

The plants of victory in ancient Greece and Rome

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Abstract

Μετά την έκβαση του αγώνα ο νικητής αποκτά μια διαφορετική σχέση τόσο με τον κοινωνικό του περίγυρο όσο και με τους θεούς, οι οποίοι τον προστάτευαν και τον ευνόησαν κατά τη διάρκεια του αγώνα. Η μετάβαση στη νέα αυτή κατάσταση σημαδεύεται και ενισχύεται από ένα πλήθος τελετουργικών και συμβολικών πράξεων, θρησκευτικών και κοσμικών εθίμων και πρακτικών. Εκτός από τα γνωστά στεφάνια που απονέμονταν στους νικητές των αγώνων, ιδιαίτερο ενδιαφέρον έχει το έθιμο της *φυλλοβολίας*. Καθώς ο νικητής έκανε τον γύρο του θριάμβου στο στάδιο, οι ενθουσιώδεις θεατές του έριχναν στεφάνια, λουλούδια, κλαδιά και ταινίες. Το έθιμο αυτό δεν περιοριζόταν μόνο στους αθλητικούς χώρους. Σε πολλές πανηγύρεις και δημόσιες εκδηλώσεις το πλήθος φυλλοβολούσε τα τιμώμενα πρόσωπα, όπως ήταν λ.χ. οι ευεργέτες της πόλης, αλλά ακόμη και τα ζευγάρια των νεονύμφων. Το νόημα της *φυλλοβολίας* δεν είναι άμεσα κατανοητό. Η πρακτική της ρίψης αντικειμένων είναι προφανώς ένας τρόπος συμμετοχής σε ένα δρώμενο που διαδραματίζεται σε κάποια απόσταση από τους θεατές του. Ορισμένοι μελετητές διατύπωσαν την άποψη ότι το έθιμο της *φυλλοβολίας* ανάγεται στις συνήθειες των αρχαίων αγροτικών κοινωνιών. Σε κάθε περίπτωση πάντως η *φυλλοβολία* αποτελούσε μια συμβολική πράξη, η οποία σηματοδοτούσε την αλλαγή της κατάστασης τιμώμενων. Τα άτομα αυτά έχουν μόλις ολοκληρώσει επιτυχώς μια ορισμένη διαδικασία και δέχονται την κοινωνική αναγνώριση, μέσα σε μια ατμόσφαιρα αλληλεγγύης και συγκινησιακής φόρτισης. Στο τέλος του 5^{ου} αιώνα π.Χ. εμφανίζεται, αρχικά σε παραστάσεις της αγγειογραφίας, ένα νέο σύμβολο της νίκης, το κλαδί του φοίνικα, το οποίο παραλαμβάνει ο νικητής από τα χέρια του βραβέα. Ο φοίνικας θα γίνει στη συνέχεια το λαλούν σύμβολο της νίκης και θα το συναντούμε σε όλες σχεδόν τις νικητήριες παραστάσεις της ελληνιστικής, ρωμαϊκής και χριστιανικής τέχνης.

The events that followed victory in an ancient athletic or equestrian race are known primarily from extant written sources that include texts from various periods of which the latest are the most extensive. Most important are: Pollux, *Onomasticon*, III,152, Clemens of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, II.72.1, *Suda*, s.v. “Periageiromenos” and *Scholia* in Euripides, *Hecuba*, 573-4. The texts inform us about the content of victorious ceremonies, such as the victory run (*periagermos*), the showering of the victor with leaves, flowers and gifts (*phyllobolia*), the proclamation of his name, his father’s name and his homeland (*anakeryxis*), his crowning with wreaths or fillets (*stepsis* or *tainiosis*, fig. 1), the palm of victory (*phoenix*) and the awarding of prizes (*apodosis epathlon*). All these actions are represented on several artifacts that give important iconographical information, such as painted vases (especially Attic), statues and stelai related to victors and victories, mosaics with relevant scenes etc. (Hyde 1921; Stecher 1981; Hermann 1988; Kefalidou 1996, 1999).

