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Alexander Aetolus' *Astragalistai*[*]

Alexander of Aetolia (IV/III cent. BC) practised a massive πολυειδία in the Callimachean mode to the extent that, in modern times, his varied output confused the editors of LSJ. A long standing «elegiacus» (cf. LSJ[9] XVI), a characterisation probably effecting his positioning among the elegiac poets in Powell's *Collectanea Alexandrina* (121-130), had to be abandoned for «tragicus et lyricus» in the *Revised Supplement* (1996, X). On the other hand, Suidas (α 1127 = *TrGF* 101 T 1 = test. 1 Magn.) characterises him as *grammaticus* and tragic poet. In antiquity he was generally considered to be a poet of tragedies (and, probably, of satyric dramas)[1]: a τραγῳδοδιδάσκαλος according to the learned Polemon of Ilion (fr. 45 Preller = *TrGF* 101 T 8 = test. 8 Magn.), a member of the tragic pleiad (Suidas *l.l.*), corrector of the text of tragedies and satyric dramas by order of Ptolemy Philadelphus (Tzetz. *Com.* 1,1-7 = *TrGF* 101 T 7 = test. 7 Magn.). But as it happens, among the scanty remains of his work no fragment or reference can be related with certainty to a drama. Of the six fragments which Powell (frr. 10-16) collected under the heading *Tragoediae*, Snell, more prudently and much more hesitantly, selected only two for inclusion in the *TrGF* I 278f.

In the first of these fragments (fr. 10 Pow. = fr. 10 Magn.) the Aetolian poet appears to handle a story known from the *Iliad*: in his childhood folly Patroclus unintentionally killed the son of Amphidamas over knucklebones. As Amphidamas was an influential nobleman (*schol.* **AD** *Il.* XII 1 = Hellanic. fr. 145 Fowler Ἀμφιδάμαντος οὐκ ἀσήμου), Menoetius, to avoid a vendetta, took his son to Peleus' house where he grew up together with Achilleus. The phantom of Patroclus pertinently recalls such a story about (knuckle)bones and death in justification of his request to have his and Achilleus' bones buried together in *Il.* XXIII 85-88:

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[*] Abbreviations:
Seaford 1984: R. Seaford, *Euripides. Cyclops*, Oxford 1984.
Magnelli 1999: E. Magnelli, *Alexandri Aetoli testimonia et fragmenta*, Firenze 1999.

[1] The genre enjoyed its final flourishing in his immediate environment: Lycophron wrote *Μενέδημος Σατυρικός* (*TrGF* 100 F 2-4), Sositheos *Δάφνις ἢ Λιτυέρσης* (*TrGF* 99 F 1a-3) with which Alex. Aet. fr. 15 Pow. = fr. 13 Magn. is in direct dialogue (Magnelli 1999, 252f.). On Hellenistic satyric drama see, for example, Seaford 1984, 21f., B. Seidensticker in Id.-R. Krumeich-N. Pechstein, *Das griechische Satyrspiel*, Darmstadt 1999, 10f. Alexander is not discussed in P. Cipolla, *Poeti minori del dramma satiresco*, Amsterdam 2003.

εὖτέ με τυτθὸν ἐόντα Μενοίτιος ἐξ Ὀπόεντος
ἤγαγεν ὑμέτερόνδ' ἀνδροκτασίης ὑπὸ λυγρῆς
ἤματι τῷ, ὅτε παῖδα κατέκτανον Ἀμφιδάμαντος
νήπιος, οὐκ ἐθέλων, ἀμφ' ἀστραγάλοισι χολωθείς.

