



HAL
open science

”Can plants be men? Vegetal phusis and autochtony in archaic and classical Greece”.

Karin Mackowiak

► To cite this version:

Karin Mackowiak. ”Can plants be men? Vegetal phusis and autochtony in archaic and classical Greece”. Phusis kai phuta in Early Greece (webseminar), 2018, Pars, besançon, Chicago, France. cel-01974158

HAL Id: cel-01974158

<https://hal.science/cel-01974158v1>

Submitted on 20 Jan 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Phusis and Phuta in Early Greece

Organisation :

Alessandro Buccheri (Labex HASTEC – Centre Jean Pépin), Arnaud Macé (Université de Franche-Comté, Logiques de l'Agir EA 2274) and Leon Wash (University of Chicago)

This project aims at gathering and sharing ongoing research on plants and natural thought in early Greece, from Homer to the 5th century BC. It is based on a regular online seminar and yearly conferences.

Our main interests are:

- Understanding the early representation of plants and vegetal processes in early Greek thought and literature, with an emphasis on the linguistic analysis of the vegetal lexicon (e.g. φύω, θάλλω, ἀνθέω, βλαστάνω, ῥιζόω and their cognates and derivatives), throughout all sources of the period, whether poetic, philosophical or technical.
- Examining the use of plants as analogical or metaphorical models for various areas of experience and thought (such as cosmogony and cosmology, politics and society, the body, kinship, ethics, etc.), thus assessing how much botanical and agricultural practices might have nourished the development of early Greek thought.

Schedule : every third Monday 9 AM Chicago / 4 PM Besançon-Paris

Can men being plants ?

Vegetal phusis and autochtony in archaic and classical Greece.

Thank you for your invitation, specially thank you Arnaud.

I would like to present you, today some texts – you should have received them – ... some texts dealing with vegetal phusis in the myth of the foundation in Thebes: it is the myth of the Spartoi, the first men and natives who founded the city of Thebes with the hero Cadmus. So, today, vegetal phusis deals with poetics and politics. You have noticed that I propose to you several small texts. The reason is easy to understand : the poetic – and political – image of the birth of the Spartoi have come down to us through numerous scattered texts that put the questions of some literary problems and, above all, the following question: how can we piece together this Theban story and the authentic image of the Spartoi's birth knowing that the Theban testimonies didn't come down to us ? With no doubt: the vegetal phusis of the Spartoi existed since the archaic period – it is, as I said a poetic and political image, or discourse... but we have mainly attic classical texts at our disposal. So we have to examine the cultural subjectivity of these texts which are contemporary with another myth of autochtony : the Athenian one, that is to say the myth of the vegetal phusis of Erichthonios. But this myth, developed during the classical period, had its proper cultural representations, of Athenian origin, aiming to the celebration of the native ancestor of Athens. So I will try to explain here, in 25 minutes, some basic questions relating to different kinds of readings and traditions connected with political vegetals phusis among the ancient Greeks. I propose a quick outline concerning the texts a tour disposal.

Our documentation lead us to consider, first, the verses 638-672 of Euripid's *Phoinissai* : I have no time to read this text here but I mention it because it is the more ancient text to tell us, entirely, the whole story of Theban foundation – Henri Grégoire and Louis Méridier, *Belles Lettres*, dated the *Phoinissai* from 406 B.C. I summarize : the hero Cadmus left Phenicia, searching his sister, Europa and is get to travel in Boetia where he was told, by the Delphic oracle, to found the city of Thebes. He reached, then, at the spot of the future city foundation, a sacred spring. Now, this place is home to a monstrous snake, son of the god Ares and of the Earth.

Autochtony begins here, with this strange creature –the dragon-, bloodthirsty and full of hubris, of fear and of madness. Cadmus kills the dragon, removes its teeth and throw them on the Earth so that natives immediately borned. Describing this chthonian phusis, Euripide uses the verb “dikô” (vers 668). But two other texts, despite the fact that they belong also to the attic and Ionian written traditions, tell us in another way the birth of the Theban natives: let us read Pherecydes of Athens and Hellanicos of Lesbos :

