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# Klytaimestra's Weapon and the Shroud for the Dead

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► **To cite this version:**

Beate Wagner-Hasel. Klytaimestra's Weapon and the Shroud for the Dead. *Archimède: archéologie et histoire ancienne*, 2022, N° 9, pp.134-145. 10.47245/archimede.0009.ds1.10 . hal-03985313

**HAL Id: hal-03985313**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03985313>**

Submitted on 13 Feb 2023

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## KLYTAIMESTRA'S WEAPON AND THE SHROUD FOR THE DEAD

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## RÉSUMÉ

The paper discusses the symbolic meaning of the purple cloth which, in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*, Klytaimestra orders to be spread on the ground in welcome of Agamemnon. In my opinion, the funeral rites function as the backdrop for the welcoming scene. The production of the cloths, which accompany the dead into immortality and which announce the *kleos* of the dead, was an important task of the women of the household. I suggest reading the purple *petasmata*, or the *poros porphyreos* as the fabrics are also called, as shrouds for the dead which transform the unfaithful husband into a living corpse.

## KEYWORDS

Agamemnon, carpet, consumption, guest-gifts, funeral rites, Klytaimestra, luxury, pattern-weaving, Persian High King, *poikilia*; purple, *peplos*, shroud, silver.

L'ARME DE CLYTEMNESTRE  
ET LES LINCEULS POUR LES MORTS

L'article discute la signification symbolique du tissu pourpre, que Clytemnestre étend sur le sol pour accueillir Agamemnon dans la tragédie d'Eschyle. Il défend l'idée que la scène d'accueil doit être perçue à travers le prisme des rites funèbres. La fabrication des draps qui accompagnent les morts dans l'immortalité et qui annoncent le *kleos* des morts, était une tâche importante des femmes de la maison. Les *petasmata* pourpres et le *poros porphyreos* sont ainsi à interpréter comme des draps des morts, qui transforment le mari infidèle en mort vivant.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Agamemnon, tapis, consommation, cadeaux d'hospitalité, rites funéraires, Clytemnestre, luxe, tissage à motifs, Grand Roi, *poikilia*, pourpre, *peplos*, linceul, argent.

In 458 BCE, the Athenians must have been surprised to get to know a new version of the epic tale of the Trojan War, especially of the death of the victorious Agamemnon after his return to Argos. In the world of the epic it had been Aegisthus who killed Agamemnon during a banquet [1], Aeschylus, in his drama, presents Klytaimestra as the murderer of her husband. In his *Oresteia* Agamemnon is killed while being bathed by Klytaimestra [2]. There is a long discussion of what weapon it was that Klytaimestra used to kill Agamemnon – axe or sword. Iconography offers both versions: in Archaic art, Klytaimestra uses a sword; Classical vase-paintings prefer the axe-wielding Klytaimestra. Aeschylus seems to have followed the Archaic tradition; each time he mentions the weapon he speaks of a sword, the warrior's weapon [3]. However, the audience never gets to see this sword. Only something else is visible: a red carpet or cloth. Nearly thirty years ago Ian Jenkins hinted at the ambiguity of textiles and Klytaimestra's destructive character in ancient tragedy. Using a structural approach, he interpreted the textiles as a representation of the double character of women as a necessary evil for their men [4]. Since then, much more work has been done in studying the social meaning of textiles and their use in ritual contexts [5]. Textiles are no longer perceived as symbolic items only but also as a real source of female power [6]. In the following paper, I will argue that Aeschylus used the ritual practice of draping the dead body in a cloth. This shroud was a source of female pride and reputation in ancient Greece and must be understood as Klytaimestra's real weapon.

## KLYTAIMESTRA'S FABRIC: PETASMA, HEIMATA, POIKILIA, HYPHAI, PEPLOS

« Servants, why are you waiting, when you have been assigned the duty of spreading fine fabrics (πετάσμασιν) over the ground in his path? Let his way forthwith be spread with crimson (πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος), so that Justice may lead him into a home he never hoped to see. Careful thought, not overcome by sleep, will set everything else <in order> in accordance with justice, with the gods' help » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 908-913, transl. A. Sommerstein).

When the Athenian audience heard Klytaimestra utter these words, it will have known that Agamemnon's fate was sealed. The poet lets Agamemnon hesitate to tread on the cloth which is called πέτασμα (*petasma*). The term denotes a piece of cloth to be used to cover something [7]. Elsewhere, other terms are used: ἕματα (*heimata*), the typical term for a mantle or blanket, and ὑφαί (*huphai*), which denotes any woven piece of cloth, or ποικιλία (*poikilia*), a term that hints at the coloured and patterned character of the cloth. Agamemnon suggests that he fears the gods' jealousy; they alone deserve the honour of walking over coloured weaving. His argument:

« I tell you to revere me like a man, not a god. It is cryingly obvious that the words «embroidered» [8] and «doormat» (χωρίς ποδοψήστρων τε καὶ τῶν ποικίλων) don't go well together and good sense is the greatest of god's gifts » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 923-928).

