Sacred Space as a frame for lyric occasions: The case of the Mnesiepes Inscription and other possible cases

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For example:

The three terms sacred space and frame and lyric occasions in the primary title of this presentation all need to be questioned for their meanings, which depend in each case on the overall meaning of the title that combines these terms. As for the words case and cases in the secondary title, they refer to specific examples that give context to my questioning of the three highlighted terms of the primary title. The questioning is meant to provoke some friendly debate, and the questioned terms can become the main subject for the debate itself. In the spirit of such friendly debate, I will now proceed to question the highlighted terms of the primary title, going in reverse order: lyric occasions, frame, and sacred space. Of these three terms, as we will see, the third of them is relevant to the illustration placed on the cover of this post.

§1. [lyric occasions] The word lyric that I use in the primary title follows the conventions of the Network for the Study of Archaic and Classical Greek Song—and what I am presenting here is actually the text of a paper delivered 2018.06.30 at a meeting organized by members of that Network. But my usage is questionable in the case of the ancient text highlighted in the secondary title, the Mnesiepes Inscription, the main referent of which is Archilochus as poet: the question is, can we describe as lyric the verbal art that this text attributes to the poet? My questioning is implicit in the combination of the word lyric with the word occasions in my primary title. The word lyric raises the question of genre, and genre needs be defined in contexts of occasion. Right away, I enumerate here four such contexts: composition, performance, reception, transmission. For more on all four of these contexts as I have just enumerated them, I refer to an online article listed as number 10 in the Bibliography below (Nagy 2009a). As we will see, the lyric occasions for the compositions attributed to Archilochus are particularly problematic. For now, however, I continue with my questioning of the three terms I have used in the primary title. Next in order, then, is...
§2. ([frame]) From the standpoint of my overall argumentation, a frame for any occasion may be either physical or only notional. That is to say, an occasion may be real or only pictured as real. I draw attention here, already now, to a distinction I need to make in this formulation. When I say that an occasion may be notional in that it may not be real but only pictured as real, this is not the same thing as saying that such a notional occasion is fictional. The very idea of fiction would be misleading here—as also in other such situations to be found in "lyric" writ large, as for example in the songs of Sappho (accordingly, I disagree with the usage of "fiction" in D'Alessio 2018). What may seem as fictional for us as "outsiders" who are merely looking in, as it were, when we view an occasion—as indicated in the text of, say, Archilochus—may have been seen as real by those who were "insiders" to the poetic traditions that shaped this given text. That is why I prefer to say pictured as real, not imagined as real, whenever I refer to occasions in the texts of Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho, and other such exponents of "lyric"—or whatever we choose to call it. Whereas the idea of fiction—or even falsehood—is at least implied in our everyday use of the word imagining, such an implication is not required if I use instead the word picturing. To picture something is not necessarily a fictionalizing of that something.

(It remains to ask, however: what was the prerequisite for becoming an "insider" to an occasion that was being pictured in the poetic traditions that shaped the text of Archilochus and other such figures? The prerequisite, I argue, was that such an "insider" would be a participant in the performance of the poetry that eventually became the text. I made a special effort here to say a participant—not merely a passive member of an audience. For more on this distinction, I refer to the book listed as number 5 in the Bibliography below [PP 83].)

For now, in any case, I continue with my questioning of the three terms I have used in the primary title. Next and last in order, then, is the third one...

§3. ([sacred space]) My use of this term takes me back to an old article of mine that I contributed to the Festschrift for Bruno Gentili, published in 1993, which is number 4 in the Bibliography. The title of the article was "Alcaeus in Sacred Space," with reference to a temenos or 'sacred precinct' mentioned in Alcaeus Fragment 129.2 V and in Fragment 130b.13 V. This temenos is described in the language of the poet as a great federal space common to all the people of the island of Lesbos, and such a place can be identified with a sacred precinct that went by the name of Messon, mentioned in two inscriptions dated to the second century BCE, which Louis Robert (1960) connected with the name of the present-day place that eventually became the text. I made a special effort here to say a participant—not merely a passive member of an audience. For more on this distinction, I refer to the book listed as number 5 in the Bibliography below [PP 83].)

For now, in any case, I continue with my questioning of the three terms I have used in the primary title. Next and last in order, then, is the third one...

