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*Klytaimestra's Beacons**

Abstract

This article confirms the accuracy and plausibility of the chain of beacon-fires enumerated by Klytaimestra at Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 281-316, both across the Aegean Sea from Troy to mainland Greece, and from Boiotia to Argos via the Megarid. It is argued that, far from displaying mere geographical virtuosity, the point of this detail lies in what it signifies about Klytaimestra herself. She is revealed as a woman with a strong grip on matters that would normally be the exclusive knowledge of practical and military men. This prepares the way for her portrayal as the single-handed slayer of the king Agamemnon.

Il contributo conferma l'esattezza e la plausibilità della serie di segnali luminosi enumerati da Clitemestra in Aesch. Ag. 281-316, attraverso il Mare Egeo da Troia fino alla Grecia continentale e dalla Beozia ad Argo passando per la Megaride. Si vuol dimostrare che, lontano dall'essere un mero sfoggio di conoscenze geografiche, l'importanza di questi dettagli sta nel significato che essi hanno in relazione alla stessa Clitemestra. La regina si rivela come una donna con una grande padronanza della materia che normalmente sarebbe competenza esclusiva di uomini usi alla vita pratica e militare. Questo prepara la via per la sua rappresentazione come donna capace di togliere la vita al re Agamemnone facendo esclusivo affidamento sulle proprie forze.

By the end of their first scene with Klytaimestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* the old men of the chorus have been persuaded by her »trustworthy proofs» (πιστὰ τεκμήρια, l. 352) that they should indeed be celebrating the fall of Troy (although they lapse into incredulity again at 475ff.). Her most vivid psychagogy lies in her evocation of the triumph and horrors of the sack (320-50): compared with that tour-de-force, her "Beacon Speech" in lines 281-316, may seem more controlled, less irresistible. But it is also far stronger evidence.

My objective here is to ask what this extraordinary sequence of places, linked by the fire of the beacons, does for the role of Klytaimestra. Or is it simply a show-piece of highly-wrought geography, a feat of Aeschylean virtuosity? Discussion of the speech has concentrated almost entirely on the topographical specifics and on their truth to empirical reality. This is, indeed, an important issue – and I shall spend much of this discussion upon it – but my aim is to realign the geographical detail as a means to an interpretative end, not as an end in itself.

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So let us plot the semaphoric cartography. The first beacon, lit in response to the burning of Troy itself, is on Mount Ida (Il. 281-83). This is a problematic start since "Ida" could be used to refer to many sites in the mountain ranges of the Troad. It has even been suggested¹ that it simply means the low hills of the Sigeion ridge, about 50m high at most, running along the coast immediately to the west of Troy. This would, indeed, be possible, and is certainly more to the point than the highest peak of Ida, Kag Dagi, which rises to 1710 m, but is some 60 kms in the wrong direction to the south-east. But there are also hills (Figla Tepe) some 250m high about 10kms from Troy to the south east; and about 25 kms to the south is the inhospitable Sakar Kaya, rising to 450m, described as «the principal mountain of this end of Ida»². From these to the second beacon on Lemnos (283-84) would be a distance of about 100kms – rather less to the hills in the south of the island (320m), rather more to the higher points (430m) in the north-west. Whichever might be meant, this is a very long stretch, but, by all accounts, far from impossible (it would need a clear night, of course!).

The next step, from Lemnos to the end of the peninsular of Athos (284-85), is less distant, 70 or 80 kms, depending on what part of Lemnos you measure from. But, even more conspicuously, Athos rises to over 2000 meters towards its tip, whence it plunges vertiginously down into the sea³. According to a fragment of Sophocles (fr. 771), possibly reflecting a saying, the shadow of Athos reaches as far as Lemnos (that would be at sunset).

After Athos the next place named in our text is Makistos (288-91), which must be a peak in Euboia: that distance is more than 150 kms. This probably *is* too far to be realistically feasible, however elevated the two beacon-sites. There is, however, a textual problem here; and editors are universally agreed that a line, or quite possibly more than one line, has been lost at this very point between lines 287 and 288. As though leaping to the rescue in corroboration, the islands of the Sporades lie in between, about 80-90 kms from Athos and 50-60 from Euboia. In that case, the missing beacon might have been either on Alonissos (ancient Ikos) or Skopelos (ancient Peparethos), both sufficiently high to pass on the signal effectively.

