



# Sappho's Aphrodite, the goddess Chryse, and a primal ordeal suffered by Philoctetes in a tragedy of Sophocles

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# Sappho's Aphrodite, the goddess Chryse, and a primal ordeal suffered by Philoctetes in a tragedy of Sophocles

AUGUST 2, 2021 | By Gregory Nagy

2021.08.02 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. The common thread, as it were, for this essay is the meaning of the epithet *poikiló-thronos* gracing the goddess Aphrodite in line 1 of Sappho's Song 1. The persona of Sappho is addressing the goddess there, and I now interpret the epithet—hardly for the first time—as '[you] who wear [your] pattern-woven dress'. But how is such a 'dress' to be imagined if we think of it only in terms of the multivalent English word 'dress'? Such a blurry image of what the goddess of sexuality and love is wearing can be sharpened. My metaphor, "common thread," is relevant: I am thinking here of an ancient technique of fabric work known today as pattern-weaving, a form of visual art that was ingeniously perfected over time through the material instrumentality of upright warp-weighted looms. And my thinking here about this art of pattern-weaving—it really was a form of art, not just a technique—was inspired by relevant comments made in two consecutive personal communications from a colleague and friend, Natasha Bershadsky. The first of these communications, dated 2021.07.20, led to my choosing the image for the cover of the previous essay I posted for *Classical Inquiries* (Nagy 2021.07.26, linked [here](#)). As for the second of the two personal communications, dated 2021.07.28, it has led to my choice of the image that we view as the cover illustration for the posting here. Both these cover images, surviving from the visual art of ancient Greek vase painters working in the classical period of Athens, that is, in the fifth century BCE, picture the look and feel of the 'dress' of Aphrodite as pictured in the verbal art of Sappho's Song 1. And that is because the "dress" that is worn by the goddess represented in both cover images is clearly pattern-woven. The cover image for the previous essay that I posted shows a cult statue of Aphrodite herself wearing a pattern-woven dress. As for the cover image of the essay that I post here, we see once again a cult statue of a goddess wearing a strikingly similar pattern-woven dress. But, this time, the adjacent lettering names the goddess as Chryse / *Khrūsē* (the lettering, faintly visible,

can be restored: XPYΣE), which is a feminine adjective meaning ‘the golden one’. The aim of my essay here is to find answers to two possibly relevant questions:

(A) What is the connection, if any, between Sappho’s Aphrodite and the goddess Chryse?

(B) What is the connection, if any, between the goddess Chryse and a primal ordeal—as I describe it in the title of my current essay—that is suffered by Philoctetes in the tragedy of Sophocles that is named after this hero?



Athenian red-figure painting, on bell krater, by the Kadmos Painter: close-up of the cult statue of Chryse. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. 1144. Drawing after Alexandre de La Borde, *Collection des vases grecs de M. le comte de Lamberg* (Paris, 1813), vol. 1, pl. XXIII.

§1. In what follows, I start with two inchoate answers matching the two possibly relevant questions that I have just introduced:

§1A. The adjectival name of the goddess Chryse, as we will see, can be interpreted as an epithet of Aphrodite herself in Aeolian traditions, which were native to Sappho.

§1B. And the same goddess Chryse, as we will also see, is relevant to an Aeolian version of a myth about the aforementioned primal ordeal suffered by the hero Philoctetes—which took place on an island that also had the same name, Chryse, that is, *Khrūsē*.

§2. It will be easier for me to elaborate first on the inchoate answer formulated at §1B. The myth about Chryse and Philoctetes was known to vase painters in Athens during the classical period, that is, in the fifth century BCE. And the same myth was known also to Sophocles: in his tragedy named after the hero Philoctetes, the poet's words refer both to the goddess Chryse (lines 194 and 1327) and to an island by the same name, Chryse (line 270).