Greek boys loved playing knucklebones; and they did so quite passionately. Leonidas of Tarentum *AP* VI 309,3 = *HE* 45,3, for example, has Philocles, no longer a κοῦρος, dedicate to Hermes, *inter alia*, ἀστραγάλας θ' αἷς πόλλ' ἐπεμήνατο. And certainly all boys hated losing, as is apparent from the reactions of Ganymede, a clear-cut loser, in Apollonius of Rhodes III 122-124 ὀκλαδὸν ἧστο / σῖγα κατηφιόων ... / ... κεχόλωτο δὲ καγχαλόωντι. He eventually walks away empty-handed, ἀμήχανος, as Apollonius himself would have been in having to somehow discharge the Homeric associations with the Patroclus incident he so artfully evoked. Therefore, quarrels over knucklebones would not have been unusual. However, Patroclus' reaction, even though lacking bad intention, is at any rate extreme, but again it should not be imagined as unprecedented given that similar incidents were recorded in the history of the game. Suetonius, *Περὶ παιδιῶν* 1,21 (p. 67 Taill.) reports that some dice-throws (βόλοι) and πτώσεις ἀστραγάλων were called by the names of gods, heroes, kings, etc. and some others by reference to incidents involving the defence of honour or repulse of taunts resultant of defeat, ἀπό τινων συμβεβηκότων ἤτοι τιμῆς ἕνεκα ἢ χλεύης[2].

The *scholium* **T** on *Il.* XXIII 86a (V 382 Erbse) records that in a work (*i.e.* play or poem), by Alexander of Aetolia, called *Ἀστραγαλισταί*, *Knucklebone-players* (Meineke's palmary correction for **T**'s Ἀστρολογισταί) Patroclus' crime was perpetrated on the premises of their elementary schoolteacher Othryoneus. This piece of information is concerned with Homeric exegesis: it serves as ultimate proof that Patroclus killed a boy, not a man; when the incident occurred the two of them were attending an elementary school. Here is the text:

ἀνδροκτασίης· καταχρηστικῶς· παῖδα γὰρ ἀνεῖλεν, ὃν <οἱ> μὲν Κλεισώνυμον, οἱ δὲ Αἰανῆ, οἱ δὲ Λύσανδρον καλεῖσθαι. ἀπέκτεινε δὲ αὐτὸν παρὰ Ὀθρυονεῖ τῷ γραμματιστῇ, ὥς φησιν Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Αἰτωλὸς ἐν Ἀστραγαλισταῖς.

The three alternative names of Patroclus' victim given in the *scholium* indicate that the tradition of this Iliadic story was kept alive; extant references show this to have been due mainly to interest in mythography or genealogy (references in Erbse, *l.l.*). In poetry, though, beyond the *Iliad*, there is no reference before or after Alexander. The crucial difference is that, in his version, the setting of what might have initially been a private game between two boys with spectators, as in the scene

[2] Cf. *schol.* Plat. *Lys.* 206e (p. 456 Gr.) = Eust. *ad Il.* 1289,57, Pfeiffer on Callim. fr. 676. The appellation of many different throws is known, cf. Antipater of Sidon *AP* VII 427 = *HE* 32, and W. Headlam, *Herodas. The Mimes and Fragments*, Cambridge 1922, 133. On knucklebones as a game of the aristocracy see L. Kurke, *Coins, Bodies and Gold: the Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece*, Princeton 1999, 287-295.

vividly described in Plato, *Lysis* 206e, or without spectators, such as was the purely literary game between Eros and Ganymede in Zeus' garden in Ap. Rh. III 114f. (cf. Ps. Apollod. *Bibl.* III 13,8 [Patroclus] διενεχθεὶς *ἐν παιδιᾷ* περὶ ἀστραγάλων *παίζων* ... ἀπέκτεινε), shifts to the premises of a schoolmaster. The action is placed within the framework of an (Hellenistic, no doubt) elementary school.

