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The struggle for the Delphic tripod -a historical approach to an iconographic motif		
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Abstract

The struggle for the Delphic tripod is frequently depicted on Attic vases dated 550-450 BC. The author draws attention to the historical background of the 6th c. BC Greece and links these events to the origin and popularity of the motif. Prime event was a threat posed by Krisa to the Delphic oracle domination, which resulted in the First Sacred War. The second time was when the oracle leadership was endangered as Athens attempted to achieve domination and Delphi secured the assistance of Sparta to defeat Athens. Both wars influenced artists and the Delphic tripod struggle was shown as an allegory of Delphi's struggle to maintain its hegemony. Possession of the tripod was perceived as acquiring a religious dominance. The author analyses textual and archaeological sources. For the research purpose a selection of Attic vases with the motif was created. Out of 223 vases, 87 had identified provenance and were included in the author's selected catalogue. The analysis of the catalogue data and written contemporary sources leads the author to the conclusion that the popularity of the iconographic motif resulted from the Panhellenic role of the Delphic oracle and the conflicts with its opponents.

Keywords

struggle for the Delphic tripod, historical background, iconography, Greek vases

Introduction

In this paper, the author seeks the origin of the representation of the struggle between Apollo and Heracles for the Delphic tripod in the historical background of 6th c. BC Greece. Therefore, an interpretation of the tripod in the historical context is made, emphasizing the significance of local conflicts of Krisa vs. Delphi and Athens vs. Delphi, in their struggle for leadership and religious supremacy.

Research on this subject began in the 19th c. All the articles and other works published after the year 1930 (the most important one is Luce S.B. 1930) treat the subject in terms of only one way approach, either historical or iconographic. The aim of the author, of which only a part can be achieved here due to space limitations, is to conduct jointly the analysis of the historical background with that of the iconography of the Delphic tripod, using the author's own catalogue. The analysis, both of the catalogue data and textual sources lead the author to the conclusion that the popularity of the iconographic motif of the struggle for the Delphic tripod resulted from the role of the Delphic oracle and its conflicts with the opponents.

1. Textual sources

The struggle is a very popular theme on vase paintings.¹ What is more interesting, the same theme is not so common in textual sources. The author has identified the sources where the struggle has been mentioned as well as the ones where the tripod is being defined by its usefulness and functionality. The latter are also very important, since they allow us to understand the value of the tripod.

The earliest textual source to tell us about the quarrel between Apollo and Heracles is the *9 Olympian Ode*, by Pindar.² Researchers interpret the reference to Heracles fighting with Apollo as a contest for the tripod. The ode is dated between 468 BC and 456 BC. Unfortunately there are no earlier sources.³

The so-called *Bibliotheca* falsely attributed to Apollodorus is the best source that

¹ Kahili 1984, Lambrinudakis 1984, 1992, Siebert 1990, Woodford 1988.

² Pi. Ol. 9.43. 32 But Pausanias (10, 13, 8) writes, without giving details, that poets have already treated this subject. Pi. Ol. 9.43

³ But Pausanias (10, 13, 8) writes, without giving details, that poets have already treated this subject.

contains a description of the tripod theft myth from the Delphic oracle.⁴

The mythological handbook *Fabulae* written by Hyginus is a source, which also gives information about the kidnapping of the Delphic tripod. The version is similar to the one in the *Bibliotheca*, except for the timing of the story. Hyginus suggests that Heracles went to Delphi after the death of his children and his wife Megara, and not -as ps.-Apollodorus wrote -after the death of Iphitus.⁵

Pausanias, in the 10 book of his *Description of Greece*, on *Phocis and Ozolian Locris*, describes the fight between the two brothers, but he also for the first time mentions Leto and Artemis trying to help Apollo and Athena supporting Heracles.⁶ In the same passage, he goes on to mention the famous dedication of a monumental tripod at Delphi after the victory at Plataea. This usage of the tripod as a votive offering at the end of the Greco-Persian wars was already mentioned by Herodotus⁷, and is echoed later by other authors, such as Demosthenes and Diodorus Siculus.⁸

