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The Role of the Muses in Ibycus’s Quest for Immortality in the *Polykrates Ode*

**Miller’s English Translation**¹

1  ... who brought Dardanian Priam’s great city, far-famed and prosperous to destruction, setting out from Argos by the counsels of great Zeus

5  involved, over fair-haired Helen’s beauty, in a struggle glorified by many songs, a war that led to tears when ruin scaled long-suffering Pergamos through Aphrodite of the golden tresses.

10 Now, however, neither Paris the traitor-guest nor Kassandra of the slender ankles do I desire to celebrate in song, nor Priam’s other children or the unspeakable day on which

15 Troy’s high gates were captured. Nor shall I recount the magnificent prowess of the heroes who sailed

in hollow ships made tight with many nails,

¹ Miller (1996), 95-97.
bringing calamity to Troy, those noble heroes.

Commanding them was lord Agamemnon,
descendant of Pleisthenes, king and leader of men,
son of a noble father, Atreus.

Such themes the Muses of Helikon, whose skill is great, might embark upon in speech;

but by himself no man alive could tell in detail

how many ships were launched from Aulis and over the Aegean Sea from Argos came to Troy,

the nurse of horses, and with them men bearing bronze shields, the sons of the Achaians.

Of them the most outstanding with the spear were swift-footed Achilles and Telamon’s valiant son, great Ajax…

... of fire …

... from Argos …

... to Ilion …

[Missing]

[Missing]

... whom golden-belted Hyllis bore. To him was Troilos
compared, like gold
already thrice refined to brass,

by Trojans and Danaans, for in attractiveness [Ep.]
of form they found them very much alike.
These two have a share in beauty for all time;
you also, Polykrates, will enjoy imperishable fame
to the extent that song and my own fame can give it.

Introduction

The earliest reference to the Heliconian Muses after Hesiod’s *Works and Days* was is in a papyrus fragment found at Oxyrhynchus from as early as the 2nd century B.C.E. The papyrus contained forty-eight unattributed, continuous lines of a poem in an archaic style.² It is an encomium of Polykrates (Fr. S151), written in an amalgam of choral lyric dialects—primarily epic, overlaid with Doric and some Aeolic. The meter is in triadic form with mostly dactyls. In order for an archaic poem of this type to survive, it likely had to be under the protection of a well-known name, one of the nine Greek lyricists.³ The dialect and meter narrow down the possible authors to Stesichorus and Ibycus, and most scholars agree that the poet was Ibycus because of his association with the court of Polykrates, the tyrant of Samos. Ibycus’s personal poems included erotic and particularly homoerotic themes resembling this work.

Yet, many modern scholars were extremely dissatisfied with the poetic quality of *Polykrates Ode*, despite agreeing that the author was the preeminent Ibycus. In

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³ Woodbury (1985), 193.
particular, the English scholar Sir Denys Page described the poem, which is the largest preserved work of Ibycus, as “spiritless and trivial”, “a series of perfunctory phrases”, “little more than a series of epic formulae, rather pinned on than painted in”, “patchwork”, and lastly “inarticulate”. After 2,000 years, out of the seven books collected during the Alexandrian period of Ibycus’s poetry, this was the unearthed poem. However, not all is lost. As recent scholars have proclaimed, this so-called patchwork is essential to the nature of the poem, which promises “imperishable fame” (47) to Polykrates through song and the poet’s “own fame” (48). Only in epic are Achilles, Agamemnon, Ajax, Helen, Priam, and the other Homeric characters immortal. Echoing Homeric and Hesiodic epithets such as “swift-footed Achilles” (πόδας ὤκυς Ἀχιλλῆς, 33) reminds the audience of both the characters’ and author’s immortality.

However, as Ibycus recalls the story of the Trojan War with epic phrases, through the use of praeteritio, he continually disavows epic as the subject of his poetry in the form of a recusatio. He “doesn’t desire to celebrate in song” (12) nor “recount” (15) the episodes of the Trojan War. At about the half-way point, he includes Heliconian Muses as capable of epic but “by himself no man alive could tell in detail” (25-26) the events of the Trojan War. While Homer and Hesiod modestly confess their inability to sing about their subject matter and then call upon the Muses for inspiration, Ibycus glosses over it, simply including it as a statement in his recollection of the Trojan War, speaking about the Muses in 3rd person. Additionally, the Muses he mentions are the Heliconides, the Muses of Hesiod, and not the Pierides or Olympiades, the Muses of Homer. Why would Ibycus mention Hesiod’s Muses as capable of Homeric subject-

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4 Page (1951), 165-166.

matter, and why does he not appeal to the Muses for help, as almost all other authors do? What role do the Muses play in this encomium and Ibycus’s promise of immortality to Polykrates?