While the proclamation of the names of victors and the awarding of their prizes are self-evident in meaning, this is certainly not the case with the crowning of the victor with wreaths or fillets, the palm of victory, and the showering with leaves, flowers and gifts. An attempt will be made next to investigate those actions that formed part of ancient victorious ceremonies. What has



1.- Crowning and proclamation of a victorious athlete. Attic hydria by the Pezzino Group, 510 B.C. Munich, Antikensammlungen, no. 2420 (Beazley ARV²:32/3, 1621; Beazley Addenda:157).

to be pointed out here is that the victorious events are being labeled “ceremonies” and not “rites”. The distinction is important. A “ceremony” is a prescriptive and public series of activities, usually symbolic, which marks the passing or the recollection of an important event. It is different to the “rite” because it is always public in nature, being based upon the collaboration, participation and presence of many people; its religious and magical elements are neither as frequent nor as intense as those involved in a rite. Additionally, while a rite can be exercised in private or be part of a ceremony, the converse is not true (Leach 1972:520-526; Burkert 1983:22f.; Burkert 1979:35 f.).

The victory wreath

Let us begin with the wreaths, which were rather common in various aspects of every day life in antiquity, so specific examples of their use are not needed here (Klein 1912; Deubner 1933; Blech 1982). Early scholarship had asserted that plants were believed to be incarnations of the “spirits of the trees” or the “spirits of vegetation” (Frazer 1935: 79-87; Frazer 1990: 127f.). The wreath itself, like the branches or flowers of which it was made, brought luck and divine protection: the blooming branch was benevolent because its latent power was transferred to whoever touched or held it, thus allowing man to communicate with the divine. The purity and sanctity of a wreath as bestowed on the wreathed person must therefore be emphasized; this conception is considered as infectious magic (Kontaktmagie) (Klein 1912: 6f; Gardiner 1916-18: 90; Eliade 1949: 263-264; Blech 1982: 365f)

Of great importance for our discussion is that the wreath was imbued with several symbolic meanings: it distinguished those who wore it and protected the head, the most important part of the human body. It also signified that the wreathed person was sacred, pure and ready to start a specific process. The wreath was a life-carrier; it contained life itself. Some scholars do not distinguish between the wreath and the branch (Frazer 1935: 79f; Burkert 1979: 43-44). Others emphasize that the tying of the wreaths around the head was a very important element in the ceremony because the act of binding was perceived to convey certain qualities on the wearer (Klein 1912: 9f; Deubner 1933: 100f; Onians 1951: 133 n. 1, 367, 376f., 443f., 456f; Blech 1982: 373f.).

It is also of some significance that the victorious wreaths were weaved with plants associated with specific gods, festivals or significant events. More important, most of the plants used for wreaths were wild and inedible, like laurel for the Olympics, pine for the Pythian Games in Delphi and wild celery for the

Nemean and Isthmian Games. Some scholars have proffered various interesting views with regard to the quality of the above plants. D. Sansone, for instance, has argued that branches and wreaths used in antiquity can be related back to the camouflage of the Paleolithic hunter (Sansone 1988: 84-85). In any case, the plants used were easily accessible in the rural areas near the location where the contests were held and could be utilized with ease given the flexible nature of their shoots and the fact that they do not decompose quickly. This meant that wreaths won could be dried and preserved as memoirs for a long time after the victory (*RE*, “Kranz”, 1602). The idealistic view, however, is that these “useless” plants symbolize the fact that the victor should not look for any other profit apart the glory he gained (Klein 1912: 78-79).

The palm branch

The *Etymologicum Magnum*, s.v. “brabeus”, mentions that the judge gives the palm branch to the victor. It is not certain when this custom began, but it seems to have been a relatively late addition to the victorious ceremonies. Plutarch connects the branch with Apollo and his holy island of Delos and says that the hero Theseus was the first to receive a palm of victory in an athletic contest on Delos (Plutarch, *Theseus* 21.3). One of the earliest visual documents comes from the late 5th century B.C.: an Attic vase-painting, namely a panathenaic prize-amphora, shows a judge holding a palm branch, which apparently will be given to a victorious athlete who is also depicted on the vase (Valavanis 1990: 333-335). From the 4th century B.C. onwards the palm of victory appears on several athletic scenes depicted on vases, mosaics, sculptures etc. (fig. 2). During the Roman period it became the major symbol of triumph and victory, and it was used not only in athletics but also for celebrating success in war (Miller 1979). Later on, the Christians used the palm branch to symbolize the victory of their faith and the victory of spirit over flesh. Thus, in Christian art martyrs were usually shown holding palms (Charalampides 1994).