[1] This is told in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. During his visit in the underworld Odysseus meets the soul of Agamemnon and is told of the hero's sad fate: « It was Aegisthus who plotted my destruction and with my accursed wife put me to death. He invited me to the palace, he feasted me, and he killed me as a man fells an ox at its manger » (Homer, *Odyssey* 11, 409-411, trans. E. V. Rieu).

[2] For different versions of the tale see SOMMERSTEIN 2008, p. X and now VOGEL-EHRENSPERGER 2012. I follow their argument to spell Klytaimestra/Clytaemestra (from μήδομαι = contrive) and not Klytaimnestra/Clytaemnestra (from μνάομαι = woo, court).

[3] For evidence see SOMMERSTEIN 1989; PRAG 1991. On the symbolic meaning of the sword in tragedy see LORAUX

1985: 36-45.

[4] JENKINS 1985.

[5] See BRØNS & NOSCH 2017.

[6] See WAGNER-HASEL 1988; 2000a, chap. III = 2020; 2002; 2009; 2012.

[7] *LSJ s.v. πέτασμα* (anything spread out). For a discussion of the different terms see BAKOLA 2016, p. 124.

[8] The adjective *poikilos* is often misunderstood as « embroidered ». However, the term only denotes the coloured and patterned character of the cloth and not the way it is produced. Pattern-weaving on the warp-weighted loom is well proved by the research of BARBER 1991 and HARLIZIUS-KLÜCK 2004; 2016; HARLIZIUS-KLÜCK & FANFANI 2016.

Only barefoot does he finally dare to walk over the fabric, here called *hyphai*, bought with silver, that leads into the house and ultimately to his doom:

« Well, if that's what you want, let someone quickly take off my shoes, which serve like slaves for my feet to tread on; and as I walk on these purple-dyed <robes> (ἐμβαίνονθ' ἄλουργέσιν), may no jealous eye strike me from afar! For I feel a great sense of impropriety about despoiling this house under my feet, ruining its wealth and the woven work bought with its silver (ἀργυρωνήτους θ' ὑφάς) » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 944-949).

In Cassandra's vision of Agamemnon being murdered in the bathroom, another piece of fabric is mentioned, a *πέπλος* (*peplos*), and styled as a trap. Before she enters the house, she announces:

« She traps him in the robe (ἐν πέπλοισιν), the black-horned contrivance, and strikes – and he falls into the tub full of water. I am telling you of the device that worked treacherous murder in a bath (δολοφόνου λέβητος) » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1126-1129). [9]

As recent research has shown, cloth is politically significant [10]. In the 1950's, Andreas Alföldi interpreted the carpet scene as an imitation of the Persian royal ritual of laying out the path from the chariot to the palace entrance with purple sheets [11]. To this day, walking on the red carpet denotes rank and esteem nearly all over the world. According to Alföldi, the Aeschylean carpet scene served as a reference to the Persian tyranny and a warning of setting up a similar reign in democratic Athens [12]. In the 1980's and 1990's, Gregory Crane and Everard Flintoff proposed another interpretation, criticising Alföldi's view as far too simple [13]. According to them, the only evidence of this custom is found in a source on the Persian High King in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, i.e. nearly hundred years later than Aeschylus' tragedy [14]. They offer a different reading. In their opinion, Agamemnon's purple path was not a carpet, but a cloak or a blanket. When stepped upon, these patterned pieces of clothing are spoilt. Using them as a path has nothing to do with the demonstration of a rank equivalent to that of a High King, but deals with the destruction of the resources of the house or of nature. Agamemnon's action will damage the cloth. For Crane, who interprets the spreading of the cloth as an *apotropaic*

[9] See also her final report of Klytaimnestra's committing the deed, in line 1383. In Apollo's description of the murder (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 644-645), a *pharos* (large piece of cloth, wide cloak or mantle) and a *peplos* are mentioned.

[10] SCHEID & SVENBRO 1994; VICKERS 1999; WAGNER-HASEL 2000 - 2020; HARLIZIUS-KLÜCK 2004; WAGNER-HASEL 2005; VAN WEES 2005; BUNDRICK 2008; CIFARELLI & GAWLINSKI 2017; WAGNER-HASEL & NOSCH 2019.

[11] ALFÖLDI 1955, p. 33: « Ein Ehrenrecht des Grosskönigs war auch der porphyróστρωτος πόρος, die Bestreuung des Weges, der vom Wagen zur Palastpforte führte, mit Purpurdecken ».

[12] ALFÖLDI 1955, p. 33: « Trotz des Aufbrausens ihres hellenischen Wesens gegen die Despotie und ihr Ritual versinken Agamemnon und Ion in dem goldenen Schlamm der persischen Willkürherrschaft ». Similar REINHOLD 1970, p. 24-25 and BLUM 1998, p. 164, who also notes the Homeric tradition the scene is embedded in, without elaborating on it, however. See also HALL 1989; KURKE 1992, p. 91-120. According to REUTHNER 2006, p. 314 elaborate clothing became an element of the topics of tyrants only in the tale of Alexander. See also REUTHNER 2013, p. 100-103.