Makistos is more plausibly, it seems to me, to be identified with the mighty landmark of Mt. Dirphys (1743m) towards the north-eastern, ie Aegean, coast of Euboia rather than the usually favoured Kandili (1225m), further west and near the southern coast. This is confirmed by a nice detail about the topography of the next beacon-post, Massapion (292-95). There is ancient evidence that this is Mt. Ktypas (838m) in the territory of Anthedon, on the Boiotian coast opposite Chalkis. Between Dirphys and Ktypas the line of sightings would cross the straights of Euripos, specifically named by

¹ CALDER (1922, 158).

² COOK (1972, 326).

³ Wilamowitz is widely quoted (e.g. by Fraenkel) as saying, «Athos is not particularly high, a thousand meters fewer than Olympus». 2000 meters sheer above the waves strikes me as pretty damn high!

Klytemestra in line 292, quite close to Aulis, a place with a particular significance for her. Whereas the line in between Kandili and Ktypas is considerably further north.

With the landfall at Ktypas, the beacons reach the Greek mainland at last. From there to the highest point on the next peak (ll. 296-301), Mt. Kithairon (1409m), is about 33 kms south-west across central Boiotia⁴. Then in between Kithairon and the final beacon on Arachnaion in the Argolid there is only one more staging-post (301-306): this given what looks more like an epithet than a name – ὄρος Αἰγίπλαγκτον «mountain...roamed by goats» (303). Many scholars have equated this with Aigaleos, the relatively slight range (463m) between Athens and Eleusis. But that would be a gratuitous diversion to the east, with nothing to be said for it except that it satisfies the scholarly fashion for bringing tragic myth to Athens at every opportunity.

There is a fine mountain, about 22 kms south-west, directly between Kithairon and Arachnaion, Mount Geraneia, the massif of the Megarid, which reaches 1369 meters high. It has been objected to Geraneia that Klytemestra reports in line 302 that during this stage the fire passes over the λίμνη Γοργῶπις, «the Gorgon-shaped lake [or sea]», and that no such land-mark is to be found in the right area. But this missing lake was brilliantly discovered by N.G.L. Hammond, when in 1953 he traced on foot the course of what he called “the Main Road from Boeotia to the Peloponnese”, following the watersheds across the northern Megarid without descending anywhere to the coast – a much shorter distance than the modern journey via Eleusis⁵. In the wild uninhabited lands between Kithairon and Geraneia, at a place known as Vathychoria, Hammond observed (and photographed) a flat bed of silt, where water had evidently gathered in some periods to form a lake. Such upland lakes, usually drained off through sink-holes in the limestone, are quite a common phenomenon in Greece. Hammond recognized this as the Gorgon Lake of Klytemestra's beacon-speech. He also spotted that it was the key to a rather fascinating story in Plutarch⁶. Explaining where the Megarian dynasty of the Ἀμαξοκυλισταί «Wagon-rollers» come from, Plutarch tells how a sacred pilgrimage (*theoria*) from the Peloponnese to Delphi camped with their family wagons «by the lake in Aigeiros». During the night some drunken Megarians pushed the wagons into the water, with serious loss of life. They were punished by the Delphic Amphiktions, and their descendents were branded the “Hamaxokylistai”.

The line of the signal between Geraneia and Mount Archnaion, a distance of about 40 kms, would pass over the westernmost bays of the Saronic Gulf and the headlands of the coast to the south-east of Corinth: that would seem to fit well with the allusions in lines 305-8. Arachnaion, which is above 1100m in several places, is the central massif

⁴ Kithairon is closely associated with the mythological Thebes, but Klytemestra's mention of the river Asopos (l. 297) may draw attention, rather, to another famous Hellenic victory, Plataia.

⁵ HAMMOND (1954); Nick Hammond had an unrivalled first-hand knowledge of Greek and Albanian terrain from his wartime service with the resistance. This route has become known as the “Road of the Towers” because of the series of ancient watch-towers along it.