Ibycus skillfully composes the Polykrates Ode using a unique invocation of the Muses along with a number of allusions throughout his abridged version of the Trojan War, functioning as a priamel. By means of the intertextual relationship with passages from Homer’s Iliad and Hesiod’s Works and Days, Ibycus explores the themes of beauty (κάλλος), strife (ἔρις), and poetic inspiration in the Polykrates Ode. Rather than calling upon the Muses as a suppliant, Ibycus builds his authenticity by collaborating with the Muses, differentiating himself from his predecessors Homer and Hesiod. In doing so, he strengthens his claim as an immortal poet.

Background

Ibycus lived in the 2nd half of the 6th century B.C. He was born in Rhegion, a Greek city on the southwestern tip of Italy. But, like fellow lyric poet Anacreon, he moved to Samos, an island of the coast of modern-day Turkey, and took up residence in the court of Polykrates. He wrote long lyric narratives in the manner of Stesichorus, but when he arrived in Samos, he began to compose the love lyric of the East.

Polykrates acted as a patron for Ibycus.

The uncovered fragment of the Polykrates Ode was a palimpsest containing the final forty-eight lines of the poem. Because the poem is in triads, divided into strophe, antistrophe, and epode, the first triad is clearly missing a strophe. While we cannot know if there was more preceding the first triad of the fragment, the ring composition

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6 Miller (1996), 95.
of the poem suggests that only a single strophe is missing.\textsuperscript{7} The focus of both the first and last triad are the assessment of beauty. The first triad includes Helen and Aphrodite, followed by Paris at the beginning of the second triad, thus alluding to the Judgement of Paris, the famous beauty contest between Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. The fourth triad compares the beauty of three other characters: Cyanippos, Zeuxippos, and Troilos.\textsuperscript{8} Cyanippos and Zeuxippos are two obscure princes of Sicyon, not found in Homeric epic. Troilos was a son of Priam and Hecuba, regarded to as the paragon of youthful beauty to both the Greeks and Trojans. The ring structure continues with the second and third triad both focusing on the story of the kingship and heroes of the Trojan War. The poem mentions the Agamemnon and Achilles at the end of the second triad and third triad, respectively. The strife between Agamemnon and Achilles kicks off the \textit{Iliad}. At the center of all of this, at about the half-way point, Ibycus mentions the Muses. The other topics act as a mirror image on both sides. Finally, the structure sets Agamemnon, the famed, immortal leader of the Greeks, at the end of the first half of the poem against Polykrates, the tyrant of Samos, seeking immortality at the end of the second half of the poem. The mirror image of Agamemnon and Polykrates as supreme rulers cannot be a coincidence.

The idea that a divine force inspires the poet exists in poetic genres ranging from before Homer to the modern day. Here, the Muses are the divine force in Greek song. The presentation of the Muses in the third triad has clear intertextual links to two passages. The first is the invocation of the Muses in Homer's \textit{Catalogue of Ships},

\textsuperscript{7} Hardie (2013), 14-16.

\textsuperscript{8} The names Cyanippos and Zeuxippos were recovered from the papyrus scholion by Barron (1969).
where Homer makes a claim concerning his ability as a poet which is almost matches Ibycus’s claim that only the Muses, and not mortal men, could sing the details of the Trojan War. Homer, instead of generalizing to all men, says that he himself could not detail the leaders and ships as the omniscient Muses can.

Tell me now, you Muses who have dwellings on Olympus -
for you are goddesses, and are present and know everything, whereas we hear only what is rumoured and we know nothing — who were the leaders and lords of the Danaans. And the host I could not relate or name … unless the Olympian Muses, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus, call to mind as many as came beneath Ilium. And I shall tell the captains of ships and all the ships.⁹

The second passage is in the Nautilia of Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, in which Hesiod details his lack of practical knowledge about sailing, but the Muses have taught him to sing about it. This passage matches less in content than the *Iliad* passage, but there are clear verbal and thematic links. Both employ forms of the rare words σεσοφισμένος (skilled, WD 649) and πολυγόμφοι (many-pegged, WD 660). Both also mention the departure of the Greeks from Aulis, and use sailing metaphors to describe how the poets “embark” in singing:

I will show you the measures of the loud-sounding sea,
though I’m not skilled in sea-faring nor in ships; for I have never yet sailed by ship across the broad ocean, other than

to Euboea from Aulis, where the Achaeans, waiting out much storm, gathered a great host from sacred Hellas for Troy of beautiful women. There did I cross to Chalcis, to the games of warlike Amphidamas where the sons of the great-hearted man appointed and proclaimed many prizes. And there it's my boast that gaining victory with a hymnos, I carried off an eared tripod which I dedicated to the Muses of Helicon, in that place where they first embarked me on clear song. Such is all my experience of many-pegged ships; nevertheless I will tell you the will of Zeus who holds the aegis; for the Muses have taught me to sing a marvellous hymnos.¹⁰

Analysis

These two passages are vital in understanding the presence of the Muses in the Polykrates Ode. The first obvious difference to note is that although all three poets claim to not have the knowledge to sing their respective epic themes, Homer and Hesiod both still sing of the subject matter through the Muses. Ibycus instead does not ask the Muses to impart knowledge, preferring to sing about his own experiences and contemporaries such as Polykrates. He elevates himself above Homer and Hesiod by not stealing the epic subject matter of the Muses but by creating his own subject matter. The third and fourth lines of Theocritus’s sixteenth Idyll draw a similar parallel between the Muses and mortal poets: “the Muses are goddesses, goddesses sing of

gods; but we here are mortals, of mortals let us mortals sing.”\footnote{Hardie (2013), 30-31.} Since epic material about gods, heroes, and journeys are reserved for the gods, Ibycus refuses to even attempt epic. Homer agrees with Theocritus when he states that as mortals, “we hear only what is rumoured and we know nothing” \textit{(Il.} 2.487). Homer writes nearly 16,000 lines on a topic about which he claims to know only rumours while Ibycus writes about a close tie, the tyrant in his current home. Hesiod on the other hand outright proclaims that he is “not skilled in sea-faring nor in ships” in the midst of him discussing sailing \textit{(WD} 649). Ibycus refuses to speak of the epic subject matter reserved for the all-knowing Muses. He opts for subject matter which he knows well.

However, in a true praeteritio, he does actually discuss the epic subject of the Trojan War, complete with Homeric formulae and epithets. In a few cases in fact, he brings up inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the writing of Homer and Hesiod. He selects the Heliconian Muses of Hesiod rather than Homer’s Muses. But, he does not always side with Hesiod. With respect to Agamemnon, Ibycus settles on Homer’s genealogy, citing Atreus as the father of Agamemnon rather than Hesiod’s Pleisthenes.\footnote{Hardie (2013), 13.} On one occasion, Ibycus outright opts for his own rendition of the story when he calls Zeuxippos the most beautiful of Greeks (36), a character who does not appear in Homer nor Hesiod.\footnote{Barron (1969), Hutchinson (2001), and Wilkinson (2013) all agree that \[κάλλιστος\] fits both the space and context well.} In the \textit{Iliad}, Homer declared that Achilles was the most beautiful of the Greeks, followed by Nireus.\footnote{Homer, \textit{Iliad}, 2.673-674.} There is no mention of Zeuxippos or his counterpart in this poem Cyanippos. On top of that, Ibycus chooses names that are
significant to Homer in etymology. By ending each name in -ιππος (horse), Ibycus alludes to Homer’s catalogue of the best Greek horses, also in Book II of the *Iliad*. Thus, in Ibycus’s cataloguing of the events of the Trojan War, he differentiates himself from the works of both Homer and Hesiod.

But, as someone who admits he is incapable of writing about the Trojan War, Ibycus writes about it in the fashion of someone who has knowledge of the epic material, even more knowledge than Homer and Hesiod had concerning the story. According to Ibycus, the Muses who watched the Trojan War have this knowledge, and inherently, since only the Muses could be truly aware of this information, the Muses must actually be present throughout Ibycus’s catalogue, just as Homer and Hesiod summoned them for their source of information. Ibycus’s does not credit his inspiration to the Muses, but it is clear that they inspire his song, and hence authenticate him as the poet. Through the Muses, Ibycus is able to confidently correct the legendary and immortal Homer and Hesiod.