The new setting constitutes a radical inversion of what would commonly be held as acceptable school activity. Knucklebone playing would be in place at the palaistra or symposium, whereas, as we learn from Herondas' eloquent third mimiamb, schoolboys are not supposed to spend much time on knucklebones, less so on the premises of their schoolmaster. In ordinary circumstances school is the place least appropriate for such an activity: in Plato *Alc.* I 110b, even for a boy as naughty as Alcibiades, school-premises and knucklebone-playground are kept separate: Socrates tells Alcibiades that he recalls him as a young boy protesting at his opponents ἐν διδασκάλων ... καὶ ὁπότε ἀστραγαλίζοις. In Plut. *Alc.* 192d young Alcibiades plays with knucklebones, as the anecdote narrated by Plutarch requires[3], ἐν τῷ στενωπῷ. Besides, at school lively (and fatal, as it turned out to be) gaming would not pass unnoticed. Should the teacher find out, his duty was, of course, to confiscate the knucklebones, much to the pupil's distress. This is cited as the action usually taken by the παιδαγωγοί in an *en passant* reference in the late Byzantine scholar Demetrius Cydonius *De cond. morte* 33 (4,22 Deckelmann) κλάειν ... ὥσπερ τὰ παιδία, ὅταν αὐτῶν οἱ παιδαγωγοὶ τοὺς ἀστραγάλους ... ἀφαιρῶνται. It becomes apparent that at least in real life, the chances of two schoolboys quarrelling at school unobserved in a game involving only the two of them are negligible.

However, Alexander of Aetolia's treatment is a product of literature, not an exact reflection of real life. In literature, as in real life, elementary schoolteachers throughout antiquity enjoyed the worst of repute. They belonged to «the very bottom of the social scale» often with implications of poor intelligence and, as a result, the mere name «schoolteacher» evolved to be an insult[4]. This reputation rendered them liable to disparagement and ridicule in all literary genres. With an idiotic teacher in charge, naughty schoolboys could be presented as playing with knucklebones when their teacher was absent (off-stage?); even when his back was turned. This would not be unimaginable, but it nonetheless seems inconclusive in our case since it would not provide time enough for the fight to flare up and, in addition, it weakens the role of Othryoneus in the fatal incident, reducing it to absence or mere inattentiveness. He is the school teacher mentioned by name in the Iliadic *scholium*; apparently he was a distinctive figure in Alexander's version. This Othryoneus, for all we know an addition to the story by Alexander, would probably have been, in some way, implicated in the unfortunate incident.

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[3] On the anecdote see T. Duff, «PCPS» IL (2003) 100-102.

[4] See A. Cameron, *Callimachus and his Critics*, Princeton 1995, 5-7, with reference to A.D. Booth, *Some suspect Schoolmasters*, «Florilegium» III (1981) 1-20.

If, as the available indications and general probability suggest, the schoolboys would be unlikely to evade the attention of their teacher whilst playing knucklebones on school premises, one would consequently be compelled to reckon with the *prima facie* uneasy possibility that Othryoneus would actually be cognisant of, and thereby complicit in, the «game» or some activity like a game (see *infra*). Would such a thing be possible at all? Very much so. In real life, the moral standards and everyday actions of a schoolteacher were not always closely monitored by busy or indifferent parents. Considering an example from contemporary literature, in Callimachus *Iambi* 5 (fr. 195 Pf.) the poet amiably satirizes, without naming him, a schoolteacher for a much more serious offence: he cautions him to desist from molesting his pupils lest he be caught.

Of course Othryoneus, an elementary schoolteacher aware, as it would seem, of gambling at his school, is not a teacher drawn from real life: he is a literary figment. In parody of school praxis, the master could be presented as tolerating a contest with knucklebones as the prize, thus turning the school into its polar opposite, a gambling place (cf. Herond. 3,11-13, and Isocr. *Ant*. 287), and schoolboys into ἀστραγαλισταί. Pupils playing with knucklebones at school act foolishly; it goes beyond foolishness to kill an opponent. Yet, Othryoneus would appear to be a first class idiot as well. There may be further reason to assume that he was indeed such a teacher, since his name, as Magnelli (1999, 249) suggested, may be an oblique, erudite allusion to his Iliadic namesake. This possibility becomes all the more interesting as the name derives from another Iliadic incident with comical implications; Alexander would have an eye for such characters. Homer's Othryoneus appears in *Il*. XIII 363-382; he is a verbose, vainglorious ally of Priam, a braggart who pledges to send the Greeks away in return for just the ἀνάεδνον hand of Cassandra. In a scene of gloomy irony he is killed by a middle-class Greek hero, Idomeneus, his death being followed by a well-deserved taunting speech.