§4. The island named Chryse, as we will soon see, was sacred not only to the goddess named Chryse but also, ultimately, to the hero Philoctetes himself. It was on this island that the goddess impelled her guardian serpent to bite the hero, afflicting Philoctetes with the ordeal of a seemingly incurable poisonous wound. The primal scene of this toxic snakebite is graphically pictured in a Classical Athenian vase painting:



Athenian red-figure painting on a stamnos, by Hermonax: Philoctetes is bitten by a snake in the Sanctuary of Chryse. Musée du Louvre, inv. no. G 143. After a drawing at p. xxxviii of R. C. Jebb, *The Philoctetes of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1898).

§5. The drawing that I have just shown here derives, as I indicate in the caption, from Richard Jebb's edition (1898) of the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles, with commentary, and the commentator adds his own interpretation of what we see being pictured in the original vase painting (Jebb p. 204):

The image of Chryse stands in the open air on a low pedestal; just in front of it is a low and rude altar, with fire burning on it; close to this is the serpent, at which Agamemnon is striking with his sceptre, while the wounded Philoctetes lies on the ground, with Achilles and others around him.

§6. Already in early epic, we see references to a toxic snakebite that afflicted Philoctetes. The earliest attestation is in the Homeric *Iliad*, 2.716–728, and there are other attestations in the so-called Epic Cycle, as we read in the Proclus summary (edited by Allen 1912): *Cypria*, p. 104 lines 21–23, and *Little Iliad*, p. 106 lines 23–27. From these attestations, we can reconstruct only the most basic aspects of what seems to be a variety of different versions of myths about

such a snakebite. We learn, basically, that the hero Philoctetes was sailing to Troy with his fellow Achaeans, led by Agamemnon, and, at a stopover island, before the Achaean armada arrived at the shores of Troy, our hero was bitten by a water-snake and then evacuated to another island, Lemnos. There the Achaeans abandoned him, sailing on to Troy. Philoctetes languished at Lemnos for ten years before the Achaeans finally came to their senses, realizing that this hero was needed to win the Trojan War. An Achaean delegation sailed to Lemnos and persuaded Philoctetes to rejoin his Achaean comrades.

§7. These epic references, however, are not in total agreement with the version of the myth that we see being retold in the vase painting—and in the tragedy by Sophocles—about the snakebite that afflicted Philoctetes. A glaring example is the fact that the Proclus summary of the *Cypria*, p. 104 line 21, reports that the snakebite happened on the island of Tenedos, and we read no mention there of Chryse—either of the island or of the goddess by the same name.

§8. Here I find it important to note that the culture of the island of Tenedos was distinctly Aeolian. In previous work (Nagy 2016.10.08, linked [here](#)), I have analyzed the importance of this island's cultural identity by comparing it to the far better-known cultural identity of the island of Lesbos, which was also distinctly Aeolian. My highlighting here the cultural parallels between the island of Tenedos and the island of Lesbos, native land of Sappho, is relevant to the first of the two questions I asked myself at the beginning of this essay: What is the connection, if any, between Sappho's Aphrodite and the goddess Chryse? And I can now return to my inchoate answer to this question, as formulated already at §1A: The adjectival name of the goddess Chryse can be interpreted as an epithet of Aphrodite herself in Aeolian traditions, as we learn from a comment made by Cleanthes of Assos, who headed the Stoic movement after the death of Zeno in 262 BCE. The comment of Cleanthes is found in the D scholia for *Iliad* 3.64: Κλεάνθης δὲ, καὶ ἐν Λέσβῳ οὕτω τιμᾶσθαι Ἀφροδίτην χρυσην 'But Cleanthes says that Aphrodite in Lesbos was given honors [of worship] by way by way of [her being called] *Khrūsē*' (Cleanthes ed. Pearson 1889 p. 292). Since Cleanthes originated from the city of Assos in Asia Minor, which had close cultural affinities with Lesbos, not with Tenedos, I infer that the Aeolian tradition about the goddess named Chryse, presiding over an island also named Chryse, was native to Lesbos.