The votive usage was one among a range of functions for the tripod in Archaic times. Homer describes in the *Iliad* the tripod as a vessel⁹, a trophy¹⁰, or more generally as a precious object.¹¹ Also in the *Odyssey* Homer presents the tripod as a costly object.¹² Hesiod himself tells us that he won a tripod in the funeral games for Amphidamas of Chalkis in Euboea as a prize for a hymn.¹³

These uses of the tripod as a precious object account for the central role that the Delphic tripod occupied in the ritual and symbolic organization of the sanctuary. Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, the central part of the trilogy *Oresteia*, is the earliest source from which we know where the tripod was standing in the Delphic sanctuary.

⁴ Apollod. 2.6.2.

⁵ Hyg. Fab 32.

⁶ Paus. 10.13.7-9

⁷ Hdt. 9.81

⁸ Dem. 9.97; Diod. 11.33

⁹ Hom. Il. 18.236.

¹⁰ Hom. Il. 22.112

¹¹ Hom. Il. 23.416

¹² Hom. Od. 13.15.

¹³ Hes. Op. 657.

The three-legged object was positioned over a slot, on the tripod a stone slab was placed, on which the prophetess was sitting.¹⁴

Euripides and Aristophanes also write about the tripod as a chair for Apollo to sit on, in his Delphic oracle.¹⁵ Much later, Strabo describes the location of the tripod, confirming its continuing importance as a central symbol of Delphi over the centuries.¹⁶

In conclusion, Pindar, pseudo-Apollodorus, Hyginus and Pausanias described the history of the conflict between Apollo and Heracles. Pindar, the earliest of these, writing in the first half of the 5th c. BC, only mentions a possibility of a conflict between the brothers. The authors who take the topic of the struggle for the Delphic tripod in a much more specific way, are pseudo-Apollodorus, Hyginus and Pausanias.

Hesiod and Homer cited the tripod in situations where it is used to perform utility functions or as a trophy in a race or as a reward in a contest. The majority of writers and poets, selected by the author, named above, namely: Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Strabo, describe the tripod as a matter unquestionably associated with Apollo and his shrine at the Delphic oracle. Herodotus, Demosthenes, Diodorus Siculus and Pausanias in their works discuss the end of the Greco-Persian wars and recall how the Greeks celebrated the victory by setting up a tripod at Delphi, to express their gratitude to Apollo.

Of the authors mentioning the struggle, Pindar was the only one to live and work in the period in which the majority of vases were manufactured. Since many vases depicting the story were much earlier, it is clearly impossible that the poet himself was responsible for an initiation of this motif in iconography on pottery. The absence of references to an Archaic poem containing the story suggests that **there had to be a stronger impulse than the purely poetic for the emergence of such a large number of vases with a scene of the struggle for the Delphic tripod.**

¹⁴ Aesch. *Ch.* 806

¹⁵ E. Ion 93., Aristoph. *Pl.* 1.

¹⁶ Strab. 93.

2. The historical background

The tripod was an attribute of Apollo, often depicted with it on the coins of Croton, as it was meant to show his protection over the colony. The image of the tripod was carved in the rocks to mark the territorial boundaries of Delphi. It has been shown, in literature the tripod often appears as a tool in the oracle. This iconic importance comes from the tripod that stood in the adyton of the Delphic temple. The author in her work has gathered 223 vases depicting the struggle for the Delphic tripod, out of which 216 have been dated (table 1). The earliest are allocated to the period 550-500 BC, the latest; 425-375 BC. The vast majority -215 vases -originated in the period between the second half of the 6th c. BC and the first half of the 5th c. BC. Therefore, to understand the reason of such popularity of this iconographic theme, it is necessary to comprehend the historical background of the period prior to the second half of the 6th c. BC, since the political, religious and cultural events might have had impact on the choice of motifs for vase painting.