⁶ Plutarch *Moralia* 304e, the last of the “Greek Questions”.

of the northern Argolid. It lies to the east of Argos itself, and there are suitable eminences for the last of the beacons about 20 kms from the palace where Aeschylus' play is set. «And then», concludes Klytemestra in lines 310f., «the fire which was directly descended from the fire on Ida jumped down onto this house of the Atreidai here» – the very event that the audience had witnessed in the opening Watchman scene. Another “trustworthy proof”, if it were needed.

So, surveying the whole sequence of the Speech, it emerges that, while it is not without problems of detail, the beacon chain is, by and large, based on plausible topographical realities. There are clearly two kinds of physical geography involved. First there are the long leaps across the sea, which bring the fires round the northern Aegean from the Dardanelles to Euboea. Secondly come the shorter steps from mountain to mountain, leaping from Euboea to the Argolid. The first sequence shows some expertise in maritime landmarks of the kind which would be accessible, and indeed familiar, to Athenians (and others) with naval or trading experience. The second sequence over land, interestingly, never encroaches on the territory of Attica (provided I am right about Geraneia as the goat-mountain). This kind of detail about Boiotia and the Megarid might be known to Athenians through military expeditions, or through trading by land. It requires some awareness of the strategically important road between Corinth and Thebes that was used by Peloponnesians for theoric pilgrimages, especially to Delphi, but also for military purposes⁷.

Most of the commentary on the Beacon Speech has admired (or questioned) Aeschylus' expertise in putting together this chain of fires. But the whole point lies, as I see it, in Klytaimestra's expertise, geographical and semaphoric. It would have been impressive enough in the mouth of a man: for a woman it shows an amazing – indeed frightening – control of masculine territory, both physical and mental territory. The first transmarine sequence would be familiar to many men in Aeschylus' audience in 458 BCE, and indeed to Greeks in other places where the play was, no doubt, performed in later years. As Fraenkel observed, «the chief landmarks of the northern Aegean were vital for merchandise as well as war»⁸. Many Athenians will have had experience with the naval patrols and skirmishes, led by them, in the aftermath of the repulse of the Persians in 480-479. Others will have been involved in the constant, busy trade between Athens and the Black Sea⁹. This was so vital that cleruchies were established in Euboea and on Lemnos; and Sigeion, right at the mouth of the Dardanelles by Troy, was under Athenian control. But how many women would have known about such things? It might have seemed rather shocking for them even to show an interest in such extra-topical

⁷ Examples in HAMMOND (1954). This would also be the drove-road by which a Corinthian would take transhumant flocks to Kithairon, a crucial pastoral detail for Sophocles' *Oedipus*.

⁸ FRAENKEL (1950, 156).

⁹ See MORENO (2007, esp. 126-40, 339-40), with references to MEIGGS (1972).

matters as maritime landmarks. Yet Klytaimestra has, in every sense, a confident command of the sweep of this geography.

In many ways Klytaimestra's grip on the mainland sequence of beacon-stages is even more impressive. This woman knows not only the local mountain for Argos, but can cut a totally convincing line north-east from there across the territories of Corinth and Megara to Boiotia, and from there to Euboia. By-passing Attica, furthermore. These are, indeed, πιστὰ τεκμήρια. And this is the first step in the astounding way that Aeschylus turns Klytaimestra into a convincing portrait of the woman who can single-handedly overpower Agamamnon.

Epilogue: one final addition to the chain of beacons that takes them beyond the thoughts of both Klytaimestra and Aeschylus, and that brings them down to the present day. Every one of the hundreds of thousands who have been to see a play performed in modern times at the ancient theatre of the Asclepeion of Epidauros will have set eyes on Mount Archnaion, even though very few will have been aware of it. The grey, rather unattractive bulk of mountain facing the audience, little more than 10 kms away across the small upland plain of modern Ligourio, is indeed Arachnaion. It is, in fact, considerably closer to the Theatre than it is to Argos. With the use of modern technologies it should be perfectly possible to arrange for a beacon to flare up on the bare mountain just before line 20 of a performance of *Agamemnon*. That beacon would leap, with an irresistible symbolism, across both time and space to us today from Aeschylus and Athens, from Argos and Klytaimestra.

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