Hemberg, *Die Idaiischen Daktylen*, *Eranos* 50, 1952, s. 41–59.

<sup>6</sup> S. Eitrem, *Kyklopen*, RE XII 2 (1922), col. 2332; W.H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Hildesheim 1993, Vol. II 1, col. 1676ff, 1678ff, 1687ff.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, we could suppose that Callimachus, tracking all rare versions of the myth, would recognize Dactyls as the inventors of iron, and not a generally known myth about the priority of Chalybes in this domain. In this case Callimachus was guided by another principle: the poets connected with the Alexandrian court willingly referred to the rulers' political interests introducing in their works information on the lands lying within the sphere of their political interests. It is known that after 284 B.C. Lysimachus presented his wife Arsinoe II, a sister of Ptolemy II, with the towns of Heraclea Pontica, Amastris and Tios, places where there were iron ore beds and where Chalybes could be encountered. Through the connexions with Arsinoe those territories remained in the interest of the Ptolemies.

<sup>8</sup> Ap. R. II 1002–1002; Hec. apud Steph. Byz., Eustach. To Dionys. Perieg. 768; Mela I 105.

<sup>9</sup> Steph. Byz. Ph. Chalybes 676, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Schol. Ap. R. II 1007.

<sup>11</sup> Schol. Ap. R. II 373.

(Mela I 105) their territory constituted the lands around Sinope and Amisus, *i.e.* they were situated farther to the west. Pliny places them around the river of Thermodon and the locality of Kotyora<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, *scholia* to *Alkestis* by Euripides<sup>13</sup> notice their skill in this respect, moreover, they determine their abode: they lived on the Pontus. The ancients also emphasize that ironworking constituted the basis of their maintenance (Xen. *An.* 1: Her. I 28; p. 12.3.19 (549 C); Val. Flacc. *Arg.* IV 600 f., V 105 f.). Some information on mining ore in that area may be also found with Aristotle, *Mirab.* 58 (834b 11 f.). The similar information is found with Apollonius of Rhodes, who widely presented, in a poetic way, their hard work connected with obtaining iron<sup>14</sup>.

Nowhere in the passage mentioned above do we have any indications that Apollonius, who made use of the same library collections as Callimachus, associated iron ore with plants. In one of his prose works (Call. frg. 481 Asper; 407 Pf) Callimachus wrote about the mining of ore from the beds near the islands of Demonesoi, lying in Propontis at the entrance to the Bosphorus. The ore beds lie under water, the ore is mined by divers from the depth of two ὀργυαί, *i.e.* 4 metres. Probably he derived this information from the work of Theophrastus *Peri metallon*<sup>15</sup>. In the fragment preserved, there is a lack of any premise allowing for a supposition that Callimachus regarded the iron ore as a formation which would resemble plants in respect of its properties; here, there is only a description of how this raw material was obtained.

Why, then, did he use the expression *κακὸν φύτον* to define the scissors of the Queen?

In order to explain this question it may be worth examining the context in which Callimachus put it: Chalybes, the producers of scissors used for cutting off Queen Berenice's lock were cursed by the same lock: “May those who have discovered iron perish”. Similarly, Chalybes, as well as their product, cannot meet with friendship on the part of the wretched hair, so the iron should receive a negative valuation, too. *Φύτον*, that “creature”, receives a negative emotional load on

<sup>12</sup> Kotyora, a colony of Sinope in the country of Tibarenes over the coast of Pontus Polemoniakos; in Pliny this locality bears the name of Cotyurum: Plin. *N.H.* 6,11.

<sup>13</sup> *Schol. Eur. Eis Alkestin* 980.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. Rostropowicz, *Apolloniosa z Rodos epos o Argonautach* (*The Epos of Apollonius Rhodius on the Argonauts*), Opole 1988, pp. 26 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Up to now the matter has not been explained whether Theophrastus wrote in this work about metals or mines. Cf. P. Steinmetz, *Die Physik des Theophrastos von Eresos*, Bad Homburg-Berlin-Zurich 1964, p. 299–304. V. Rose, *Aristoteles Pseudepigraphus*, Leipzig 1863, entitled this work as *peri ton metallon*, following here the ancient sources (D.L. 5.44, Harpocr. *Lex.* 108.22. *Poll onom.* 7.99, *Simpl. In Phys.* 3,5, *de caleo* 3.2, Philopon, *in Phys.* 2.1, Olympiod. *In Meteor.* 6.6). In reference to the times of Theophrastus the title *peri metallon* may be translated only as „About mines”, because until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. the word *μέταλλον* meant a mine, cf. Lidell-Scott, s.v. Callimachus drew this information just from Theophrastus, then we could consider his information as confirmation of the thesis that Theophrastus wrote in his work not exactly about metals but mines.

account of the definition given to it by Callimachus: κακὸν. In the Greek literature we can find several instances where the expression κακὸν φύτον was used in the function of abuse. In the monostiches of Menander, there is the following verse (Men. *Mon.* 304): κακὸν φύτον πέφυκεν ἐν βίῳ γυνή/ Καὶ κτώμεθ' αὐτὰς ὡς ἀναγκαῖον κακὸν<sup>16</sup>. And it is also here that we can find a definition that pertains to our interest: κακὸν φύτον. The context indicates that this expression should be understood as “misfortune”, as something that by its nature is “wretched”, “bad”. Here is used to define a woman, in general, a woman as a creature. Euripides used the word φύτον in a similar meaning<sup>17</sup>: γυναῖκες ... ἀθλιώτατον φύτον. This expression has the same sense in the utterance made by Alexander Rhetor<sup>18</sup>: εἰτ' οὐ περιεργὸν ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος φύτον. In the quoted examples the term κακὸν does not refer to things, but to persons. Why did, then, Callimachus use it with reference to the scissors?

Let us notice that in the elegy *Plokamos Berenices*, Callimachus creates a situation in which objects become animated and assume personal features: first of all, the lock becomes personified, as it utters a complaint against severing hair from the Queen's head. The poet added the personal features also to the spring wind, which carried away the hair and put it on the knees of Arsinoe adored before then. Even the hair which remained on the Queen's head is personified to some extent as the poet calls it “sisterly”. Owing to such an arrangement of utterances Callimachus created a situation in which not only the lock, but also other objects assume personal features. Also the scissors were invested with these features: they were indeed the perpetrators of this foul deed, *i.e.* they cut off hair from the head and that was not the Queen herself who did that with their help.

It seems, therefore, that we can suggest the following interpretation: similarly as the women in Menander's monostiches, in the tragedy by Euripides and in other texts mentioned above were defined pejoratively as κακὸν φύτον, so were the scissors, perpetrators of misfortune, treated here as persons and defined by the same abusing expression. Thus, κακὸν φύτον might be understood not as “Gewächs”, *i.e.* something that grows from the earth as a plant, but as a “miserable creature, disaster, evil”.

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<sup>16</sup> *Menandri sententiae*, Lipsiae 1964, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> *Eur. Med.* 231.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.