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SOPHOCLES' BALL (FR. 781)*

In the interpretation of fragments the omission or neglect of even the most minute detail can lead a scholar to false conclusions or to ill-founded speculations. How careful one must be to draw out every possibility and nuance from every little piece of textual evidence can be seen in the following case. This is the text of Soph. fr. 781 (ed. Radt) as quoted by a late lexicographer (*Etym. Magn.* s.v. ἔγχος [313.3–4]):

ὁ δὲ Σοφοκλῆς τὴν σφαῖραν ἔγχος κέκληκεν, οἷον "τὸ δ' ἔγχος ἐν ποσὶ κυλίνδεται".

A standard interpretation of this fragment is that it describes a ball game and belongs to Sophocles' *Nausicaa* (otherwise titled *Plyntriai*).[1] Bob Corthals, however, has recently argued that the fragment refers instead to a description of a battle, in which Sophocles 'is using ἔγχος as a metaphor not for an actual ball but for an object that resembles a ball'.[2] Corthals suggests that this fragment portrays the violent decapitation of Imbrius by Locrian Ajax, particularly the moment when Ajax spins around and throws the head of Imbrius through the crowd 'like a ball' (σφαιρηδόν), and it then falls down in front of Hector's feet (cf. *Il.* 13.204–5 ἦκε δέ μιν σφαιρηδὸν ἑλιξάμενος δι' ὁμίλου, | Ἕκτορι δὲ προπάροιθε ποδῶν πέσεν ἐν κονίῃσι). According to Corthals, then, the ἔγχος is the head of Imbrius, and the feet are those of Hector. On the basis of this reconstruction, Corthals goes on to suggest that the fragment belongs to the lost play *Aias Lokros* and that the lines may have been spoken by Cassandra. Corthals is right to challenge the traditional interpretation of the fragment, but in matters of textual detail several of his arguments require significant revision. As will become apparent, the range of possibilities for the context of fr. 781 is far wider than Corthals and earlier scholars have acknowledged.

One of the main problems related to the interpretation of this fragment is how one might best translate it. Corthals reads τὸ δ' ἔγχος ἐν ποσὶ κυλίνδεται as 'and the ἔγχος rolls to (someone's) feet'. This translation serves as the main basis for his

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[1] See A.C. Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1917), 29–30: 'The fragment is generally assigned to the *Nausicaa*, on the suggestion of Schneider and Bergk. The situation may be that of ζ 115, as described by Odysseus to Alcinous in η 290'; S.L. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, vol. 4. *Sophocles* (Göttingen, 1999[2]), 537. For earlier scholarship, see L.C. Valckenaer, *Diatribe in Euripidis perditorum dramatum reliquias* (Leiden, 1767), 167; G.C.W. Schneider, *Sophokles Tragödien*, vol. 8. *Bruchstücke* (Weimar, 1827), 135; T. Bergk, *Commentatio de fragmentis Sophoclis* (Leipzig, 1833), 22; F. Ellendt, *Lexicon Sophocleum*, vol. 1 (Königsberg, 1835), 471; F.G. Welcker, *Die griechischen Tragödien mit Rücksicht auf den epischen Cyclus*, vol. 1 (Bonn, 1839), 230; T. Gaisford, *Etymologicum Magnum* (Oxford, 1848), col. 898: 'Sumptus fortasse versus ex f. Nausicaa. Vid. Homer. Od. ζ 115.'

[2] B. Corthals, 'A spear "like a ball": a note on Sophocles, fr. 781', *CQ* 68 (2018), 326–9.

