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Protesilaos: First to Fall at Troy and Hero in Northern Greece and Beyond

THE CHRONICLES OF heroism in all ages from Homer to Hastings, from Famagusta to the Philippines are filled with tales of those who have offered their lives first in battle in order that others might succeed.* Protesilaos, leader of the men from Phylake in Thessaly aboard forty ships, was the first such hero in the *Iliad*. The place where he made the supreme sacrifice was the beachhead near Troy.¹ His deed made him an object of veneration in Thessaly and Macedonia in later ages when these lands were seeking to establish a semblance of Homeric parity with Ithaca, Epirus, and the great Mycenaean cities of the Peloponnesus. The coins of a number of Greek and Greek imperial cities commemorate the images and the cults of Protesilaos.

Philippopolis in the Thracian heartland (modern Plovdiv in Bulgaria) under the Roman Emperor Elagabalus (A.D. 218 to 222) sets a northern limit in space and a late boundary in time for an image identified as Protesilaos.² The obverse of a 28 mm. bronze coin shows the laureate, cuirassed bust of the young Syrian Emperor facing to the right (Fig. 1). On the reverse, a warrior-hero, wearing a crested helmet and holding a large, round shield on the left arm, stands to the left. He is on a groundline, and his right

hand is lowered and extended, as if pointing to the ground in front of him (Fig. 2).

This hero standing in ominous fashion may be Protesilaos, popular in many cities from Thrace to Thessaly and who was the first Greek killed when he leaped off his ship on the landing at Troy. He is seemingly pointing down at the beach where he fell. The image used on this local coin late in the first quarter of the third century A.D. derives from a bronze statue of the era of the now-celebrated Riace bronzes, two monumental works of about 440 B.C., representing early Athenian (?) heroes and retrieved from a shipwreck at the foot of Italy. By the late Severan age, Philippopolis may have had such a bronze statue, or a Roman-period copy of the same, which the locals christened with the name of the first heroic casu-

* This short note is offered as a tribute to a distinguished contemporary. Ulla Westermark was already a legend in numismatic circles in the early 1950s when I was reading for a Ph. D. at University College, London, and spending many hours each day in the Students Room of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum. I would like to thank Mary B. Comstock, John J. Herrmann, Amy E. Raymond, Emily T. Vermeule, and Florence Z. Wolsky for help with this paper and the coins therein. Friends at Complete Photo in Cambridge, Massachusetts, helped prepare the illustrations.



Fig. 1. Thrace, Philippopolis, Elagabalus (218 to 222). AE 28 mm. Obverse. Bust of the Emperor. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.325.



Fig. 2. Thrace, Philippopolis. Reverse. Protesilaos standing, pointing to the ground.

alty in the ten-year war on the beach and before the walls of Priam's city. The original of the statue known as the Ares Borghe-se, in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, was not far apart from the image on the coin of Philippopolis, but the god of war in the Borghe-se statue and its other marble replicas, if this be indeed Ares, does not point groundwards.

The popularity of Protesilaos as a cult-hero in Northern Greece, Macedonia and Thrace, was related to the defeat of Darius at Marathon and, particularly, Xerxes in 480 and 479 B.C. The Greek warrior who leapt ashore to strike the first blow at the adversaries in the northwestern corner of Asia Minor could stand for all those Greeks and northern tribal peoples who fought against the Persians and their allies on the beachheads, from Abydos and Sestos along the Dardanelles to Athens and, ultimately, to the Bay of Salamis in the Saronic Gulf of Attica.

As a result of all this, the head of Protesilaos appeared on silver coins of Scione in Macedonia, the hero's name written in retrograde lettering on the crest of his helmet (Fig. 3). The prow on this tetradrachm's reverse cements the iconographic relationship of this coin of about 475 B.C., a spectacular effort for Scione which may have commemorated the removal of Xerxes and the threat of Persian power in Northern Greece.³

In the same vein, a large chalcedony intaglio of scaraboid shape can be dated about 480 B.C., or a decade later.⁴ Looking directly at the milky white stone, we see a large galley, a trireme, gliding to the left, the heads of rowers and soldiers visible along the open second deck. On the exposed, ornamented top deck, Protesilaos crouches with a long spear and a large, round shield. (The hero's shield was famous enough to have been given to Telephos after his death). He wears a conical Central Greek



Fig. 3. Macedonia, Scione, Circa 475 B.C. AR Tetradrachm. 27 mm. Obverse. Head of Protesilaos. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 60.1299.

("Boeotian") helmet and a cloak as he stares intently at the shore where he would soon give his life as an example to the other Greeks and in fulfillment of a prophecy or an oracle that the first man ashore would die (Fig. 4).