○ Phérécyde : FGrH IA 3 F22c (l. 36) *anaphuomenous* = Φερεκύδης δέ φησιν ὅτι Κάδμος, ἰδὼν ἐκ γῆς ἀναφυομένους ἄνδρας ἐνόπλους, ἔπ' αὐτοὺς ἔβαλε λίθους, οἱ δὲ ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων νομιζόντες βάλλεσθαι εἰς μάχην κατέστησαν. περιεσώθησαν δὲ πέντε, Ἐχίων Οὐδαῖος Χθονίος Ὑπερήνωρ Πέλωρος.¹

○ a fragment of Pherecyde, quoted in a scholia 1179b to Apollodoros of Rhodos, say (=FGrH IA 3 F22aμ *extrait*) *anaphuoménois* =

Φερεκύδης δέ φησιν ὅτι Κάδμος, ἰδὼν ἐκ γῆς ἀναφυομένους ἄνδρας ἐνόπλους, ἔπ' αὐτοὺς ἔβαλε λίθους· οἱ δὲ ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων νομιζόντες βάλλεσθαι εἰς μάχην κατέστησαν. περιεσώθησαν δὲ πέντε· Ἐχίων Οὐδαῖος Χθόνιος Ὑπερήνωρ Πέλωρ.

○ Phérécyde (arouran/anaphuontai/speirei) : Φερεκύδης (...) φησιν· « ἐπεὶ δὲ Κάδμος κατωκίσθη ἐν Θήβησιν, Ἄρης διδοῖ αὐτῷ καὶ Ἀθηναίη τοῦ ὄφιος τοὺς ἡμίσεις ὀδόντας, τοὺς δὲ ἡμίσεις Αἰήτη. καὶ ὁ Κάδμος αὐτίκα σπείρει αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν ἄρουραν Ἄρεως κελεύσαντος, καὶ αὐτῷ ἀναφύονται πολλοὶ ἄνδρες ὠπλισμένοι. ὁ δὲ Κάδμος δείσας βάλλει αὐτοὺς λίθοισιν. οἱ δὲ δοκέοντες ὑφ' ἑαυτῶν βάλλεσθαι, κρατέουσιν ἀλλήλους καὶ θνήσκουσιν πλὴν πέντε ἀνδρῶν, Οὐδαίου καὶ Χθονίου καὶ Ἐχίονος καὶ Πέλωρος καὶ Ὑπερήνορος. καὶ αὐτοὺς Κάδμος ποιεῖται πολίτας. »

○ (speiro/ beblastekenai) τοὺς περιλειφθέντας ἐν τῇ μάχῃ σὺν Κάδμῳ κατοικῆσαι ἐν Θήβαις φησί. Λέγει δὲ καὶ Ἑλλάνικος ὅτι Κάδμος ἐξελὼν τοῦ ὄφεως τοὺς ὀδόντας ἔσπειρεν, ἐκ δὲ αὐτῶν πέντε ἄνδρες ἔφυσαν, Οὐδαῖος Χθονίος Ὑπερήνωρ Ἐχίων Πέλωρος. Καὶ ὁ μὲν Ἑλλάνικος μόνους φησὶ τούτους βεβλαστηκέναι.

A first comment can be said: these testimonies, written between the beginning and the middle of the Fifth century B.C., some decades before Euripide, set out another reading than in the Phoinissai :

1/ there is a tradition or a reading that minimize in some way the Spartoi's birth as a vegetal phusis. Everything depends on the description of Cadmus gesture, holding in his hands the dragon's teeth. Euripide's uses the verb “dikein” which means “to throw” “to scatter” : this does not erase the vegetal phusis but minimize the fertilizing aspect of the gesture of Cadmos

2/ there is another tradition more focused on vegetal phusis, using another lexical field : Hellanicos makes use of the verb “phuô near the verb “speirein”. In

¹ Phérécyde dit que Kadmos, lorsqu'il vit des hommes en armes pousser de la terre, leur lança des pierres et eux, pensant s'agresser mutuellement, se mirent à se combattre les uns les autres. Cependant, cinq d'entre eux survécurent : Echion, Oudaios, Chthonios, Hyperénor et Pélôros » = Apollodore, Bibliothèque, III, 4, 2.

Pherecydes " appears the variation "anaphuô" and the allusion to a birth on corn-land – tès arouran.

So this summarize our documentation: despite the fact that no texts use the verb "phusaô" which is more focused than "phuô" on a *vegetal* growth – while "phuô" can also generally mean "to produce" according to the Liddell-Scott -, it is impossible to be unaware of the vegetal process of the Spartoi's birth which is more or less underlined according to various ancient readings. Besides, the verb "anaphuô, when used in the passive form, restore (restitute) a vegetal growth, according to Liddell-Scott.