Phyllobolia

The custom of *phyllobolia*, in which branches, wreaths, fillets were thrown to the victorious athlete is not easy to explain. Both written sources and iconography inform us that this practice was not exercised only for athletic and equestrian victors (fig. 1, fig. 3). It was also used to honor: a) the deceased, b) famous politicians, military personnel and city benefactors, and c) brides and grooms during their nuptial procession. Let us briefly examine these three cases:



2. - Marble funerary relief depicting a youth with the prizes that he won in athletic competitions, 200-250 A.D. From Thessaloniki: Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, no. 1213.



3. - Victorious athlete receiving the *phyllobolia*. Attic lekythos by the Bowdoin Painter, 480-470 B.C. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, no. 487 (Beazley ARV²:684/153; Beazley Addenda:279).

a) Euripides refers to the *phyllobolia* of the dead Polyxene (*Hecuba*, 573-4): «Some of them strewed the dead woman with leaves, while others built up a pyre». Dionysius of Halicarnassus (XI.39.5-7) describes the use of the custom of *phyllobolia* in honor of Virginia, who was killed by her father in order to preserve her chastity, threatened by the oligarch Appius Claudius. Thus her death (around 450 B.C.) became a symbol of democracy while Virginia herself became a posthumous public figure (Balsdon 1975: 28-29). Her body was placed in the Forum and the funeral procession passed through the main streets of Rome and the matrons and maidens run out of their houses lamenting her fate, some throwing flowers and garlands upon the bier, some their girdles or fillets, others their childhood toys. The covering or deposition of leaves or branches on the corpse was a widespread burial custom (see i.e. Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1201-2), which had been practiced since Paleolithic times (10000 BC). Pollen analysis of a Paleolithic interment in the cave of Shanidar in the Zagros range of northern Iraq indicates its use (Leroi-Gourhan 1990: 100). In latter times and in the case of cremation, *phyllobolia* was exercised upon the urn (i.e. Plutarch, *Philopoemen*, 21.2). Similarly, the practice was exercised upon tumuli and stele, usually depicted strewn with branches on Attic white lekythoi (Kurtz 1975).

b) *Phyllobolia* was also commonly exercised for those who were beloved, famous or successful in public life, especially subsequent to a glorious action or on their return from a victorious battle, campaign etc. (Blech 1982: 113). For example, the legislator Dracon and the maiden Polykrita, who helped her fellow Naxians against their Milesian enemies, received *phyllobolia* in respect of their special services to their cities (*Suda*, s.v. “Drakon”. Parthenius, *Narrationes Amatoriae*, 9.8.). Moreover, Plutarch’s description of the *phyllobolia* exercised upon Pericles and Caesar, evidences the athletic origins of the practice. In *Pericles* 28.4 he writes: «as he came down from the podium, the women clasped his hand and fastened wreaths and fillets on his head, as though he were some victorious athlete». A similar statement exists also in Plutarch’s *Caesar* 30.2: «when Curio laid these proposals on behalf of Caesar, he was loudly applauded, and some actually cast garlands of flowers upon him as if he were a victorious athlete». Also, in the *Scholia* of Euripides’ *Hecuba* 573-4, mentioned above, it is reported that: «Polyxene receives *phyllobolia* as if she has won an athletic contest».

There is more evidence of the practice of *phyllobolia* on certain politicians and military officers like the Spartan Aristomenes (Pausanias, 4.16.6), the admiral Teleutias (Xenophon, *Hellenica*, V.1.3), the general Timoleon

(Plutarch, *Timoleon*, 8.2 and 26), Alexander the Great (Arrianus, *Anabasis*, 6.13.3), Pompeius (Plutarch, *Pompeius*, 57), and others. Moreover, mention must be made of the extravagant *phyllobolia* received by the Emperor Nero in respect of his athletic victories at the Olympic and Pythian games: the ceremony included sacrifices, perfumes, birds, fillets, desserts etc., thus it is reminiscent of a Roman triumph (Suetonius, *Nero*, 25.2). The *Suda* Lexicon, s.v. “Periageiromenos”, refers to the hero Theseus as the first one to have received the honor of *phyllobolia*, after killing the Minotaur. *Phyllobolia* would have been appropriate for the mythical Agamemnon on his glorious return from Troy, although he was assassinated before he could be so honored. For this reason, Electra laments (Euripides, *Helen*, 163-4): «your wife did not receive you with fillets and wreaths».

c) Finally, the earliest and rather detailed testimony for the use of *phyllobolia* during nuptials is a passage from Stesichorus (187 *PMG*) about the wedding of Helen and Menelaus. It refers to people throwing quinces, myrtle leaves, wreaths of roses and garlands of violets. The custom is also attested in other ancient written and visual sources, such as vase paintings (Oakley and Sinos 1993) and it survives until today in Modern Greek Orthodox wedding ceremony, where people throw rice and rose-petals to the newly married (fig. 4).