The coin of Scione and the chalcedony gem are the Early Classical manifestations of the cult of Protesilaos. Like other Homeric monuments and memories, the virtues of Protesilaos would survive into the reign of Elagabalus, nearly to the time when the Persian power (in its Sassanian form) was once more becoming a threat to the Mediterranean world.

The question of whether the bronze statue of the perhaps-wounded warrior springing forward is Protesilaos or another unfortunate hero continues to be debated. The pose seems perfectly suited to that of a warrior, spear in hand, leaping from a ship

to the shore. Greek Imperial coins of Elaious or Elaesus, the southernmost town in the Thracian Chersonnesus in the time of Commodus (180 to 192), show Protesilaos standing on the forepart of a ship, clad in helmet, cuirass, and short chiton, in the right hand a spear and with the left hand raised.⁵ The complete, almost-lifesized statue in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is a Roman imperial copy in marble of this lost masterpiece in bronze, a sculpture of the type found in numbers in Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli and representing famous originals of the period 480 to 320 B.C. from all over the Greek and Greek imperial world.⁶ The original was cast around 450 B.C.

Confirmation of the identification as Protesilaos seems evident in the fact that the British Museum replica of the statue, found at Cyzicus-Kyzikos on the Mysian coast of the Propontis, has a plinth in the form of a ram of a ship, surrounded by waves.⁷ This suggests that the warrior was represented as standing on the foredeck of a ship and in the act of hurling his spears against an enemy on the shore. Other heroes, such as the shadowy Kyzikos himself, have been proposed for this statue, but the presence of a copy from a garden near Rome adds to the weight of the identification as the more widely-remembered Protesilaos.

EPILOGUE

Protesilaos was buried at Elaious-Elaesus (now Eski Kale, the Old Castle) near the southern end of the Chersonnesus and the entrance to the Dardanelles. There was a temple dedicated to him at this town. Here Alexander the Great offered sacrifice at the



Fig. 4. Attica or Northern Greece, Circa 470 b.c. Chalcedony intaglio gem, scaraboid shape. L.: 31



mm. Protesilaos preparing to leap ashore. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.300.

tumulus in the year 334, at the beginning of his campaign, as Arrian put it, "to ensure for himself better luck than Protesilaos had".⁸ But the geography of hero-cults such as this, involving Protesilaos, is often not so simple. There was also apparently a so-called Tomb of Protesilaos at Sigeum-Sigeion in the Troad, north of Beşika Bay and on Beşika Burnu or headland. This, of course, may have been a cenotaph to recall the spot where Protesilaos fought and dispatched some of the Trojans before he was cut down by Hector.⁹ Alexander the Great carried the Protesilaos spirit with him and was the first to leave his ship and set foot upon the shore of Asia.

This second tradition of where Protesilaos was buried goes back at least to about 340 b.c., for the top of an Attic treaty relief shows Athena, the Demos, and Protesilaos (?). The relief, now in the Fitzwilliam Mu-

seum, Cambridge, was brought from Sigeion in 1801. The style of this upper part of a larger monument is purely Attic, as befits the art of a city once part of Athens and still influenced in the fourth century b.c. by sculptural traditions radiating from the cradle of democracy. The Athena of the Fitzwilliam Museum relief is the figure typical of the goddess in such diplomatic and urban monuments. The figure identified as the Demos, of Athens or more likely of Sigeum, is a bearded, himation-clad man. Protesilaos, as befits the myths of his unfinished house and his loving wife, is an elegant young warrior with a plumed helmet. This headgear also suggests a hero whose armor, like that of Achilles, would have been desired by Pergamene Telephos after his death at the beachhead.¹⁰

If this short tale began with the legends of the champion who becomes the first sacri-

fice in a long war, it can end with the legends of the voyager over the seas whose bones were claimed by more than one city on either side of the waters. Such was also the case with Christopher Columbus, thrice discoverer and explorer of the New World.