[13] FLINTOFF 1987, p. 119-130; CRANE 1993, p. 117-136 with references to former research.

[14] According to Xenophon (*Institutio Cyri* 8, 8, 16), the Persians introduced the custom of spreading carpets (*tapides*) under the beds only after Cyrus. Generally, the luxury of cloth of the Persians, for example the purple robe of the ruler, originates from the Medes, according to Xenophon (*Institutio Cyri* 2, 4, 6); the same applies to the custom of giving garments to the members of the elite of the Persians (8, 3, 1-2). However, Herodotus

(9, 82) counts patterned *parapétasmata* among the textile goods from the possessions of the commander Mardonios captured at Plataea. In his translation of Herodotus, Josef Feix renders these as carpets, yet they rather have the function of curtains (*LSJ s.v. parapétasma* [that which is spread before]), used as protection from heat and storms, or, in a metaphorical sense, to conceal things (i.e. Plato, *Protagoras* 316 e). For further discussion see HARLIZIUS-KLÜCK 2004, p. 166. The verb *petánnymi* already appears in epic poetry and means, among other things, the spreading of the sail (*Odyssey* 5, 269) or of the freshly cleaned laundry set out for drying (*Odyssey* 6, 94) or of the hands spread for swimming (*Odyssey* 5, 374). Those who conceive of the *parapétasmata* as carpets like ALFÖLDI (1955, p. 26) always refer to the information from Athenaeus, who quotes the works of historians of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, who in turn have written Persian histories: « Selbst eine einfache Durchsicht der Zitattensammlung des 12. Buches des Athenaeus über die Kleiderpracht führt sofort zur Feststellung, daß die angeführten Autoren ausnahmslos den Kleiderluxus als ein Zeichen der ethisch-politischen Dekadenz und Gefährdung anfechten ». Dinon, for example, knows that the Persian king dismounts from a horse onto a golden footstool (Athenaeus 12, 514 B); Heracleides of Cyme states that only the great king was allowed to step on Sardian carpets (ἡμιλοταπίδων Σαρδιαῶν) (Athenaeus 12, 517 B). – Flintoff and Crane refer also to biblical passages: « Rolling out the red carpet for royalty seems to have been an old custom in the Near East – thus in the Gospel according to Mark, for example, the population hails the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth and throws his way both with palms and with their own *péploi* » (CRANE 1993, p. 123). For literary and archaeological evidence of carpets, see WALSER 2000.

gesture of averting misfortune, this practice has similarities to the Native American custom of potlatch, a form of demonstrative waste of riches. Here, status and rank are not symbolized by the consumption of cloth but by destruction [15]. Other ancient examples seem to support this view: Polycrates of Samos sacrifices his ring aiming to avoid the envy of the gods (Herodotus 3, 41); Croesus of Lydia burns his purple robes in honour of the Delphic god Apollon (Herodotus 1, 50, 1). This generosity towards the gods and the people is what Agamemnon, in Crane's opinion, lacks; he uses the riches of the house, the weaving bought with silver, for selfish purposes instead of using it for the community [16].

While Alföldi, Flintoff, and Crane refer to the political meaning of the carpet scene, in the 2000's the meaning of gender was pointed out. In her article « Bridal cloths, cover-ups, and Kharis » from 2005, Linda McNeil has argued that the carpet scene evokes a nuptial context. According to her, the garment functions as a nuptial robe as well as a coverlet for the marriage bed [17]. She bases her argumentation on my own research on the term *kharis*, which refers to patterned textiles as female gifts and their visual power [18]. According to McNeil, Aeschylus wanted his audience to imagine that Klytaimnestra's nuptial cloth depicted a mytho-historic story: the love triangle of Klytaimnestra, Agamemnon, and Cassandra should evoke the myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela [19].

The different terms Aeschylus uses make us suppose that the poet wanted to evoke different symbolic meanings of the carpet scene. But if we consider the gender of the protagonists, we have two possibilities of interpretation: the nuptial context as McNeil has proposed or – as I would like to stress – the funeral rite which has some similarities with the nuptial rituals. I share the assumption of Crane, Flintoff, and McNeil that the

purple fabric is not a carpet, but a garment, probably a *himation*, a cloak or a coverlet. Also, I agree with McNeil that the garment symbolizes the reciprocal bond between Agamemnon and his wife Klytaimnestra because textiles represent female wealth in Archaic as well as in Classical times [20]. In other tragedies like *Medea* or *The Trachinians*, we find this female wealth as dangerous gifts denoting the breakdown of the reciprocal bond between couples [21]. However, I believe that the garment mentioned in Aeschylus' Agamemnon does not belong to a nuptial context but to the funeral rite, as Richard Seaford has already argued in his article « The last bath of Agamemnon » in 1984. I also agree with those scholars who assume a political meaning of the purple path.

