

IRON FOR COPPER: A NOTE ON METAL TRADE AT THE END OF THE LATE BRONZE AGE

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ABSTRACT

There is an ambivalence in the way, that Sicily and Italy are depicted in the *Odyssey*. They are portrayed as places with dangerous mythical creatures, albeit a visit from Italy was also perceived as nothing extraordinary. It is apparent, that there is an amalgamation of contradicting myths and traditions stemming from different periods. In the *Odyssey* there is a reference to a ship travelling from the Ionian Sea with a cargo of iron to Temesa in Italy, in order to acquire copper. The mention of iron led many scholars to think, that this particular passage reflects the realities of the eighth century BC. In this paper I argue that the reference to this particular journey reflects an early phase of trading activity in the 11th and 10th centuries BC, when iron was being produced in the Aegean, but not yet in Italy.

In the *Odyssey* 1:179-86 Athena disguises herself as Mentès, that is, son of Anchialus and ruler of the Taphians,¹ in order to speak to Telemachos and convey to him hope, that his father is still alive. Mentès mentions the following to Telemachos:

*And now have I put in here [that is, Ithaca], as you see, with ship and crew, while sailing over the wine-dark sea to men of strange speech, on my way to Temese for copper; and I bear with me shining iron.*²

Some modern commentators favoured the identification of this Temese with Tamassos on Cyprus.³ Nevertheless, Tamassos is landlocked, and Mentès would have mentioned one of the Cypriot ports as the destination of his sea journey. Ancient authors had little doubt that this particular passage refers to the city Temesa in Italy.⁴ Strabo mentions that copper mines were in the vicinity of Temesa, albeit they were abandoned by his time,⁵ and Ovid also alludes to its ore,⁶ and copper mines.⁷ Furthermore, there was a shrine dedicated to one

¹ According to Euripides (*Iphigenia in Aulis* 284-86) the Taphians inhabited the isles of the Echinades.

² Hom. *Od.* 1, 179-86: “τοιγάρ ἐγώ τοι ταῦτα μάλ’ ἀτρεκέως ἀγορεύσω. | Μέντης Ἀγχιάλοιο δαΐφρονος εὔχομαι εἶναι νόος, ἀτὰρ Ταφίοισι φιληρέτμοισιν ἀνάσσω. | νῦν δ’ ὦδε ξὺν νηὶ κατήλυθον ἥδ’ ἐτάροισιν | πλέων ἐπὶ οἶνοπα πόντον ἐπ’ ἀλλοθρόους ἀνθρώπους, | ἐς Τεμέσῃν μετὰ χαλκόν, ἄγω δ’ αἶθωνα σίδηρον. | νηὺς δέ μοι ἥδ’ ἔστηκεν ἐπ’ ἀγροῦ νόσφι πόληος, | ἐν λιμένι Πείθῳ ὑπὸ Νηίῳ ἑλθέντι.”

³ For example, Heubeck *et al.* 1988, s.v. 1.179-86.

⁴ Strabo 6.1.5: “People say that Homer has in mind this Temesa, not the Tamassus in Cyprus (the name is spelled both ways), when he says “to Temesa, in quest of copper.” And in fact copper mines are to be seen in the neighborhood, although now they have been abandoned.” About the location of the Italian Temesa see also Pomponius Mela 2.69; Ptolemaeus, *Geogr.* 3.1.9; Steph. Byz. s.v. Temese.

⁵ Strabo 6.1.5.

⁶ Ovid, *Met.* 7.192.

⁷ Ovid, *Met.* 15, 699; also “Temesan bronze” in Ovid, *Fasti* 5.419.

of the companions of Odysseus, who was supposedly killed in that city and was later worshipped as a hero.⁸

There is an ambivalence in the way that Sicily and Italy are depicted in the *Odyssey*. On the one hand, they are portrayed as places with dangerous mythical creatures, such as the Skylla and Charybdis, the Cyclopes, and the Laestrygonians. On the other hand, a visit from Italy was perceived as nothing extraordinary. The disguised Odysseus lied to Penelope when he claimed he arrived at Ithaca from the city of Alybas in Sikania by accident, because he was carried away off his route.⁹ Sikania was not unknown to Penelope and his story was not so out of the ordinary as to arouse her suspicions. In the *Odyssey* Sicily is presented as a place where slaves can be sold,¹⁰ or bought,¹¹ and Mentès' journey to Temesa also refers to regular trade activity with no heroic connotation whatsoever.¹² Both in the stories of the disguised Odysseus and Mentès there is not the slightest allusion to dangers posed by mythical creatures.

It is apparent, that there is an amalgamation of contradicting myths and traditions in the *Odyssey* concerning Italy.¹³ Trade contacts between the Aegean and the Italian peninsula already existed during the Late Bronze Age. Late Helladic IIIB and IIIC pottery has so far been discovered in more than 70 sites in Sicily and Italy; in some cases the Mycenaean pottery was locally produced, which may indicate the presence of small Mycenaean trading stations.¹⁴ Moreover, Handmade Burnished Ware or Barbarian Ware was introduced to the Aegean from Italy.¹⁵ It is reasonable to assume, that the references to dangerous mythical creatures reflect fabulous stories of early sea travellers, probably prior to the Late Bronze Age. The narrative of regular trade contacts in the *Odyssey* reflected the situation both in the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age.