NOTES

1. "Protesilaos", by H. J. Rose, in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, Second Edition, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, pp. 890-891. "Protesilaos", by Gerhard Radke, in *Der Kleine Pauly, Lexikon der Antike*, IV, Alfred Druckenmüller Verlag, Munich, 1972, cols. 1195, 1196.
2. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession number 1987.325. Theodora Wilbour Fund in Memory of Zoë Wilbour. AE 28 mm. 17.40 g. *The Museum Year: 1986-87, The One Hundred Eleventh Annual Report of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston*, Boston, 1987, p. 52. ex Gerhard Hirsch Nachfolger, Munich, Auktion 154, May 13, 1987, p. 36, no. 590.
3. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession number 60.1299. Theodora Wilbour Fund in Memory of Zoë Wilbour. AR Tetradrachm. 27 mm. 16.40 g. M. B. Comstock, C. C. Vermeule, *Greek Coins, 1950 to 1963*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1964, pl. IV, no. 44. ex Hess-Bank Leu Sale, Zurich, 1960, no. 136. F. Brommer, *Denkmälerlisten zur griechischen Heldensage*, III. Elwert, Marburg, 1976, p. 431, no. 2.
4. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession number 1987.300. Morris and Louise Rosenthal Fund. Chalcedony intaglio gem, scaraboid shape. L.: 31 mm. *The Museum Year: 1986-87*, pp. 30, illus., 52. A companion intaglio of the same date and style, in the collection of Max Bernheimer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, shows the galley on its passage across Hellespont, before Protesilaos moved forward on the upper deck to be in position for his leap ashore.
5. B. V. Head, *Historia Numorum*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1911, pp. 259-260. A cast of the coin is illustrated as fig. 13, on p. 197, of the article by G. M. A. Richter, in *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, I, 1928-1929, cited below in notes 6 and 7.
6. Accession number 25.116. Hewitt Fund, 1925. H.: 2.21 m. = 7 ft. 3 in. G. M. A. Richter, *Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Catalogue of Greek Sculptures*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1954, pp. 22-23, no. 27, pls. XXV, XXVI. G. M. A. Richter, "A Statue of Protesilaos in the Metropolitan Museum", *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, I, 1928-1929, pp. 187-200. Joan R. Mertens, Curator of Greek and Roman Art, has kindly provided me with a print-out of all the references to 25.116, and, by association in recent years, the torso and plinth in London (see the following note). The most important include: J. Frel, "The Volneratus Deficiens by Cresilas," in *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 29, December 1970, pp. 171-177, with figs.; *idem*, "The Wounded Warrior in New York and London," in *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1973, pp. 120-121, and figs. 1 (detail of the wound under the right armpit of the New York statue), 2 (similar detail showing the wound at the break on the London statue from Cyzicus-Kyzikos). As J. Frel has noted this means that the lost original may or may not be the statue by Cresilas. As Protesilaos, the hero, whether or not the statue by Cresilas, has already suffered a wound, surely not mortal, before his feet touched the Sigeian sands. Martin Robertson, *A History of Greek Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, I, pp. 343-344; II, p. 677, note 121, etc., points out that Protesilaos on a prow was an anticipation of his wound or wounds; his candidate for the "wounded man falling" by Cresilas is elsewhere, a bronze statuette at St. Germain-en-Laye (p. 676, note 109).
7. H. (main part, as preserved): 1.27 m. = 4 ft. 2 in. A. H. Smith, *Catalogue of Sculpture in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, III, British Museum, London, 1904, p. 10, no. 1538. "Bought, 1876". G. M. A. Richter, *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, I, pp. 195, figs. 8, 9 (the torso), 196, figs. 10, 11 (the base of the statue with the ship's ram and the waves).
8. J. Freely, *The Companion Guide to Turkey*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1984, p. 113.
9. J. Freely, *The Companion Guide to Turkey*, pp. 119-120. J. M. Cook, *The Troad, An Archaeological and Topographical Study*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973, pp. 155, 178-186, especially p. 182. The most famous tumuli beside the sea to the northwest of Troy are those of Achilles, Patroclus, and Ajax. See Hachette World Guides, *Turkey*, Paris, 1970, p. 363. The treaty relief from Sigeum-Sigeion, described here, could have been incorporated into the tomb (really a cenotaph?) of Protesilaos, just as the Transitional to Early Classical stele now in Boston (Accession number 03.753) was set up at the tomb of Ajax, until it was brought by Frank Calvert to Thymbra Farm about or before 1892. See L. D. Caskey, *Catalogue of*

Greek and Roman Sculpture in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1925, pp. 25-26, no. 13.

10. Inventory number GR. 13.1865. Acquired by E. D. Clarke from among the stones of the Church of St. Demetrius in 1801. H.: 0.285 m. W.: 0.35 m. L. Budde, R. V. Nicholls, *A Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Sculpture in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*, Cambridge, 1964, pp. 11-12, no. 27, pl. 5. Protesilaos is identified by the inscription over his head.

SAMMANFATTNING

Protesilaos, ledaren för männen från Phylake i Thessalien, blev den förste som offrade sitt liv på stranden vid Troja. Hjälten står på framsidan av ett mynt från Philippopolis i Thrakien under Heliogabalus (218-222 e. Kr.) och pekar på marken. Hans huvud med namnet inskrivet på hjälmen finns på åtsidan av en tetradrachm från Scione, Makedonien, omkring 475 f. Kr. Slutligen förbereder sig Protesilaos för att hoppa i land på en skarabéliknande gem i chalcedon från omkr. 470 f. Kr. Det är också troligt, att marmorkopiorna i New York och London av en bronsstaty från ca 50 f. Kr. föreställer den thessaliske hjälten.

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