This is further reinforced by the lexical choices Ibycus makes. He uses πολύμνον (of many songs, 6) in the first triad. The close cognate Polyhymnia is the name of one of the nine Greek Muses. By using polyhymnion at the beginning, not only is Ibycus saying that the strife of the Trojan War is sung in many songs, but he is saying that it is sung by the Muses, using Polyhymnia as the presiding spirit. At this point, in the first triad, the Muses already play a part in the poem. Then, Ibycus builds up the Muses’ consistent presence in the poem by again recalling them in the third triad. Next, Hesiod

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16 Homer, *Iliad* 2.760-762, 768-769.
17 Hardie (2013), 27-29.
uses σεσοφισμέναι (23), a form of the word used in Hesiod’s passage, σεσοφισμένος (WD 649). Hesiod’s σεσοφισμένος describes the craft of the seaman. The word is a participle of the verb σοφίζεσθαι, which is used to describe the practice of the human, not divine, technical skill.\textsuperscript{18} Ibycus’s description of the Muses as σεσοφισμέναι is then quite unusual. The Muses do not need practice like humans, because they have the innate ability to sing and are omniscient about the subject matter. They are the source of the inspiration for the poet. Ibycus uses σεσοφισμέναι to lower the Muses down to the level of humans where they can attempt to exhibit their skills in a new, unpracticed manner, different from that of Homer and Hesiod. Ibycus wishes for the Muses to focus on new topics such as love poetry.

This distancing from epic is more clear in the allusion to Hesiod’s passage. Scholars generally apply a metapoetic dimension to Hesiod’s references to sailing and the Greek fleet at Aulis.\textsuperscript{19} The juxtaposition of the Hesiod’s short voyage from Aulis to Chalcis with the Greeks’ long voyage from Aulis to Troy is in the form of a recusatio. Hesiod rejects the long works of Homeric epic, opting for a shorter journey, writing shorter poems. With his shorter poems, he manages to win a poetic competition at Chalcis, dedicating his trophy to the Muses of Helicon. In alluding to this, Ibycus distances himself from Homer while still boasting his achievements, siding with Hesiod. This agonistic tradition between Hesiod and Homer, a so-called certamen, emerges at some point in ancient Greece. Hesiod represents farming and peace while Homer represents wars and slaughter. Ibycus describes the conflict as a “war that led to tears”

\textsuperscript{18} Woodbury (1985), 200-201.
\textsuperscript{19} Hardie (2013), 12-15.
(7), which is consistent with other sixth-century poetry. Thus, as Ibycus writes about the Trojan War, he is rejecting Homer’s war as his subject matter. But instead of writing about Hesiod’s more peaceful content, he opts for his own content, love and beauty, in even shorter poems than Hesiod. And like Hesiod, the Muses still inspire his work.

The Muses guide Ibycus to this realization as he writes about epic content but focuses on the subjects of love and beauty. This poem in itself is a journey from the blameworthy strife which leads to wars and destruction to the commended strife which leads to beneficial competition between men in rivalry, another allusion to Hesiod’s Works and Days. The beauty at the beginning of Ibycus’s poem is representative of the “struggle glorified by many songs” (6), the Trojan War. The judgement of Paris results in the abduction of Helen and the clashing of the gods, which in turn cause the Trojan War. Cassandra (11) was also known for her beauty but was cursed by Apollo and her true prophecies would never be believed. These negative connotations of beauty cause blameworthy strife. However, in the second half, the beauty becomes agreeable. The beauty of Zeuxippos and Cyanippos do not cause war; they are not even mentioned in Homer. The great beauty of Troilos is agreeable to both the Greeks and the Trojans. Though Troilos dies during the Trojan War, Homer does not detail the death. The beauty of each character in this trio only causes men to strive in competition to reach such a level of beauty, but it does not result in destruction like the beauty of Aphrodite and Helen. This blameless beauty is what Ibycus aligns with Polykrates. The presence of the Muses leads him on a journey from destructive beauty

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20 Anacreon. Eleg. 2.3 (πόλεμον δακρυόεντα).
22 Hardie (2013), 15-16.
of epic to the beneficial beauty of love poetry. This beneficial beauty is how Polykrates and Ibycus become immortal, a far more pleasant memory than the beauty which caused a ten-year war and countless deaths and ruin.

**Conclusion**

In the *Polykrates Ode*, Ibycus alludes to Homer and Hesiod to explore the themes of beauty, strife, and immortality. Although he does not invoke the Muses, they have a clear presence throughout the encomium as they take him on the journey from from epic to love poetry, from warring strife to favorable strife. In reality, this poem might represent just that. In the beginning of his life, Ibycus wrote long epico-lyric narratives in the manner of Stesichorus, and it is possible that he wrote this shortly after his journey from Rhegium to Samos, a similar voyage to Hesiod’s from Aulis to Chalcis. As Hesiod’s short expedition marked his separation from Homer, this poem marks Ibycus’s transition from the mythical, epic content of his epico-lyric narratives to love and praise of his erotic poetry.23 This is the poetry which brought Ibycus immortality with Polykrates as his patron, who in turn, received immortality through the poetry.

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References