## THE MEANING OF THE SHROUD

According to Richard Seaford, in Homer « the bathing, anointing, and dressing of living men is described in a manner almost identical to the bathing, anointing, and dressing by women of the dead Hektor », a practice that can be found in Classical times too [22]. Whereas Seaford concentrates on the bath, I would like to stress the clothing of the corpse.

Before the return of Hector's body to Troy, Andromache laments his nakedness and speaks bitterly of the fine and lustrous garments in her house: « I will burn all of them in a blazing fire, not to benefit you, since you are not laid out in them, but as honour (*kleos*) before the men and women of Troy (ἀλλὰ πρὸς Τρώων καὶ Τρωϊάδων κλέος εἶναι) » (Homer, *Iliad* 22, 513-515, tr. E. Theodorakopoulos). The ancient scholiasts regard it as typically female that Andromache believes the clothes could be of use if Hector lay in them [23]. Modern authors are less sceptical and assume that the garments were intended to provide clothing for the dead in Hades and/or to represent his wealth and

[15] CRANE 1993, p. 127. See also BAKOLA 2016, p. 127 who has recently interpreted the purple tapestry as symbol of « the generative powers of nature ». She argues: « In the «tapestry scene» [...] the tableau of the red stream flowing out of the opening of the interior evokes the female generative capability. However, the allusion to the sea's generative powers adds a powerful additional dimension » (p. 129).

[16] CRANE 1993, p. 127.

[17] McNEIL 2005, p. 2.

[18] WAGNER-HASEL 2002; 2000, p. 141-165 = 2020, p. 155-186.

[19] McNEIL 2005, p. 12-14.

[20] For more detail see WAGNER-HASEL 2000 = 2020; 2009 and 2012. See also REUTHNER 2006; BUNDRICK 2008;

GHERCHANOC 2009; GHERCHANOC & HUET 2012; SPANTIDAKI 2016. Therefore LYONS (2013, p. 81) interprets the purple path as « a sign of Klytemnestra's alienation from her wifely role that the textiles with which she is associated are metaphorically or actually torn, stained, or otherwise unusable ».

[21] See MUELLER 2001; LYONS 2003, p. 116-119; LYONS 2012; GHERCHANOC 2020.

[22] SEAFORD 1984, p. 248.

[23] See the bt-Scholia: *Il.* 22, 513. Cf. DE JONG 1991, p. 19. For a different argument see PAPADOPOULOU-BELMEHDI 1994, p. 119. In her opinion, Andromache's declaration refers to the breaking of the bond between the couple, and the uselessness of the clothing laments the fact that Hector and Andromache will not be reunited.

status [24]. Textiles have symbolic as well as practical functions – this is true of the burial ritual as much as it is true of the rituals of guest-friendship. During the funeral they serve to conduct the deceased to a new stage, and they thus function as the bearers of a new – immortal – identity. After washing and embalming, the corpse is wrapped in sheets. After his comrades have covered him with a fine linen robe (*heanos*), Patroclus' body is covered in a sheet described as a gleaming (*leukos*) *pharos*, such as those handed to guests on other occasions. After cremation the bones are placed in a golden bowl (*phiale*) and once again wrapped in a linen *heanos* (Homer, *Iliad* 18, 346-353; 23, 254). In Hector's case, a *pharos* is placed over the body, once the serving women of Achilles have washed him and dressed him in a *chiton* (Homer, *Iliad* 24, 587-588). After the lament and the cremation of the body male relatives collect the bones and store them in a golden casket (*larnax*) which is wrapped in soft purple *peploi* (πορφυρέοις πέπλοισι καλύψαντες μαλακοῖσιν) and then placed into a grave over which the comrades erect a gravestone (Homer, *Iliad* 24, 796). In the case of Achilles, the Nereids dress him in « immortal garments (ἄμβροτα εἴματα) » (Homer, *Odyssey* 24, 59) and carry out the lament. He is then cremated wearing the « clothes of the gods (ἑσθητὶ θεῶν) » (Homer, *Odyssey* 24, 67).

The washing, embalming and clothing of the dead is equivalent to the treatment of guests as a ritual of integration during which a new identity is formed. In the rituals of guest-friendship, a stranger (*xeinos*) is transformed into an insider (*philos*), while the rituals for the dead effect their transition into immortality, and thus the transformation of a life-span into eternity [25]. Shrouds

and winding sheets, carriers of that life-span, accompany the deceased on the journey and are burnt along with them [26]. In Homer, the *psychē*, that intangible part of life often translated as « soul », can only leave the perishable body once the process of cremation is completed. Such *psychai* then wander as shadow images, called *eidōla kamontōn* (εἰδῶλα καμόντων), in Hades (Homer, *Iliad* 23, 72-74; *Odyssey* 24, 14) [27]. In seventh-century clay tablets, these images, which in Homer are able to fly, are depicted as birds or Sphinges [28]. Such Sphinges, assumed to be Eastern borrowings [29], decorate Penelope's shroud on an early fifth-century vase painting [30]. These winged *eidōla* can also be weighed – just like the fate of heroes, which we have seen can be measured according to the wool required to make one shroud [31]. Just as clothing established the appearance (*eidōs*) of the living so these shrouds seem to lend the shades of the dead their own post-mortal appearance. Indeed, the widely used ancient metaphor of the « garment of the soul » appears to confirm this function of the shroud [32].