Now that we have discussed the cases where *phyllobolia* was exercised we can try to investigate its meaning, which is not readily comprehensible. The practice of throwing objects at someone or something has been interpreted as a means of purging aggression; *phyllobolia* has been paralleled with the casting of stones and other, similar practices (Burkert 1977: 102; Burkert 1983: 5, n. 18). Of course, the throwing of objects is a means of participation and intervention in an event which takes place at a distance, especially when the focus of display is in motion. Some scholars have limited their study to the floral elements used in *phyllobolia*, to which magical qualities were attributed (as we have already discussed above). They have interpreted the custom as a magic ritual that transfigured the recipient into an incarnation of the spirit of the trees and forests (Cook 1903: 174-186, 268-78; Cornford 1989: 221). This view was subjected to the pejorative comments of the positivist E.



4. - Throwing rose-petals and rice at a modern Greek Orthodox wedding.



5. - Throwing confetti at a modern football game.

N. Gardiner, who argued that *phyllobolia* could be seen simply as a gracious offer of gifts, whose origin lies in the fact that the majority of athletic games initially had an agricultural character (Gardiner 1916-1918: 92-93). While it is true, however, that the custom of *phyllobolia* comprised in parts the bestowing of gifts, this was not the focal point of the act. The cut branches and leaves were of no value to the recipient of *phyllobolia* and indeed, they were abandoned on the ground.

As we said above, apart from victorious athletes, the *phyllobolia* occurred also in relation to famous and honored persons, the newly married and the dead. What, then is the common thread between them? Firstly, it may be observed that all these occasions were public gatherings, at which the participants experienced predominant sentiments of intense joy or sorrow.

Furthermore, it may be noted that all acts of *phyllobolia* had a double character consisting of a group, on the one hand, and an individual (or individuals), on the other; the latter accepted the positive sentiments expressed by the former. The most important issue, however, is that the *phyllobolia* was practiced on persons who had recently achieved feats or altered their status in some way, thereby creating the need to reinitiate these people into society. Having completed a process, an attempt or a struggle, the individuals accepted social ratification into an emotionally charged atmosphere of mutual solidarity. The change of status is obvious in the case of weddings (Oakley and Sinos 1993: 3f.). The athlete reached the pinnacle of his achievements in becoming the victor. The success of politicians and military officers was similar (Blech 1982: 153f; Henry 1983: 22; Stecher 1981). The deceased person reached the end of a life's struggle (Klein 1912: 48; Garland 1985: 1f). In other words, after having successfully completed a task or his/her life-circle, the individual was re-united with society, even if that process involved the acceptance of death and the fact that his/her condition was altered, having attained a position *kreiton* and *aristos* (i.e. elite).

In this sense, the *phyllobolia* can be interpreted as a "rite of passage" or "transition rite" since it marks the transition from one status to another. Life means separations and reunions, changing of forms and situations, deaths and rebirths, action and calm *ad infinitum*. Every new situation demands rites, which finally incorporate people into a group or attribute to them a specific status (Van Gennep 1960; Leach 197; Bartel 1982:32-5; Moreau 199; Bianchi 1986; Ries 1986: 13f., 285f; Vernsel 1993).

Although we may finally come to agree with L. Wittgenstein who wrote in his *Bemerkungen über Frazer's The Golden Bough* that «the idea that a custom can be interpreted seems to me pointless», we can be certain that the *phyllobolia* was a means to express strong sentiments through a symbolic act, the original meaning of which was probably unknown to the participants and, moreover, of little interest to them. The same is true today in athletic games, where excited spectators throw small pieces of paper towards their favorite team without realizing that they thus continue the ancient custom of *phyllobolia* (fig. 5).

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