§4. Having offered working definitions for lyric occasions, frame, and sacred space, I will now offer a set of three placeholders, as I call them, which will each support the argumentation as it gets underway.

Placeholder 1.

Epitomized from PH 12549. The compositions ascribed to Archilochus take the form of a specialized kind of poetry that is differentiated from song. As we see from external references to this poet, including the testimony of Plato (Ion 531a), the professional performers of compositions attributed to Archilochus were rhapsōdēi 'rhapsodes', not kitharōdēi 'lyre singers' (documentation in PH 15816–20). Still, the figure of Archilochus retains a choral personality, as evidenced by his self-description in one fragment (Archilochus F 120 W) as an exarkhōn 'choral leader' of the dithyrambus 'dithyramb,' where his performance is explicitly accompanied by the aulos 'double-reed'; in the wording of this fragment, the dithyramb is described as sacred to the god Dionysus. In another fragment (F 121 W), Archilochus is self-described as an exarkhōn 'choral leader' of the paideôn 'paean'; implicitly, his performance there is accompanied by the kithārē 'paean,' as we see from the description of Apollo's own model performance of the paean in the Hymn to Apollo (514–519), where the god accompanies on the kithārē 'lyre' his own choral singing and dancing as a lead-in for performance by the rest of the chorus. We may compare two images I showed in the posting for 2018.06.06, where we see Archilochus in the act of performing his compositions while holding a lyre—as pictured on the surface of coins minted by the state of Paros, the poet's homeland.

Placeholder 2.

The choral personality of Archilochus is also evident in the Life of Archilochus tradition as preserved by the Mnesiepes Inscription (Archilochus F 1 1740 Tarditi). This inscription, dated to the third century BCE, narrates the life of Archilochus, giving context to "quotations" of the transmitted compositions that were attributed to him. The Life of Archilochus tradition, as memorialized by the Mnesiepes Inscription, epitomizes the hero cult of Archilochus; in fact the setting for the Mnesiepes Inscription was the Arkhilókhion, the sacred precinct at Paros where Archilochus was worshipped as a cult hero. As we will see in Placeholder 3, the Mnesiepes Inscription gives explicit testimony about a traditional myth, native to the island of Paros, that represented Archilochus as a chorus teacher of his community (T4 III 16–57). For more on the text of the Mnesiepes Inscription, I refer to an online article listed as number 8 in the Bibliography below (Nagy 2008).
As we have seen, the poetry of Archilochus refers to itself as a choral lyric medium: for example, the persona of Archilochus describes himself as capable of being an exarkhōn ‘choral leader’ of a chorus that sings and dances in honor of the god Dionysus—to the accompaniment of the aulos ‘double-reed’ (F 120 W). Such self-reference is an example of what I call diachronic skewing, that is, where the medium refers to itself in terms of earlier stages of its own existence. As I have argued elsewhere in the online book listed as number 2 in the Bibliography (PH), especially in Chapters 1 and 12, the medium of Archilochus was originally undifferentiated lyric, that is, sung and danced, but it evolved eventually into differentiated non-lyric recitative.

In the Poetics (1449a9 and following), Aristotle says that both tragedy and comedy had a beginning that is autokhōdēistikē ‘improvisational’ (ɗι’ ὄρχης οἰκοδομιστικής), and that tragedy was derived from the exarkhontes ‘choral leaders’ of the dithyrambos ‘dithyramb’ (ɗι’ τῶν ἐξ ὄρχηστῶν τῶν διήθραμμάτων). Aristotle may have had in mind the wording of Archilochus F 120 W, where the persona of the composer declares that he knows how to be the exarkhōn ‘choral leader’ of the dithyramb, performed in honor of the god Dionysus, while the poet’s mind is thunderstruck with wine. The meter of Archilochus F 120 W is trochaic tetrameter catalectic. According to Aristotle the meter of dialogue in early tragedy, before it was replaced by iambic trimeter, was this same meter, trochaic tetrameter catalectic (Poetics 1449a22 and following). What Aristotle says about the evolution of comedy and tragedy implies that he thought that Archilochus was a typical exarkhōn of dithyramb, which Aristotle understood as characterized by trochaic tetrameter catalectic, typical of both comedy and tragedy.