Amidst these reflections one would have to consider the question of whether, in Alexander of Aetolia's version, there actually was a game of knucklebones[5], as there was a death, in the first place. The information in the Iliadic *scholium* restricts itself to the killing: no mention of the nature of the game featured by Alexander. One might wonder whether the allegedly cognizant schoolteacher may have gone a step further than, conceivably, merely tolerating gambling at his school. Could he be involved in the cover-up of such activities under the pretext of normal school activity? One could readily envisage proceedings which would alloy ordinary teaching with knucklebone-playing. In such case Othryoneus would be not simply a passive accomplice, but *tout court* the instigator and organiser of the «game». What is implied by this is a school contest, unusual in that it promised knucklebones as the prize. The prize, if not the event, is not without parallel. School contests are known from dedicatory epigrams such as Callimachus *AP* VI 310 = *HE* 26. In the only such case where we hear of a prize, that prize is, surprisingly, knucklebones. In Asclepiades

[5] For ἀμφ' ἀστραγάλοισι = «at the prize of knucklebones», see Campbell *ad* Ap. Rh. III 117b.

of Samos *AP* VI 308 = *HE* 27 a schoolboy, Connaros, dedicates to the Muses a comic mask, after winning a contest of good writing and receiving no less than eighty knucklebones as his reward. The first two verses of this epigram are as follows:

Νικήσας τοὺς παῖδας ἐπεὶ καλὰ γράμματ᾽ ἔγραψεν
Κόνναρος ὀγδώκοντ᾽ ἀστραγάλους ἔλαβεν

«[T]he occasion (whether real or fictitious) may have been envisaged as unusual», remarked Gow and Page (*HE* II 136). The exact proceedings are not clear. However, both the nature of the prize seems odd and the number of knucklebones too large, when compared, for instance, with a recompense of ten knucklebones in Callim. *Hec*. fr. 276 Pf. = 107 Hollis, or the apparent attempt to bribe a young boy (φίλε κοῦρε) with a set of five luxurious knucklebones in Callim. fr. inc. sed. 676 Pf. «One may perhaps wonder», Gow and Page went on, «whether the entrants for the examination each contributed a bone, or whether the γραμματιστής awarded as a prize ἀστράγαλοι confiscated from naughty pupils». This seems the only sensible explanation: all pupils losing would be made to pay for the prize of the winner, or all pupils would be made to hand over some or all of their knucklebones in advance of the contest. This might constitute a punishment meant to teach them that too much time spent playing with knucklebones is detrimental to performance at school. Such antipedagogical and imprudent methods would not be unknown in ancient schools, especially in one with a nitwit as its director.

In Alexander's version one may surmise a situation not very different from the one outlined for Asclepiades. A γραμματιστής would not be taken seriously. Gauche handling of the postulated contest either by Patroclus' playmate (*P. Oxy* 447 of the 2nd cent AD and two manuscripts offer in *Il.* XXIII 88 the variant νήπιον), or their teacher, or some sort of cheating at the expense of Patroclus, could understandably outrage the young hero. If his defeat took place in the presence of others (satyrs as schoolboys?) his feelings of shame would be further intensified. As the story goes, he turned against his opponent; but moral responsibility in Alexander's tale would lie ultimately with the teacher. In this respect, whether Othryoneus was, or was not, present at the scene of the murder is of little or no consequence. Patroclus, who in the *Iliad* is suave and popular with the army (XVII 671 πᾶσιν ... μείλιχος), would appear to over-react, displaying a premature and over-sensitive sense of shame and honour.