As our texts are mainly athenian tragedies, there was a political stake (enjeu) around the description of the Spartoi's birth – I have no time to develop this but it plays a role in the historical evolution of greek readings of what is and remain (reste) a vegetal phusis : the Spartoi were seen as "men-plants" – des "hommes-plantes".

The myth depicts the idea of a growth like plants, more precisely a vertical growth, upwards, implicitly present in the prefix "ana" in "anaphuein" : it precises the image of germination, the idea of the plants blooming in the light. Hellanicos uses a complementary verb : beblastèkenai (from blastanô) : the Spartoi have sprouted. Now, it is worth emphasizing that this symbolic and metaphorical image is recurring in other poetic or religious patterns of germination : I'm thinking at Core's anodos in Eleusis, as it is showed on the vase of the Penelop painter in the MMA; I'm thinking, equally, at Erichthonios's anodoi depicted on the attic red-figured vases of the Fifth century B.C. Showing these pictures, I would like to recall that a very important visual phusis exists connected with autochtony: the attic vase paintings help us to seize an imaginary space mixing political, religious and agrarian symbols.

As far as the Spartoi's phusis is concerned, a question that must be raised is that of a specific Athenian addition in the Theban myth. As we are dealing with the signification of lexical fields and their use, what can be the extent of this Athenian contribution. The question must all the more be raised because we try to have a glimpse of the archaic theban point of view concerning autochtony.

What is sure is that the vegetal tradition – I dare say so – seems to have had his "letters of nobility" among the ancient Greeks as we can deduce from major or minor sources widespread in our documentation:

- Scholia 5 to Euripide's *Phoinissai* (anephusan/gigantes) reminds us that Cadmus « κτίζει Θήβας. Καὶ τὸν δράκοντα ἀναιρεῖ, σπείρας τοὺς ὀδόντας αὐτοῦ, ἐξ ὧν ἀνεφύησαν οἱ γίγαντες ...
- Scholia 412b to Aischylos's *Seven Against Thebes* tells : Δράκων ἐν τῇ Δίρκῃ πηγῇ καὶ τοὺς κατερχομένους ἐκεῖσε ἔτρωγε. Κάδμος δὲ τοῦτον τοῦ ζῆν ἀπεβάλετο καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας αὐτοῦ εἰς σποράν ἔρριψε καὶ οἱ γίγαντες ἀνεδοθησαν ὡς πλῆθος πολὺ
- The scholia to Aischylos lights up the general mean of « erripse » with « eis sporan » that is to say « in order to cause a sowing » as if it were important for the

scholiast to explain correctly the fertilizing gesture of Cadmos which goes back to the archaic period. Indeed, the earliest text at our disposal, using the verb “speirein”, is a fragment dealing with Stesichorus: Fragment 195 (Page) : Ὁ μὲν Στησίχορος ἐν Εὐρωπειᾷ τὴν Ἀθηναίων ἐσπαρκέναι τοὺς ὀδόντας φησὶν (= scholie à Euripide, *Phéniciennes* 674 (Valckenaer) = 670 (Schwartz))

We can, so, deduce from Hellanicos that he was accurate to older traditions, describing a vegetal phusis from the idea of the sowing of the dragon’s teeth. Generally speaking, it must be emphasized that Hellanicos was inspired by the aristocratic traditions dealing with origins of cities – it has been shown by Italian researchers for south Italy ; furthermore, Hellanicos is said to have written a book concerning Boeotia (scholia of Eustathios to the Iliad, B 494).

But let us see Aischylos. Another evolution in the reception of Theban autochthony in Attic traditions can be seen in the *Seven Against Thebes*: the verses 412-414 say about Melanippos (412 epheisato = from phuô; and 413 : rizôm’aneitai): Σπαρωτῶν δ’ ἀπ’ ἀνδρῶν ὧν Ἴαρης ἐφείσατο ῥίζωμ’ ἀνεῖται (= from aneimi : go up comme le lever du soleil), κάρτα δ’ ἔστ’ ἐγχώριος Μελάνιππος.