There is much discussion in the academic world regarding the First Sacred War.¹⁷ About its existence, consequences and importance. It should be taken under consideration that it was not a military action, only a type of staging a mythical war, from times before. The author however, relies on Boardman's work.

The FSW was being led by the Delphic Amphictyony, Athens, Kleisthenes of Sycion and Thessalian Eurylochos against Krisa. It was a strongly fortified town, situated in the valley of Delphi, in the Gulf of Corinth. Its geographical location was cutting off Delphi from the sea. Such location not only allowed robberies on pilgrims heading with gifts to the oracle to obtain answers to nagging questions. Such lawlessness was very profitable and easy for Krisa to carry out. The response to that constant threat to pilgrims was a military act against Krisa, which lasted from about 595 BC for the next ten years.

The war results were absolutely disastrous for Krisa. The victorious coalition razed

¹⁷ On the First Sacred War, cf. Davies 1994, Forrest 1956, Lefevre 1998, Parke, Boardman 1957, Robertson 1978, Sanchez 2001.

the city, destroyed the city walls, poisoned the water sources and murdered the entire civilian population. Territory of the city was devoted to Apollo and the local games were converted into Pythian Games, held every four years, the first ones took place in the year 582 BC.

The FSW is not described or even mentioned in ancient sources until the year 340 BC, during the congregation of the Delphic Amphictyony, in the speech of Aeschines against Ktesiphon.¹⁸ Thucydides did not pay attention to the war, claiming that all conflicts in Greece before the Persian wars were local.¹⁹

What is the connection between the FSW and the motif of the theft of the Delphic tripod?

The author argues that the conflict between Heracles and Apollo is an artistic representation of the conflict between the Delphic Amphictyony -de facto the city of Delphi -and the rich town of Krisa, which pursued to subordinate and exploit Apollo's sanctuary. Krisa was a real threat to Delphi in the run for preeminence and dominance in the region. First of all it had a very favorable geographic location and secondly through harassment and stealing the offerings from pilgrims, the town was becoming very rich.

It seems possible that in this case Apollo becomes the personification of Delphi and Heracles epitomizes Krisa. The divine hero stealing the tripod commits not just a selfish act of plunder and robbery, but it is an allegory of gaining the power over the Delphic oracle.²⁰

In the later period, the author also notes political activities of Delphi, which could have led to a renewed interest in this iconographic subject. In 561 BC Pisistratus takes over the power in Athens. The losers in the battle for power, the Alcmaeonidae, were expelled from Athens and settled in Delphi. They gained the favor of the oracle by helping to rebuild the temple, which burnt in 548 BC.²¹

¹⁸ Aeschin. 3.108.

¹⁹ Robertson 1978: 50.

²⁰ Parke, Boardman 1957: 277

²¹ Pi. P. 7.8-9.

After the death of the tyrant Pisistratus in 527 BC, the power was taken over by his two sons Hippias and Hipparchus. The brothers finished the construction of the temple of Athena on the Acropolis, and made the city a famous center of the goddess worship. A change in the political scene of Athens brought the murder of Hipparchus, causing repression and the second exile of the Alcmaeonidae. They renewed their earlier influence in Delphi and, as some say, bribed the oracle to convince Sparta to attack Athens and overthrow the tyrant.²² Sparta succeeded during the second intervention, leading to the resignation of Hippias in 510 BC. Delphi did not want to lose its influence in the region with the emergence of a new religious center at Athens, and took action to overthrow the tyranny that promoted it.

The symbol of the rivalry between the two cities in the sphere of religion is symbolized through the iconographic theme of Heracles and Apollo fighting over the Delphic tripod. The best instance of this new meaning given to the myth is to be found in the pediment of the Syphnian treasury at Delphi.²³ The erection of the treasury was a reminder about the importance of the myth and a trigger for the attic vase painters to use the theme in their work.