§9. This inference is relevant to the second of the two questions I asked myself at the beginning of this essay: What is the connection, if any, between the goddess Chryse and the primal ordeal that is suffered by Philoctetes? I now return to my inchoate answer to this second



question, as formulated already at §1B: The same goddess Chryse is relevant to an Aeolian version of the myth about the primal ordeal suffered by the hero Philoctetes—which took place on an island that also had the same name, Chryse.

§10. I pursue further the point that I am making, that the name Chryse may well have varied in the traditions of Aeolian Lesbos and of Aeolian Tenedos. In the version native to Tenedos, the primal scene of the snakebite would have taken place on that Aeolian island. In the version native to the island of Lesbos, on the other hand, the snakebite would have taken place on a smaller nearby island that was named after the goddess—the island of Chryse.

§11. The vase painting that we viewed a minute ago, where we saw a picturing of the primal scene of the snakebite, tells the essentials of the story. As we have read in Jebb's summary of this scene, we are viewing here a sacrifice that has gone wrong, very wrong. Philoctetes, as a primary participant in the sacrifice, has been bitten by a serpent that is guarding an altar sacred to the goddess Chryse (spelled Chrysè by Jebb), whose cult statue, positioned on top of a column, presides over the altar. This sacrifice gone wrong, which has been taking place at the altar of the goddess named Chryse, is staged on an island also named Chryse. As we learn in more detail from other sources that I will quote and translate presently, this island Chryse was the sacred place where Agamemnon and his Achaeans stopped over—just before their lengthy sea voyage across the Aegean finally reached the shores of Troy on the mainland of northwest Asia Minor. Evidently, the sacrifice at Chryse was meant to guarantee the success of the Achaeans in their quest to capture Troy.

§12. All that is known for sure today about the location of this sacred island of Chryse, where Philoctetes suffered the toxic snakebite, is that it was situated, according to the myth, much nearer to the shores of Troy than was Lemnos, a much larger island that is situated farther northwest, farther away from Troy. The location of the island Lemnos, which was where Philoctetes languished, myth has it, for ten years after the Achaeans evacuated him from the island Chryse, is of course a reality today, but not so the location of Chryse, where the primal scene of the toxic snakebite actually took place according to the myth. The reality of Chryse is no longer to be seen ever again, and there is a most compelling reason for the visual absence of this island from the seascape of the northwest Aegean. By the time of Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE, this island Chryse had disappeared under sea level. Here are the words of Pausanias himself (8.33.4):

ἐπιδείκνυται δὲ καὶ ἐν τῷδε ἔτι τὴν ἰσχὺν μείζονα καὶ θαύματος πλείονος ἢ κατὰ συμφορὰς καὶ εὐπραγίας πόλεων· Λήμνου γὰρ πλοῦν ἀπεῖχεν οὐ πολὺν Χρύση νῆσος, ἐν ἧ καὶ τῷ Φιλοκτήτῃ γενέσθαι συμφορὰν ἐκ τοῦ ὕδρου φασί· ταύτην κατέλαβεν ὁ κλύδων πᾶσαν, καὶ κατέδυσεν ἡ Χρύση καὶ ἠφάνισται κατὰ τοῦ βυθοῦ.

The incident that I am about to relate shows that the mighty power of fortune is even greater and more wondrous than what is shown by incidents of bad or good fortune that happen to cities. Just a short trip by sail from Lemnos was once upon a time an island named Chryse, where, it is said, Philoctetes experienced his misfortune caused by the water-snake. But the waves utterly washed over it, and Chryse sank and disappeared in the depths.