This funeral bathing and clothing are not the only references to what the Homeric funeral practices point to. If we look at the practical and metaphoric use of weaving, we will find further references to the death ritual. Aeschylus calls Klytimestra an *oikonomos dolia* (*Agamemnon* 155), a cunning manager of the house who wants to take revenge on Agamemnon for sacrificing her child to the goddess Artemis on the eve of the campaign against Troy. The execution of her revenge is termed *dolophonos*, i.e. planned murder (*Agamemnon* 1129). Aeschylus thereby refers to the ruses, *doloi*, which the heroes and heroines of the epics prepare for the enemies they want to destroy. Similarly,

[24] See e.g. MARWITZ 1961, p. 8; GRIFFIN 1984, p. 3, and MUELLER 2010, p. 13 who also stresses the function of the cloth to contribute to the making of Hector's *kleos* (fame).

[25] See HUMPHREYS 1983, p. 152: « [...] allowing the bones of the dead to become separated from the flesh which once encased them is only one of a number of ways representing the separation of a part of the person which is capable of achieving immortality from the parts which are subject to destruction by time ». See SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1983, p. 38), who interprets the ritual as change of status expressed by cloth.

[26] The burning of cloth at death is known until Hellenistic and even Roman times. Cf. e.g. Xenophon *Ephesius* 3,7,4; Sueton, *Iulius* 84.

[27] On the *eidolon* see BREMMER 1987, p. 73; SOURVINOU-INWOOD 1995, p. 89-92. On images of Hades, compare GARLAND 1985, p. 48-76.

[28] VERMEULE 1979, p. 7-11, 23-24; PEIFER 1987, p. 15-16; NIEMEYER 1996, p. 72. For Homeric evidence see *Odyssey* 11, 218-222 (tr. Rieu): the mother of Odysseus knows: « It is the law of our mortal nature, when we

come to die. We no longer have sinews keeping the bones and flesh together; once life has departed from our white bones, all is consumed by the fierce heat of the blazing fire, and the soul (*psychē*) slips away like a dream and goes fluttering on its ways ». In the *Iliad* (23, 71; 76, tr. Rieu) Patroclus asks Achilles: « Bury me as quickly as possible and let me pass the gates of Hades. [...] for once you have passed me through the flames, I shall never come back again from Hades ».

[29] See VERMEULE 1979, p. 17-19, 56, 69, 212, who stresses Egyptian influence, and NEUMER-PFAU 1987, p. 19-20.

[30] BOARDMAN 1989, fig. 247.

[31] VERMEULE 1979, p. 161, fig. 14 and 15. According to PEIFER (1987, p. 33-43), who interprets the *eidōla* as lots of death (*Todeslose*) and identifies the *Keres* with the *psychai*, the motif of the *kerostasia* starts in the last quarter of the sixth century BCE in black-figure vase painting.

[32] For evidence see KEHL 1978, col. 945-1025, who interprets the phrase as just a manner of speaking, without any deeper meaning (col. 1023).

in Penelope's case the *dolos* she prepares for her suitors is of a textile kind. She develops her *dolos*, when she pretends to weave a shroud for her aged father-in-law Laertes by day and then undoes it by night (Homer, *Odyssey* 24, 141-154), thus being engaged in a never-ending task [33]. I believe these shrouds constitute the textile reference in the so-called carpet-scene, and not the Persian royal carpet.

Both poets, Homer and Aeschylus, refer to the belief in fate, a fate depending on the thread of life or the measure of well-being that lies on the knees of the gods and is conceded to a man on two occasions only, at his birth and at his wedding [34]. This corresponds to the ritual practice of spreading a shroud over the bier as a symbol of the life-span of the deceased. In Penelope and her unravelling her fabric, the poet of the *Odyssey* shows us how she halts time, thus allowing Odysseus, on his return, to take his revenge on the suitors.

Aeschylus' purple-coloured path has a similar meaning: it is not only a metaphor of the purple-coloured death many heroes suffer in his tragedy; it is also the specific material sign of the purple and patterned shrouds that escorts the dead heroes into the realm of Hades [35]. Given this background, then, it is only consistent that the fabric is spread out in front of the threshold of the house. Agamemnon thus crosses the boundary between inside and outside just as the dead do when taken to their funeral: he becomes a « living corpse » [36]. However, Agamemnon walks down this path in reverse order. In this context, Agamemnon's reasoning that the tidings of his fame would not need a *poikilia*, becomes understandable (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 926-927). He thus distances himself from the practice, where textile wealth stands for the glory of the house, for the *kleos* of its members, as we hear from Andromache's own lips (Homer, *Iliad* 22, 508-515). In the context of democratic reforms of Ephialtes in 462/461 BCE, which, as Christian Meier has shown, form the background of the Aeschylean drama, Agamemnon's argument makes sense [37].