In Greek mythology the colonisation of many Greek cities in Italy and Sicily is connected with the *Nostoi*, that is, the returning heroes from the Trojan War.¹⁶ The epic poets were not interested in searching for motives of an economic character behind the oral tradition, which was the source of their inspiration. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt, that the founding of Greek and Phoenician trading stations and later colonies in the Central and West Mediterranean was motivated by the desire to acquire metals.¹⁷ It was proposed that the Euboeans were mainly interested in iron and copper, and the Phoenicians in silver.¹⁸

⁸ Strabo 6.1.5; Pausanias 6.6.7-11; Suda s.v. Euthymos. For a discussion, see Brenk 1987. About the identification of Temesa and the archaeological finds in its region, see Maddoli 1981. According to Strabo (6.1.5), Temesa was "*founded by the Ausones, but later on was settled also by the Aitolians under the leadership of Thoas; but the Aitolians were ejected by the Brettii.*"

⁹ Hom. Od. 24.303-14.

¹⁰ Hom. Od. 20.383.

¹¹ For example, Laertes's personal servant is a woman from Sicily: Hom. Od. 24.211-12.

¹² Cf. Peacock 2011, pp. 6-7.

¹³ For a discussion on the references of the *Odyssey* to Italy and their reflection in later authors, see Phillips 1953.

¹⁴ Wijngaarden 2003; 2008, pp. 132-135; Alberti and Bettelli 2005; Guglielmino *et al.* 2010.

¹⁵ Lis 2009; also Jung 2009.

¹⁶ For a full list of the cities, see Solinus Polyhistor 2.10-11.

¹⁷ Treister 1996, pp. 36-37.

¹⁸ Markoe 1992. For the Phoenician presence in Italy, see Nijboer 2008.

Copper was indeed mined in Italy during the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the idea of the Euboeans searching for iron and copper in Italy is not convincing. Both metals were available in the Aegean, while copper could also have been obtained from Cyprus not only during the Late Bronze Age but also in the Early Iron Age. After the collapse of the palatial centres in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 12th century BC and the disruption of long-distance trade,²⁰ it was tin that became rare, because it could no longer be imported from the East. Both the Phoenicians and the Greeks were mainly interested in securing tin sources in the West, namely in Spain, North Italy or elsewhere. It is very possible, that also the Mycenaean trading activity in Italy during the Late Helladic IIIB and Late Helladic IIIC also aimed at securing tin, although no firm evidence yet exists.²¹

Od.1:179-86 is not referring to tin, but to the exchange of iron for copper. The mention of iron led many scholars to think, that this particular passage reflects the realities of the eighth century BC.²² This opinion is based on an outdated archaeological picture. Iron objects from both meteoritic and terrestrial iron ores were used during the second millennium BC in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean.²³ Iron at the time was indeed rare and it was considered to be even more expensive than silver and gold.²⁴ An iron ring was discovered in the cemetery of Castelluccio di Noto in Sicily, along with a Mycenaean Late Helladic IIIA vase, indicating that it was imported from the Eastern Mediterranean through the Aegean.²⁵ Only after the collapse of the Hittite kingdom in the first quarter of the 12th century BC did iron production increase significantly and evolve from an expensive prestige product to a commodity used for the production of tools and weapons. Iron technology gradually became available in the Levant, Cyprus and the Aegean between the 12th and 10th centuries BC.²⁶

Iron mining in the Populonia,²⁷ and Etruria²⁸ probably goes back to the eighth century BC. The earliest iron finds in Italy are connected with Greek imported pottery, and are dated to the late ninth or early eighth centuries BC.²⁹ There is some evidence for even earlier iron production on the island of Elba, dated to the 11th-10th centuries BC.³⁰ Pacciarelli suggested accordingly, that iron metallurgy was imported to Calabria from the Aegean at the end of the Late Bronze Age.³¹ Nevertheless, such an early date is not supported by the available archaeological evidence. It is reasonable to assume that iron metallurgy was gradually introduced in Italy from the Aegean between the 11th and the 9th centuries BC. Moreover, there must have been an early phase, when only iron products were being exported to the Italian peninsula from the Aegean, and not yet the technology to produce them.

¹⁹ Giumlia-Mair *et al.* 2010.

²⁰ For an overview, see Cline 2014.

²¹ Kopanias 2015.

²² For example, Phillips 1953, p. 54 (with previous references).

²³ Bebermeier *et al.* 2016, p. 153.

²⁴ Papadopoulou 2018.

²⁵ Giardino 2005, p. 496.

²⁶ Bebermeier *et al.* 2016, p. 154.

²⁷ Corretti and Benvenuti 2001, p. 135.

²⁸ Corretti and Benvenuti 2001, p. 132.

²⁹ Gualtieri 1977; Hartman 1982; 1989. For an overview of early iron finds in Italy, see Delpino 1989-1990.

³⁰ Corretti and Benvenuti 2001, p. 132.

³¹ Pacciarelli 1999, pp. 61-62. For a more general discussion, see Bietti Sestieri 1973.

In both Homeric epics there are only 49 references to iron compared to 418 references to copper (bronze).³² Weapons and tools are made of copper (bronze), not iron. As previously mentioned, iron was indeed known during the Late Bronze Age, and it was prized as a prestige material. This is also reflected in the Homeric epic, thus the references to iron in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* cannot be viewed as anachronisms from the ninth and eighth centuries BC. Furthermore, the reference to the export of iron from the Aegean to Italy in *Od. 1:179-86* does not fit well with the reality of the eighth century BC. Iron ore was abundant in many parts of Italy, and, by then, iron working technology was also available. In my view, the reference to Mentès' journey reflects an early phase of trading activity in the 11th and 10th centuries BC, when iron was being produced in the Aegean, but not yet in Italy.

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³² Gray 1954, p. 1. Possibly, distinguishing between bloom iron, wrought iron, and steel (Russo 2005, p. 23).

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