The positive dimension of this text seems to me significant compared to the very negative one put forward by Euripides. Aischylos develops in verse 412-413 a genealogical aspect of theban autochthony. He develops the poetic image of “rizôm’aneitai” that we should understand as an ability for the natives to be a fruitful stump, in the capacity to grow or produce shoots (bourgeons) as Melanippos. These words – related to the sprouting of the Spartoi seen in Hellanicos - are very interesting because there have not any other equivalent in our documentation : so it can be attributed to a poetic sophistication made by Aischylos himself. Now, it seems also that the tragedian exploits, on the other hand, a theme deeply rooted in Thebes itself, that is to say: genealogical traditions. Indeed, we know from other texts that autochthony may have produced an ideological discourse linking the legendary princes of Thebes to the Spartoi, logically seen in Thebes as the ancestors. The scholia to Euripid’s *Phoinissai* relates names unknown to us – as Klasas : this can surely be put on the account of Boeotian local traditions, of aristocratic families who saw in figures like Melanippos or Creon and others, mythical equivalents of them.

It is, then perhaps possible to sharpen the historical and ideological working out of the Spartoi’s vegetal phusis. In Aischylos and Hellanicos, there is, without any doubt, some theban representations which included, if not the detail of corn-land as attested in Pherecydes and Euripides –this is, I think, a typical Athenian addition -, at least the dimension of an important vegetal phusis related to the birth of the Spartoi. This vegetal dimension seems all the more interesting that the Spartoi are deeply rooted in Boeotian archaic cosmogony: the scholia 5 (Euripid’s *Phoinissai*) reminds us that the Spartoi were the Gigantes’ twins : indeed, all these creatures have in common to be born from the earth, full of arms and of hubris. But this original, cosmogonic earth is not a corn-land despite the fact that the Spartoi have this

peculiar feature, compared to the giants, to be born like plants. Obviously, the image of plant growing constitutes an addition to the very old cosmogonic tradition from which it comes from, including some later sophistications – that are of political nature; all seems, then, to suggest that the vegetal phusis is an archaic working out, already known from Stesichorus at the end of the seventh or beginning of the sixth century B.C.

At present, it is a historical aspect of these political sophistications that I would like to sharpen more, linking vegetal metaphor with early political thought.

Because one point intrigues and gives to our Spartoi their original features : but why is there a question of sowing – or scattering ? - *teeth* ?

This detail is important to understand the vegetal process working in the Spartoi's phusis. This myth is very rich in symbolic, metaphorical and poetic contents : there is a very high sophistication of the phusis which determines the original and archaic features of this myth. As I could show in a paper, the Spartoi are ambiguous creatures belonging at the same time to chaos and to the city foundation. On one side they kill each other so that only five among them survive (fragments of Pherecyde and Hellanicos). Now, this detail is an exact parallel with the chalkeion genos described by Hesiod in the myth of the Five races (*Works and Days*, verses 143-155) ; and it is useful to remind us that the chalkeion genos was born from the trees - ἐκ μέλιων -, all armed and full of hubris, unable to do anything else than fight so that they quickly annihilated themselves : all this shows that the Spartoi are typical from an archaic boiotian mythology which build autochthony on two themes, simultaneously : on an hybristic - and cosmogonic - theme and on a vegetal phusis. On the other side, the Theban Spartoi are the ancestors of the social elite in Thebes and the founder of the city as showed before. So, we can say that the dead Spartoi belong to the death and the chaos whereas the survivors are put on the side on the civilization and the polis.

But in this ambiguous tension, and despite of it, lays an unshakeable principle : the Spartoi are the sons of the dragon of Ares and inherit the same nature, warlike and full of hubris. From then on, it has a sense to ask if their vegetal phusis is not the ideal metaphor to describe on the same level their kind of growing emerging from the theban earth – a vegetal phusis linked with a political claim on the chora by the city – and their intrinsic nature, their specificity and original features. There is here a kind of genetic discourse. And this latter aspect is present, one more time, in Hesiod's *Works and Days* concerning the argureion génos (verse 129): inferior to the golden race that preceded it, Hesiod tells us that the silver race did'nt look like to the golden race, nor in size nor in spirit: “χρυσέω οὔτε φῦήν ἐναλίγκιον οὔτε νόημα ».

“Phué » could mean here « body » in opposition with noos but includes also a growth dimension (= the definition given by the Bailly who quotes Hésiode). Hesiod, indeed, comments the quality and nature of the argureion genos compared with the chryseion genos.