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view that, because there are no direct parallels for a ball rolling *to* someone's feet in a ball game in any known plays by Sophocles or elsewhere, the fragment must instead refer to something else. Corthals repeatedly emphasizes this point as the mainstay of his interpretation, saying, for instance, that 'the fragment's object is said *to reach someone's feet* rolling', and that, by contrast, the ball thrown by Nausicaa 'did not end up *at his* [Odysseus'] *feet*' (*Od*. 6.115, 7.290), and that, 'while playing with a ball, he [Glaucus] fell into a jar of honey (Hyg. *Fab*. 136). But this ball too can hardly have *rolled to anyone's feet*. Glaucus was alone' (my italics). Corthals does not consider alternatives. But τὸ δ' ἔγχος ἐν ποσὶ κυλίνδεται is unlikely to mean 'the ἔγχος rolls *to* (someone's) feet'. Instead, elsewhere in classical literature κυλίνδω or κυλίνδομαι with ἐν usually means 'roll (or be rolled) *in* or *on* or *among* (some thing or some place)': see *Il.* 24.640 αὐλῆς ἐν χόρτοισι κυλινδόμενος κατὰ κόπρον ('being rolled into the filth in the enclosure of the court', transl. Murray); *Od.* 1.162 ἢ εἰν ἁλὶ κῦμα κυλίνδει ('or the waves roll them in the sea', transl. Murray); Thgn. 1.619 πόλλ' ἐν ἀμηχανίηισι κυλίνδομαι ἀχνύμενος κῆρ ('often I toss about in helplessness, distressed at heart', transl. Gerber); Pind. *Pyth.* 2.22–3 ἐν πτερόεντι τροχῷ̣ | παντᾷ̣ κυλινδόμενον ('as he turns in every direction on his winged wheel', transl. Race); Hermippus, fr. 48.5–6 K.–A. ῥάβδον δ' ὄψει τὴν κοτταβικὴν | ἐν τοῖς ἀχύροισι κυλινδομένην ('you'll see the cottabus-stand rolling around in the dust', transl. Olson); Ar. *Vesp.* 492 ὥστε καὶ τοὔνομ' αὐτῆς ἐν ἀγορᾷ̣ κυλίνδεται ('see how its [tyranny's] name is tossed about in the agora', my transl.); Matron. Pitan. *SH* 534.19 οἱ δὲ κυλινδόμενοι καναχὴν ἔχον ἐν ποσὶ παίδων ('the sea urchins produced an uproar rolling about among the boys' feet', transl. Olson). This last example is particularly relevant, since, as is the case in the Sophoclean fragment, κυλίνδω / κυλίνδομαι is combined with ἐν ποσί, and so the sea urchins are described rolling (or being rolled) among feet in a way similar to the ἔγχος.[3] From these close parallels it is possible to build a very strong case that Soph. fr. 781 most likely means 'and the ἔγχος rolls / is rolled *among* their/his/her/my/the feet'. Of course, it is not impossible that the phrase in fr. 781 means 'rolls to', as Corthals takes it, since ἐν with a verb of motion can mean '*into*; implying both *motion to* and subsequent *position in* a place' (LSJ^{9} s.v. ἐν, A.A.I.8); but Corthals's discussion might give the misleading impression that his is the *only* possible translation of the phrase. Other scholars who have translated the fragment offer slightly different interpretations. Paduano has 'la palla rotola tra i piedi';[4] Pearson 'the ball rolls close to my feet';[5] Sutton 'the ball rolls at his [or her] feet';[6] Young 'and the missile rolls | [b]efore my feet'.[7] In any case, it is clear that Corthals's proposed interpretation of the language is more limited than necessary.

This seemingly minor detail has significant implications for Corthals's argument. Indeed, on the basis of his translation, Corthals brings up and then rejects two possible scenarios in which the fragment could fit. First, Corthals says that, because at *Od.* 6.115 the ball does not 'end up at his [Odysseus'] feet', such a scene is unlikely to have occurred in Sophocles' *Nausicaa* and therefore this attribution must be incorrect.

[3] For a later parallel, cf. Them. *Sophistes* 284b7–8 τοὺς δὲ ὀϊστοὺς ὁρῶ πίπτοντας οὐκ οἶδα ὅθεν καὶ ἐν ποσὶ κυλινδομένους.

[4] G. Paduano, *Tragedie e frammenti di Sofocle*, vol. 2 (Torino, 1982), 1015.

[5] Pearson (n. 1), 29.

[6] D.F. Sutton, *The Lost Sophocles* (Lanham, MD, 1984), 161.

[7] G. Young, *The Dramas of Sophocles Rendered in English Verse, Dramatic and Lyric* (London, 1906), 358.