§13. We know of an earlier incident, however, that took place on the island of Chryse during the Third Mithridatic War, 73–63 BCE, at which time Chryse was still above sea level. The source for relating this incident is Appian 11.77:

Οὐάριον δὲ καὶ Ἀλέξανδρον καὶ Διονύσιον περὶ Λῆμον ἐν ἐρήμῃ νήσῳ καταλαβόντων, ἔνθα δαίκεται βωμὸς Φιλοκτήτου καὶ χάλκεος ὄφις καὶ τόξα καὶ θώραξ ταινίαις περιδεδυμένος, μίμημα τῆς ἐκείνου πάθους

He [Lucullus], having taken by surprise [the enemies] Varius and Alexandros and Dionysios in the seas around the [island of] Lemnos, on a deserted island... [on which deserted island] one is shown for viewing there an altar of Philoctetes and a bronze [statue of a] snake [*ophis*], together with bow-and-arrows [*toxa*] and a breastplate adorned with ribbons—a re-enactment [*mīmēma*] of that one's experience [*pathē*].

§14. So, in the second of the last two passages I have just quoted about the island of Chryse—this one from Appian, dated to the first century BCE—we learn that the island was in his time still visible, though deserted, and visitors could still see remnants of a hero cult that memorialized Philoctetes and the primal ordeal that he had experienced on that island. To be contrasted is the first of the two passages quoted—this one from Pausanias, dating from a time not that much later, that is, the second century CE. By now the island of Chryse is no longer to be seen above sea level, and so the hero cult of Philoctetes has by now been covered over by the waves of the sea.

§15. I can hardly assume, however, that there would have been no memory of the hero's cult, even in the days of Pausanias. After all, our traveler refers to the primal ordeal of Philoctetes even in the context of saying that the site of this ordeal is nowhere to be seen any more in the Aegean seascape. And I would add that the cults of heroes, even submerged, may have a way of persisting in the memories of those who know the myths about these heroes. A case in point is what we read in the scholia to the *Alexandra* of Lycophron, Σ 365.42-46, on which I have commented in a previous essay (Nagy 2019, linked [here](#)). I now epitomize from that essay (p.185):

In Lycophron Σ 365.42-46, we read that the state of Locris, native land of Ajax son of Oileus, a hero known as the "Lesser Ajax" in the Homeric *Iliad*, sends out a ship every year to sail off to a traditionally designated point in the Aegean Sea where Ajax the Locrian was killed in a violent seastorm, myth has it, and, at that point, which is marked by a reef that barely sticks out of the waves, the Locrians make sacrifice to their hero. The Locrian ship of state that is sent to this point in the sea is rigged with a black sail, and on board the ship is a brazier of fire, brought from the Locrian homeland, that the Locrians will use in making their *thusiā* 'sacrifice' to the hero (Θυσίαν τῷ ἥρωϊ) on the surface of the reef. We may compare in Philostratus *Heroikos* 53.9 the description of a seasonally recurring ritual organized by the state of Thessaly, native land of Achilles. In this case, a ship of state is sent off to sail across the Aegean Sea to the territory of Troy, where the Thessalians then make sacrifice to their hero. I note two details:

(A) the Thessalian ship of state is rigged with a black sail, and (B) the Thessalians bring with them on board the fire that they will use in making the sacrifice.

§16. As this essay winds down, I am left with the uneasy feeling that I have opened a way to finding new problems without having developed adequate solutions to the old problems that have been swirling around the myth of Philoctetes. In the essay that follows this one, I will attempt a remedy by fusing into one question the biggest of the old problems with the biggest of the new problems I have created for myself here. That one single question will be this: what was the source, for Sophocles, of the myth about the primal snakebite experienced by Philoctetes on the island of Chryse? And the tentative answer that I will try to develop in the essay that follows this one will have to do with the fact that Philoctetes the hero was a vital participant not only in Trojan War II. There had once been a Trojan War I where Philoctetes had also participated. And, before that World War I ever even got started, Philoctetes had once

before visited the sacred island of Chryse. That time as well, there had been a sacrifice—but that earlier sacrifice had succeeded where the later sacrifice was doomed to fail.

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[Aphrodite](#), [Chryse](#), [Philoctetes](#)