In summary, whenever there was a threat to Delphi domination, for the first time coming from Krisa during the FSW and for the second time coming from Athens during the reign of the sons of Pisistratus, the oracle found its way out, due to its influence and relations with other *póleis*. Both of these conflicts were so significant in the Greek world that they might have influenced the painters and inspired them to create a new iconographic motif. The owner of the Delphic oracle was Apollo, and his opponent was Heracles, who personified the Delphic competitors in the real world, that were first Krisa and later Athens.

There is also another aspect, that is very important, the process of foundation. In the Delphic version of the struggle, the conflict is resolved by the intervention of Zeus, the father of both Apollo and Heracles, who confirms Apollo's rights to the tripod. According to another source, the city of Gythion was founded in conclusion of the

²² Hall 2007: 230.

²³ Ridgway 1965, Watrous 1982.

reconciliation between the god and the hero after the struggle.²⁴ Tripodiscos founding myth was based on the view that the oracle gave a tripod to the founder of the new city and ordered him to build there a temple of Apollo.²⁵ Since Delphi's involvement in the foundation of cities was a crucial element in the sanctuary's activities, these stories suggest that the struggle motif also implied a prevalence of Delphi over its potential rivals in this important aspect, as a strong assertion of Delphi's monopoly of the foundation process throughout the Greek world.²⁶

The author sees the myth as a reflection of a struggle for the ownership of the Delphic oracle and a claim to Delphi's exclusive control over the foundation process. This way, the myth could have been used in a political way, since possession of the Delphic tripod defined who had the control in the Greek world over the oracle of Apollo.²⁷

Conclusions

The author suggests that the popularity of the iconographic motif of the struggle for the Delphic tripod on Attic vase painting between 550 BC and 450 BC resulted from the importance of the Delphic oracle in the Greek religious sphere and from the conflicts of Delphi with its opponents over the oracle control. Two major historical events took place in the 6th c. BC in the Greek world that have had an impact on the imagination of potters and painters. They "translated" the conflict between Delphi and Krisa and later between Delphi and Athens into an iconographic motif of the struggle for the Delphic tripod.

It might be that poetry also had an important role in the creation of the myth, but the absence of notices to works earlier than Pindar's odes, the dating of the vases

²⁴ Paus 3.21.8.

²⁵ Paus. 1.43

²⁶ Carruesco, Reig 2015.

²⁷ All of the vases gathered in the catalogue are of Attic production. This fact could raise an objection to my argument: why would the losing party of the struggle promote this iconographic motif? It is important to note that the political scene in Athens was a complex one in this period: the Alcmeonidae, for instance, sided with Delphi against the Pisistratids, as it has been shown. Another answer to this problem lies in the provenance of the vases. From further studies of the author, whose results will be presented in the nearest future, the vases were intended for export to Etruria (where over 50% of vases from the selected catalogue were found) and Magna Graecia. And this leads us back to the process of foundation and the struggle for the Delphic tripod as a symbol of Delphi's central role in that process, which was seen as an affirmation of Hellenism over foreign or remote peoples.

depicting this motif and the importance of monumental iconography such as the pediment of the Syphnian treasury, suggest that in this case iconography had the leading role in the spread of this myth, fraught as it was with a strongly political significance.

type of vase	550-500	525-475	500-450	475-425	425-375	Σ
amphora	44	26	7			77
lekythos	6	54	4			64
hydria	10	8				18
kylix	6	6	3			15
krater		4	6		1	11
oinochoe	5	3	1			9
skyphos	1	6				7
stamnos	1	1	2			4
olpe	2					2
pelike	1	1				2
pinakion			2			2
kyathos		1				1
chous		1				1
rhyton			1			1
pyxis	1					1
plate		1				1
Σ	78	112	26		1	216

Table 1. Table showing the dating in the years BC of Attic vases with representation of the struggle for the Delphic tripod.²⁸

²⁸ Dates are recorded in overlapping 50-year periods (BC) according to the system presented in The Beazley Archive. The symbol Σ means the total number of each type of vases in each period.

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