[33] WAGNER-HASEL 2000a, p. 197-205 = 2020, p. 232-246.

[34] Homer, *Odyssey* 11, 136 and 23, 293. Cf. also *Odyssey* 19, 368; 4, 210.

[35] Such shrouds are called *pharea* in the Homeric epics. The Archaic sumptuary laws, however, use the general term *heimata*, which also applies to the purple trail. WAGNER-HASEL 2000b, p. 81-102 and WAGNER-HASEL 2012.

[36] Cf. VOGEL-EHRENSPERGER 2012, p. 164: « Er ahnt nicht, dass er als Verurteilter nicht ins eigene Haus, sondern ins Haus des Hades und damit in den Tod geht ».

[37] For the democratic reforms of Ephialtes as the background of the *Oresteia* see MEIER 1983, p. 144-154.

[38] Just like the resources of the Homeric *basileis*, the wealth of

## THE POLITICAL MEANING OF THE PURPLE PATH

In Agamemnon's words, fabrics form a specific kind of wealth, which is not produced in the house but bought with silver. Therefore, he does not wish to spoil (*φθείω*) it with his feet (949: *ποσὶν φθείροντα πλοῦτον ἀργυρονήτους θ' ὑφάς*). Klytimestra, in contrast, points to the endless resources of the sea:

« There is a sea – who will ever dry it up? – which breeds an ever-renewed ooze of abundant purple, worth its weight in silver, to dye clothing with (*πορφύρας ἰσάργυρον [...] εἰμάτων βαφάς*) » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 959-960).

This house has enough, and she continues:

« So with the gods' help, my lord, we can remedy this loss; our house does not know what poverty is (*πένεσθαι*). To contrive a means of bringing this man back alive, I would have vowed to trample *many* garments (*πολλῶν πατησῶν δ' εἰμάτων*), if that had been prescribed to our family in an oracle » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 962-965).

Klytimestra thus stylizes herself like the tyrants of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, who legitimized their elevated position with their ability to recruit foreign goods [38]. This is why, after Agamemnon's death, her reign is called a tyranny by the chorus:

« You can see that. Their first actions show the behaviour of men giving the signal that they mean to be tyrants of this city (*ὄρᾶν πάρεστι. φοιμαῖζονται γὰρ ὥς, τυραννίδος σημεῖα πράσσοντες πόλει*) » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1354-1355).

On the other hand, Agamemnon, who fears the jealousy of the gods if he treads on the fabric, is lamented by the

the tyrants stems from foreign goods but is also recruited from their own people. In the case of Peisistratos, silver mines in the Pangaion Hills in Thrace are mentioned, as well as the *chrēmata* (goods, wealths) from Thebes, the precise origin of which remains in the dark. For discussion cf. LAVELLE 1995, p. 45-66; LAVELLE 2005. The house of the Cypselides (Theognis 891-894), which erected a tyranny in Corinth, gained its wealth by levying tolls at the Isthmus as well as by organizing transportation. Cf. SALMON 1984, p. 186-230. According to SANCISI-WERDENBURG 2000, p. 1-15, the rule of the tyrants is rooted in the tradition of the personal, non-institutionalized political leadership manifesting itself in the *epics*. It should also be conceived as a family reign, not that of a single person.



chorus of old men not only as the *basileus*, but also as a representative of the *polis*, as a *stratēgos*:

« You woman! You, the stay-at-home, did this to these who had just returned from battle – at the same time as you were defiling the man’s bed, you planned to kill the commander (ἀνδρὶ στρατηγῷ) of the host like this » (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1625-1627).

I would, therefore, argue that Agamemnon seems not to want to preserve the goods of the house, as has often been supposed [39], but the goods of the *dēmos* to which he is bound, especially silver. It was access to silver that established the Attic supremacy at sea [40]. In democratic Athens, luxurious textiles, bought with silver and worthy of a ruler, as Klytimestra points out, belonged to the sphere of the gods, not to the sphere of an individual *oikos* – that is the message of the poet [41]. This interpretation may explain the use of the unusual term *petasma* by Aeschylus, also found in Delian inscriptions of the time, as a term for gifts to the gods [42]. In the context of this democratic development, a new appreciation of cloth expenditure at funerals seems to have taken place. This change must also be taken into consideration in order to understand what is happening on the stage [43].