From the testimony of the Mnesiepes Inscription (Archilochus T 4 Tarditi), we learn of a traditional myth, native to the island of Paros, that represented Archilochus as a chorus teacher of his community (T 4 III 16–57). I propose to consider how this myth, preserved in the context of the poet’s hero cult in Paros, dramatizes the social function of Archilochean poetry in the civic life of the polis.

In the wording of the Mnesiepes Inscription, it can be argued, we are witnessing a cognate of the source of Aristotle Poetics 1449a and 1448b23, who considered Archilochus an exponent of primitive blame poetry. I summarize here the relevant story as retold in the Mnesiepes Inscription, Archilochus T 4 III 16–57 Tarditi. The story has it that Archilochus improvises (Ϝ 251 W = 219 Tarditi): the text is fragmentary, but we can see clearly that Dionysus figures prominently (251.1), in the context of the epithet Oipholios (251.5), a derivative of the obscene verb oiphō ‘have intercourse [male subject]’. The polis finds this composition ‘too iambic’ (Ϝ 251 W = 219 Tarditi): among the gods listed (1–13), Dionysus is accorded a position of particular prominence (10).

The narrative pattern of the story of Archilochus and the punishment of the Parians is typical of aetologies concerning the founding of a hero cult: (1) some hero is dishonored, sometimes even killed, by a community; (2) the community is then beset by some plague; and (3) the Oracle is consulted and prescribes the hero cult of the given hero as the remedy. In such aetologies the well-being of the community, as threatened by the plague, is visualized as fertility of crops and inhabitants alike—a fertility that is then restored and guaranteed to continue through the proper maintenance of the hero cult (examples for fertility of crops: Pausanias 6.11.6–8; for fertility of humans: Pausanias 2.3.6–7; in the Archilochus story as well, the fertility of the polis is connected in general with the hero cult of Archilochus, which is after all the context for the telling of the story, and in particular with the institutionalization of Archilochus as ‘chorus teacher’. Here we have the nucleus of the civic function of Archilochean poetry in that the chorus is the traditional medium for the self-expression of the polis (PH 5§10–11, 5§15; also 12§48–49 and following).

The theme of fertility is explicit in the story of Archilochus in his stylized role as chorus teacher, which is connected with the cult of Dionysus (cf. T 4 II 10 Tarditi and F 251 W; also F 120 W).

According to what we read in the text of the Mnesiepes Inscription, the poet Archilochus was worshipped as a cult hero within an enclosure that was named the Arkhilόkhеion, as we see at line 17 of the text as I translate it here:

1. To Mnesiepes did the god [Apollo] make the oracular declaration that it is more propitious and just plain better if
2. in the precinct [temenos] that he [= Mnesiepes] is constructing he [= Mnesiepes] sets up [participle of hidruein]
3. an altar and makes sacrifice [participle of thuein] on it to the Muses and to Apollo
4. the Mousagētēs and to Mnēmosunē. And that he make sacrifice [infinitive of thuein] (and perform correctly the sacred acts [infinitive of kallhieruein])
5. to Zeus Huperdexios, to Athena Huperdexia,
6. to Poseidon Asphaleios, to Herakles, to Artemis Eukleia.
7. (And) that he organize a delegation [infinitive of pempein] to go to Delphi and offer there to Apollo a sacrifice for well-being. [paragraphē mark here]
8. To Mnesiepes did the god [Apollo] make the oracular declaration that it is more propitious and just plain better if
9. in the precinct [temenos] that he [= Mnesiepes] is constructing he [= Mnesiepes] sets up [participle of hidruein]
10. an altar and makes sacrifice [participle of thuein] on it to Dionysus and to the Nymphs
11. and to the Hōrai. And that he make sacrifice [infinitive of thuein] (and perform correctly the sacred acts [infinitive of kallhieruein]) to Apollo
13. (And) that he organize a delegation [infinitive of pempein] to go to Delphi and offer there to Apollo a sacrifice for well-being. [paragraphē mark here]
14. To Mnesiepes did the god [Apollo] make the oracular declaration that it is more propitious and just plain better if
15. he [= Mnesiepes] honors [participle of tīmân] Archilochus the poet, in accordance with the intent (of the god).
16. And, in the light of this oracular declaration of Apollo,
17. we call this place [topos] the Arkhilókheion and we have set up [indicative perfect of hidruein] the relevant altars
18. and we make sacrifice [indicative present of thuein] both to the gods and to Archilochus and
19. we honor [indicative present of tīmân] him in accordance with what the god declared to us.
20. Now, concerning what we wanted to put on record in writing, the following are the things that have been
21. handed down to us by the ancients and that we have made our concern.
22. For they say that Archilochus,
23. when he was still a young man, …