Many decades ago, K. Schenkl suggested that the story was enacted in a satyric drama[6]. Powell (*CA* 127f.) classified the reference as from a tragedy but the protagonists and their actions seem too humble to justify such an assumption. For Wilamowitz, the content of the story would better fit an idyll[7]. Toying with the

[6] K. Schenkl, *Die Astragalistai des Alexandros Aitolos*, «WS» X (1888) 326f., with whom E. Magnelli in R. Pretagostini (ed.), *La letteratura ellenistica. Problemi e prospettive di ricerca*, Roma 2000, 117 n. 20 agrees.

[7] U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Hellenistische Dichtung in der Zeit des Callimachos*, I,

heroic ideal was a feature of satyric drama as it would be of such an idyll. But the involvement of a γραμματιστής, by all indications an accomplice in, perhaps even the organiser of, the «game» (and the crime), would point to the former alternative. A satyric drama with an idiot at the head of the school, would give the story a greater potential. The content of the *Astragalistai* conjectured here certainly implies a light, frivolous treatment interrupted only when things got out of hand with the loss of life. Loss of life, in funny circumstances, is not alien to a satyric drama (cf. Eur. *Cycl*. 375f.). We cannot know how the story might have been manipulated to a positive closure. The immediate repercussions of the murder would be that the activities at Othryoneus' school, and gaming house, would be uncovered and young Patroclus, safe and sound, would be taken into exile to meet the man of his life. In that case Patroclus' eventual death would inevitably loom on the horizon as a righteous reversal of fortunes. In similar fashion, at the closure of Euripides' *Cyclops*, Odysseus and the uneaten Greeks escape happily from the monster despite his explicit reference to their predestined future travails at sea (699 δίκας ὑφέξειν ἀντὶ τῶνδ' says Cyclops). But speculation on this point is rather tenuous.

The plot of the *Astragalistai*, as conjecturally outlined above, would not be out of place in a satyric drama. Schenkl compared Achaeus' *Linus TrGF* 20 F 26 which appears to have had as its theme the (hopeless?) education of Heracles in music: in the one surviving fragment Heracles converses on stage with satyrs, playing the game of cottabos apparently on the premises of Linus, the teacher of music. In fact, such a plot would classify Alexander's *Astragalistai* among the satyric dramas which deal with the παιδοτροφία or education of a hero, in which form of satyric drama Achaeus' *Linus* seems to belong[8].

With regard to Asclepiades' epigram one last possibility may be cautiously raised: as E.W. Handley has demonstrated[9], two epigrams of Asclepiades (*AP* V 181, XII 50 = *HE* 25, 16: the former a master-slave dialogue on the preparation of a banquet, the latter a sympotic exhortation to drink) manifestly share characters and themes with Middle Comedy. Such affinity with drama could not be argued for a dedicatory epigram such as that by Asclepiades quoted in part above. Still, a prize of knucklebones indicates more leisure, even revelry, than ordinary school activity, and seems so odd that the dedication of a comic mask (3 τὸν κωμικὸν ... Χάρητα [: Χρέμητα Bergk]) amidst the noise of the schoolboys might serve to imply the origin of such a (fictitious, in that case) prize.

Rethymno KONSTANTINOS SPANOUDAKIS

Berlin 1924, 167 n. 1; cf. F. Schramm, *Tragicorum Graecorum Hellenisticae, quae dicitur, aetatis fragmenta* [...], Münster 1929, 41; M. Campbell, *A Commentary on Apollonius Rhodius* Argonautica *III 1-471*, Leiden 1994, 107 adducing Linus in Theocritus 24,105f. See Magnelli 1999, 248.

[8] On such satyric dramas see Seaford 1984, 38, 203, further Kannicht on *Adesp. TrGF* 5g *Μαθηταὶ Σάτυροι*.

[9] E.W. Handley, *Two Epigrams by Asclepiades*, «MH» LIII (1996) 140-147.