According to Thorsten Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, « the pointed and demonstrative use of goods that do not come from one’s own work but from recruiting foreign labour is a fundamental trademark of the formation of an elite. » [44] There is hardly a more significant example of elitist consumption than purple, described as exceedingly valuable not only in tragedy but also in epic

poetry [45]. In Homer, it is not only the textile guest-gifts, like those the Phaeacians give to Odysseus, but also the shrouds that originate from the services of dependent female spinners and weavers. Apart from that, material and colour of the cloth point to an exchange of resources across regional borders. Dyeing requires access to alum, which was used to fix the colour and could be found in Egypt. Linen fabrics, as found in several tombs and used for the covering of the bones of the burned dead, probably also came from Egypt or the Black Sea. The *basileis* organized this exchange of resources across regional borders and could thus acquire a reputation that made them stand out among their peers [46]. However, the use of such recruited goods goes beyond a simple demonstration of status. In epic poetry, the foreign, recruited, textile goods are mostly items of value, which circulate as guest-gifts, dedications to deities or gift offerings to the dead. They fulfil the function of a social connection or bond [47].

Research on modern consumption differentiates between want (*Wahlbedarf*) and basic needs (*Grundbedarf*), that means between luxury and necessities, and views the generalization of *choice demands*, which encompass not only the elite, as a characteristic of our modern consumer society [48]. Recent research on consumption in antiquity leads to the assumption that *choice demands* or consumption options were not limited to the elite [49]. On the contrary, the ability to mobilize resources for regular consumption precedes the development of an elite. Hence Lin Foxhall has rightly questioned why goods that are readily available at home, like wheat, wine, and clothing, are « imported » in the epics. She explains that these goods constitute « semi-luxuries », to be jointly consumed in a ritual context, and thus contribute to the development of a supra-regional set of values [50].

[39] See BAKOLA 2016, p. 125.

[40] Cf. also the interpretation of JENKINS 1985, p. 109-132, who sees the purple fabrics bought with silver as symbols of the ambivalence of the feminine as both dangerous and precious.

[41] On the political meaning of textile wealth in democratic Athens see WAGNER-HASEL 2009.

[42] See PRÊTRE 2018, p. 548.

[43] Therefore, I cannot agree with the recent interpretation of BAKOLA (2016, p. 127) who understands the purple as symbol of the generative power of nature and does not consider the historical background of the drama.

[44] VEULEN 1899. GEDDES 1989 also reasons with Veblen’s approach in her analysis of the expenditure of textile goods in democratic Athens.

[45] FLINTOFF 1987, p. 126, has tried to determine the current market value and assumed a price of 7.000 \$ per 1.5 gram of purple. For recent research on colour see CLELAND & STEARS 2004; GRAND-CLÉMENT 2011.

[46] For evidence see WAGNER-HASEL 2000a, p. 141-152

(services of women), p. 246-257 (supra-regional exchange of resources) = 2020, p. 155-169; 295-311.

[47] WAGNER-HASEL 2000a, chap. II = 2020, p. 80-143. For Classical practices see GHERCHANOC 2009; WAGNER-HASEL 2012. I cannot see a devaluation of the fabrication of textiles by female members of the household because of the increasing exchange in post-Homeric times, as argued by VAN WEES 2005.

[48] PRINZ 2003, p. 32-33. For further discussion, see SCHRAGE 2009 who stresses the social function of consumption.

[49] This is especially true for the participation in bread wheat, which had to be imported from areas around the Black Sea or Egypt as well as from Gaul. Roman legionaries, for example, were entitled to it. See SALLARES 1998. For Classical Athens, we can establish a correspondence between the participation in political decisions and the participation in luxuries in the field of nutriment, as DAVIDSON 1997 has illustrated in his study.

[50] FOXHALL 1998.

For me, the ritual context of consumption seems to be the key to understanding the political symbolism of expenditure of textile goods. If the reference point for Klytaimestra's purple fabric is the funeral ritual, then this touches on the most decisive ritual for creating bonds next to that of marriage, as death rituals stage bonds of loyalty and give information on relationship networks and social hierarchies. In the epic description of the death ritual, we can see all circulating goods come together and be devoted to renewing the existing system of bonds. Shrouds, which are burned along with the body, closely knit the generations and represent items of generational power [51]. Especially purple robes and purple shrouds were connected with rank and power [52]. Herodotus (5, 92) reminds us of this use of textile wealth in his account of the rule of Periandros in Corinth. Periandros has a dream in which his deceased wife Melissa accuses him of neglecting to burn her clothes at her funeral. As a result, he makes the women of Corinth come together in their most beautiful festival garments and then forces them to burn them to honour Melissa. In return, Melissa reveals to Periandros the hiding place of the *tesseræ* from a former guest-friend. The wives of the tyrants seem to « manage » the hospitality arrangements just like the Homeric heroines, and may even have supplied the textile means for doing so [53]. When Theognis of Megara refuses to mourn an unnamed tyrant in one of his elegies (Theognis 1203-1206), he is actually refusing to renew his bond to the house of the tyrant, although we do not know whether this included labour services or gifts. On the other hand, the obligation of all the inhabitants of Laconia, whether free or dependent, Helots, Perioikoi or Spartans, to mourn the king after his death, as Herodotus mentions (6, 58), conformed to the Homeric tradition and served to strengthen the loyalty to the ruler even beyond his death. This loyalty also implied the production of the goods consumed in ritual contexts [54].