§6. This enclosure, called a temenos or ‘sacred precinct’ at lines 2 and 9, is also a sacred space for gods, and these gods receive the sacrifices of their worshippers on two bōmoi ‘altars’. Sharing one of the two altars are Apollo Mousagētēs, the Muses, and their mother, the goddess Mnēmosunē, lines 3–4. After that, at lines 4–7, we read that these other gods also receive sacrifice: Zeus Huperdexios, Athena Huperdexia, Poseidon Asphaleios, Herakles, Artemis Eukleia. And then there is a second altar, to be shared by Dionysus, the Nymphs, and the Hōrai ‘Seasons’, lines 10–11. After that, at lines 11–12, we read that these other gods also receive sacrifice: Apollo Prostatērios, Poseidon Asphaleios, Herakles. Finally, in the context of the reference to the entire enclosure as the Arkhilókheion, at line 17, it is prescribed at lines 17–19 that worshippers are to offer sacrifice on the two altars not only to the gods named but also to Archilochus, described as ‘the poet [poiētēs]’ at line 15. I note with special interest that the verb thuein ‘sacrifice to’
applies not only to the gods as recipients of sacrifice, lines 3, 4, 10, 11, 18, but also to Archilochus himself, line 18.

§7. I draw attention to the fact that the entire enclosure within which Archilochus is worshipped here as a cult hero is a sacred space that is shared by a variety of gods who are worshipped in the context of the hero cult. I find a remarkable parallel in a passage of Pausanias where our traveler describes a precinct in the city of Troizen that is sacred to Hippolytus, who is worshipped there as the city’s primary cult hero. Before I quote my literal translation of the relevant passage, I emphasize already here the fact that the peribolos or ‘enclosure’ of Hippolytus, as mentioned at 2.32.2, is described already at 2.32.1 as the temenos or ‘sacred precinct’ of Hippolytus. Keeping this fact in mind, let us now consider the relevant passage:

{2.32.1} To Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, is dedicated a very famous precinct [temenos], in which is a temple [nāos] with an ancient [arkhaiōn] statue [agalmα]. Diomedes, they say, made [poieîn] these, and, further, he was the first to sacrifice [thuein] to Hippolytus. The people of Troizen have a priest [hierus] of Hippolytus, and he is consecrated [hierasthā] [to Hippolytus] for life. Also, it is an established practice for them to have annual sacrifices [thussa] performed [for Hippolytus]. In addition [to this ritual practice performed for Hippolytus] they have another one. They perform-a-ritual [drān] that is as follows. Every girl before marriage cuts off for him [= Hippolytus] a lock [plokamos] of her hair and, having cut it off, she brings it, in an act of bringing-in-procession [pherein], to his temple [nāos] and dedicates it. They [= the people of Troizen] are unwilling to accept that he died, dragged to death by his horses, and they do not show [apophainein] his tomb [taphos], though they know where it is. But they customarily-think [nomizein] that the one who is called the Charioteer [= Auriga = hēniokhos] in the sky, this one [houtos], is that one [ekeinos], the Hippolytus who receives this honor [timē] from the gods.

{2.32.2} Within this enclosure [peribolos] [of Hippolytus] is a temple [nāos] of Apollo Epibatērios ['boarding (the ship')], a dedication of Diomedes for having weathered the storm that came upon the Greeks as they were returning from Troy. They say that Diomedes was also the first to hold the Pythian Contest [agōn] in honor of Apollo. Of Damia and Auxesia (for the people of Troizen, too, share in their worship) they do not tell [legein] the same story [logos] as do the people of Epidauros and of Aegina, but they say that they were maidens [parθēnai] who came from Crete. When factionalism [stasis] broke out everywhere in the city, even these girls, they say, were stoned to death by an opposing faction and they [= the people of Troizen] celebrate [agōn] a festival [heortē] for their sake, calling it the Lithobolia ['throwing of stones'].