Otherwise, this Hesiodic « phue » appears in an anthropogonic context and the poet diagnoses the intrinsic nature of the argureion genos in a myth which describes the various kind of men existing on earth since the beginnings.

From now on, we should ask if the vegetal phusis adapted in a political discourse is not a significant mean, in archaic Thebes, to develop the idea of heredity, a kind of ontological (?) and socio-ideological discourse, simultaneously, gratifying a specific mankind emerged from Arès and Gê. Connecting men and plants could be a mean to describe a different and superior nature of a kind of social caste or génos. Now, the idea of a génos Spartôn is testified in some texts. And Aischylos doesn't develop another discourse with original words : if Melanippos is so courageous and brave, it is because he has grown on the Spartoi's stump : in other words, Melanippos belongs to a superior group of beings characterized by the warrior activity and a specific origin.

To proclaim to be born from the earth is not a surprising idea – it has an ideological dimension with sociological and political features, like in Athens. To proclaim to be born from Ares is not surprising at all in Boeotia : other sources testify the vividness, in archaic Boeotia, of the traditional paradigm of archaic warrior : to claim oneself from Ares was a mean to qualify oneself as a warrior above all.

Knowing now this social and cultural background, the image of the sowing or scattering (?) of teeth confirms these kind of ideological discourse, I think : the story of the dragon's teeth mixes in fact agrarian culture and epic culture in early political thought. It must be said here that the gesture of Cadmus can be paralleled with that of Heracles cutting from another monster, the Ketos, its tongue (on black figured archaic vases) : this gesture is a symbol of warrior triumph. So, removing the teeth from the dragon' mouth was an heroic trophy on which a native dimension –vegetal phusis- were moreover added, possibly in Thebes itself.

Cause what was, indeed, the signification of these symbolic associations ? The Spartoi were certainly seen as heroes and incarnations of the victory under its more brilliant aspect : is there no sense, in this point of view, to tell how they come to light from the earth ? This is a high poetic degree and political ideology. On another side and a more sociological aspect, the sowing or scattering of the dragon's teeth on the earth exploit, in a complementary way, the image of vegetal phusis as bearing intrinsically all the guarantees of an heredity rooted in the earth. There were behind these poetic images of the dragon's teeth, understood in the Athenian literary traditions as a sowing gesture on ploughed land, a metaphorical discourse, highly significant, that legitimizes a sociopolitical domination of a warrior and landowner upper-class in Thebes which was proud of its chthonian origins. The Spartoi construct a very high sophisticated discourse which is rooted in archaic epic style and symbols, also in a cosmogonic style.

Let me say some final words on this epic dimension because it goes deeply into the historical origins of the vegetal process of the Spartoi's birth : their phusis could indeed be rooted in Homeric culture. It is interesting to emphasize that the *Iliad*

highlights, in several passages, various poetic analogies between warriors and plants, in order to describe either the decaying of some warriors (VIII, 306-308; XIV, 499; XIII, 178 et 389-391; XVI, 482), either their strength (XII, 132) or more : their great number (XI, 67-71). Using these analogies, Homer evokes flowers – and warriors are like the poppy: VIII, 306-308) ; he evokes trees – and warriors are like the oak or the ash: XVI, 765-771) ; Homer evokes also the cultivated fields, describing the armies of Troians against Achaeans in which the spears are dense and thick as the harvest (XI, 67-71). In the frame of this epic culture, first addressed to an aristocratic audience, we can suggest that the analogy between warriors and harvest depicts – as in a painting – a wonderful and amazing show : it is, then, possible to suggest, I think, than the vegetal phusis of the Spartoi includes also, through Homeric reminders, the idea of a extraordinary apparition emphasizing a great number of warriors, suddenly arisen from no-where, from darkness to light : the vegetal process outlined here is equivalent to an epiphany, both prodigious and frightening. Now, epiphany is regularly attested in the universe of war (Athena, ex-voto from the agora, VII B.C.) and of autochtony : Pindar, the classical poet of Thebes, if he did describ the birth of natives, did it surely for Erichthonios about who he says, in Fragment 253 (Maehler) : Ἐριχθόνιον ἐκ γῆς φανῆναι (from phainô).

We can not imagine anything else for the understating of the birth of the Spartoi in Thebes itself. Vegetal phusis existed there and could have be seen like a supernatural wonder in a poetic theban point of view, and like an effective political claim in an ideological point of view.