In democratic Athens, however, where no class of dependent farmers did exist since Solon [55], the funeral expenditure of patterned textiles – in which the women spread the *kleos* of their house in the epics – was beginning to be regulated (Plutarch, *Solon* 12) [56]. Thus, the bonds of loyalty to the fellowship of citizens of the Polis exceeded the bonds to the individual houses. The ostentatious consumption of clothing in democratic Athens was reserved for the gods' festivities, especially the Panathenaic festival. However, the production and offering of cloth also remained the responsibility of the women, just as in the epic tale. At the great festival of the patron goddess, a *peplos* woven by female citizens was offered to Athena [57].

In Aeschylus' tragedy, Agamemnon's fear of the jealousy of the gods could be interpreted as an expression of his belonging to the Polis system of bonds. Having the juice of the purple dye murex at one's disposal could have been understood by the audience of that time as a reference to the yield of the Athenian *dēmos* (people)' supremacy at sea established after the Persian War. However, this poetic playing with clothing consumption would have revealed its meaning only if the audience in the Attic theatre was aware of the female function to preserve the textile wealth of the house and its political significance in ritual contexts [58]. I would, therefore, agree with Linda McNeil's argument and consider the reciprocity between the couple. The visualization of political differences by textile objects, here between tyranny and democracy, is based on the political difference of gender roles. Aeschylus' Agamemnon is not the only ancient tragedy that plays with this female responsibility for funerals to convey political messages [59].

[51] For verification see WAGNER-HASEL 2000a, p. 206-219 = 2020, p. 246-265.

[52] In epic poetry only high-ranking persons like Agamemnon, Odysseus, etc. wear purple robes. For evidence see STULZ 1990; WAGNER-HASEL 2000a, p. 251 = 2020, p. 301. For evidence in later times see REINHOLD 1970; BLUM 1998. ELLIOTT (2008, p. 180) hints at the purple shroud of Alexander the Great.

[53] As the daughter of the tyrant of Epidaurus, whose wife hailed from Arcadia, she must have had the means of processing wool into fabric. In all likelihood, there were transhumance connections between Arcadia, which was rich in sheep, and Epidaurus. For evidence see WAGNER-HASEL 2000a, p. 259 = 2020, p. 320-327.

[54] On textile dues see WAGNER-HASEL 2019.

[55] WAGNER-HASEL 2018.

[56] WAGNER-HASEL 2000b. Cf. also SEAFORD 1994, p. 82-85, who stresses the responsibility of women for the *oikos*. According to him, the regulations served to establish *homonoia* (concord) within the *polis*. For another view see HAME 2008 who denies the prominent role of women in funeral rites and stresses the responsibility of men: She argues that women who take control of the death ritual in Attic tragedy perform male roles: « they are acting in a manner that is socially and religiously aberrant for women in historical Greek culture ». Her arguments are based on the evidence of Attic orators and on the assumption of « a male-dominated society » (p. 2). She does not consider the different gender roles in funeral rites.

[57] BARBER 1992; BRØNS 2019; CLEMENTS 2017, 43-45.

[58] REUTHNER 2006; BUNDRICK 2008; WAGNER-HASEL 2009; 2012.

[59] See HOLST-WARHAFT 1992; STEARS 1998.

I would like to end with a modern example. On September 24<sup>th</sup> 1848, the grand ducal municipality of Freiburg informed the local representative of the Government of Baden that, the afternoon before, eleven women had been arrested. Their offence: « Sie hatten », so the letter from Freiburg says, « die Gräber derjenigen Theilnehmer an den jüngsten hochverrätherischen Unternehmungen auf dem Gottesacker an der Wiehre mit Kränzen u.s.w. geziert ..., welche kürzlich auf Urtheil des hiesigen Standgerichts erschossen worden (waren). » Decorating the graves of the executed with flowers was, so the women chronicling the incident, anything but an innocent, personal, act. Rather, the local municipality considered this to be a « strafbare öffentliche Demonstration

gegen die Großherzogliche Staatsregierung » [60]. In Freiburg, too, funeral rituals were considered stagings of loyalties and, similar to the practice in ancient societies, were not seen as a purely male domain.

Loyalty for the dead is visible in objects, be it flowers in the above-mentioned example, be it textiles in ancient tragedy. However, Klytaimestra's purple *petasmata*, which belong to funeral practices, are only a pretence of loyalty towards her husband who she is going to kill in the bath. Therefore the inversion of the death ritual by spreading the shroud on the floor, therefore no lament for her unfaithful husband after his death [61]. ■

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## THANKS

This paper is partly a revised version of my article « Der Stoff der Macht – Kleideraufwand, elitärer Konsum und homerisches Königtum », published in ALRAM-STERN & NIGHTINGALE 2007. I would like to thank Liselotte Glage for her assistance with the English translation and the editors for their helpful comments.

[60] HEIDTKE & RÖSSLER 1995, p. 17.

[61] At the end of the drama, Klytaimestra announces that

she will bury her husband without lamentation (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1554). See SEAFORD 1984, p. 253-254.

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