{2.32.3} In the other part of the enclosure [peribolos] is a race-course [stadion] named after Hippolytus, and looming over it is a temple [nāos] of Aphrodite [invoked by way of the epithet] Kataskopēl ['looking down from above']. Here is the reason [for the epithet]: it was at this very spot, whenever Hippolytus was exercising-naked [gumnazesthai], that she, feeling-an-erotic-passion-for [erān] him, used to gaze away [apo­blepein] at him from above, Phaedra did. A myrtle-bush [mursine] still grows here, and its leaves—as I wrote at an earlier point—have holes punched into them. Whenever Phaedra was-feeling-there-was-no-way-out [aporēn] and could find no relief for her erotic-passion [erōs], she would take it out on the leaves of this myrtle-bush, wantonly injuring them.

{2.32.4} There is also the tomb [taphos] of Phaedra, not far from the tomb [mnēma] of Hippolytus, which is a piled-up tumulus near the myrtle-bush [mursine].

§8. As we see from this passage (I give further commentary in Hour 20 of H24H), the temenos or ‘sacred precinct’ of Hippolytus contains not only a nāos ‘temple’ that is sacred to him but also a nāos that is sacred to Apollo and, even more interesting, a nāos that is sacred to Aphrodite, who is given an epithet that evokes the myth about the love of Phaedra for Hippolytus. I analyze that epithet in my posting for 2018.06.21. But I save for last here the most interesting detail of them all, from the standpoint of my argumentation: also contained by the sacred space of Hippolytus is the tomb of Phaedra herself.

§9. As I argued in my posting for 2018.06.21, the presence of a tomb for the suicidal Phaedra within the temenos or ‘sacred precinct’ of Hippolytus is an indication of hero cult. And, as I argue in my next posting for Classical Inquiries, the tomb of Phaedra is comparable to the tomb of the suicidal daughters of Lykambes as signaled in a fragmentary poem preserved in Dublin Papyrus 193a, dated to the late third century BCE, and in a poem by Dioscorides, likewise dated to the third century BCE, in the Greek Anthology (7.351). Laura Swift (1974:26), in a most perceptive analysis of these and other sources, quotes a telling summary, formulated by Martin West (1974:26), of the underlying story: “A match was arranged between Archilochus and one of Lycambes’ daughters, Neoboule. But Lycambes afterwards broke it off, whereupon Archilochus abused him and his two daughters in such fierce iambi that they (the daughters only, in the earlier sources) hanged themselves for shame. He claimed that he had met the girls in the precinct of Hera and that they had indulged in a sexual orgy or orgies together, the details of which were described with the most indecent explicitness.”

§10. About the daughters of Lykambes I will say only this much more for now before I draw this presentation here to a close: the references to these two doomed girls in the so-called First Cologne Epode of Archilochus (F 196a W) do in fact signal erotic activity within a sacred space. In my next posting for Classical Inquiries, however, I argue that this activity is not simply an act of desecration, as Laura Swift
(2015) describes it: rather, it is also an act of sacralization, sanctioned within a space that is sacred to the goddess Hera. I should add that I do agree with Swift when she points to this goddess as a model for the poetics of seduction, as we see such poetics at work in the celebrated erotic scene of Iliad 14 where Hera seduces Zeus as if these two divinities were young lovers, not a mature married couple, but I disagree with her view that this seduction scene is some kind of epic model for the "lyric" scene of seduction as narrated in the Cologne Epode. In making my own argument about Hera as a model for the poetics of seduction in "lyric" traditions, I draw on the insights of the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers (1970) in his study of "women and sanctuary," who analyzes examples of "ritual inversion" within various kinds of "social order" (p. 873). For now, though, I conclude by returning here to that image of a pair of lovers featured in the cover illustration for this posting. There they are, all wrapped up inside the cloak that hides their lovemaking, and their sexual activity is sanctioned by the Dionysiac halo, as I called it, of grapevines surrounding their act of making love. So also in the Cologne Epode, I argue, the seduction of the girl who is all wrapped up inside a cloak with her lover is sanctioned by the poetic medium of Dionysus as activated within a sacred space of Hera.

Bibliographical Abbreviations


Bibliography


Erotic desecration and sacralization in Greek myth and ritual

A placeholder for the love story of Phaedra and Hippolytus: What's love got to do with it?


Tags: Archilochus, Hippolytus, Mnesiepes Inscription, Pausanias, Phaedra