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But which scholars say that the ball must *end up at Odysseus' feet* in this scene, if it is from the *Nausicaa*, and that no other feet are being referred to? Corthals attributes this view only to Welcker.[8] But Corthals misleadingly assumes that the interpretation of ἐν ποσί as referring to Odysseus' feet is the only possible interpretation he needs to refute in order to dispose completely with the attribution to *Nausicaa*. No names are given in the fragment, nor is there any indication of the number or gender of the characters being referred to. As noted above, ἐν ποσί could mean *among their* or *his* or *her* or *my* or simply *the feet*. There is no reason to assume that, if this is a fragment of the *Nausicaa*, these must be Odysseus' feet. They could be the feet of Nausicaa or of one of her companions, or of Nausicaa *and* her companions. Corthals himself admits that '*Nausicaa* will have included a version of the famous scene in which the Phaeacian princess and her maidens enjoy a game of ball', because 'Sophocles himself is famously claimed to have performed the role of Nausicaa and received great credit for his skill with the ball' (for testimonia on Sophocles' performance as Nausicaa and his skills with the ball, see *TrGF* 4 test. 28–30). The second scenario brought up by Corthals is as follows. Corthals says that Sophocles' *Manteis* (or *Polyidus*) may have included a reference to a ball, since Hyginus (*Fab*. 136) records that Glaucus died while playing with a ball because he fell into a jar of honey. Corthals's only objection to this possibility is that 'this ball … can hardly have rolled *to* anyone's feet. Glaucus was alone'. We have already seen that this interpretation of the language of the fragment, namely that it must refer to an object rolling *to* anyone's feet, is too restricted. Why could the ball not roll among Glaucus' own feet (ἐν ποσί)? These hypothetical contexts for the fragment can still stand as possibilities.

There is another more significant problem here. The main thesis of Corthals's article is that this fragment refers to the decapitation of Imbrius by Locrian Ajax. Corthals offers two reasons for making this argument. First, Corthals points out that Imbrius' head is described flying through the air 'like a ball' (σφαιρηδόν) in epic (*Il.* 13.202–5), and so Sophocles 'is using ἔγχος as a metaphor not for an actual ball but for an object that resembles a ball: Imbrius' head'. Second, Corthals sees a parallel between the moment when Locrian Ajax cuts off the head of Imbrius (*Il.* 13.202–5) and the moment when Hector shears off the top of Telamonian Ajax's spear (*Il.* 16.114–18), observing that Ajax's spear is thrice called an ἔγχος (*Il*. 15.730, 15.742, 15.745). In fact, Corthals goes so far as to say that 'the enormous ship-pike used by Telamonian Ajax … closely matches Imbrius' fate', and that 'Sophocles is using ἔγχος as a *totum pro parte*, since Imbrius' head properly compares to the spear's αἰχμή. The *tertium comparationis* consists of the quality, implicit in the case of (the head of) Ajax's ἔγχος, of rolling over the ground σφαιρηδόν'. Here Corthals stretches the evidence too far. The notion that there is a comparison between the decapitation of Imbrius' head and the shattering of the αἰχμή of Ajax's ἔγχος is doubtful for several reasons. To begin with, there is the problem acknowledged even by Corthals himself, namely that an αἰχμή is not the same as an ἔγχος: only the αἰχμή of Telamonian Ajax's spear (ἔγχος) is shattered, and this is what falls to the ground during battle. This gives rise to the following question. If Sophocles intended to make a connection between the spearhead (αἰχμή) of Ajax's spear and Imbrius' head, why, then, would he call Imbrius' head an ἔγχος? To suppose, as Corthals does, that in fr. 781 Sophocles is using ἔγχος *as an equivalent for* αἰχμή, even when the very passage it is supposedly inspired by (*Il.* 16.114–18) does not

[8] Welcker (n. 1), 230.

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make and in fact contradicts this equivalence, is too much to accept, especially when Ajax's αἰχμή is clearly *not* described as being 'like a ball'. There are also some more rudimentary reasons to doubt this interpretation. The supposed parallel between Imbrius' head and Ajax's ἔγχος is not observable: the epic passages cited by Corthals offer no clear support for a connection between the scenes, and Corthals only asserts rather than argues for such a connection. Furthermore, unlike in fr. 781, Ajax's αἰχμή and Imbrius' head fall straight onto the ground rather than roll. One may also doubt whether such an elaborate sequence of allusions and comparisons can reasonably be invested in so small a portion of text, especially when we know nothing of the context. Much of what Corthals writes here is highly speculative, and Corthals himself admits that one of his suggestions is 'a mere guess'. So when Corthals goes on to say that 'the feet mentioned in the fragment *must* be those of Hector, not of Odysseus' (my emphasis), this statement simply begs the question.

If the lexicographer's description of the use of ἔγχος in fr. 781 is accurate, then any interpretation of this fragment must take into account the metaphorical force of the word as referring to a 'ball'. This would probably make most sense if a character is throwing, or has just thrown, the ball in the same way as one might throw a spear. The ball games in the *Odyssey* are games of handball, where the ball is thrown and caught rather than kicked. We could imagine a scenario where one of the girls throws the ball, as one might throw a spear, for another girl to catch it; she drops it and it rolls between her feet or between the feet of the other girls, like a spear rolling on the ground during battle. It has also been suggested that Nausicaa and the other girls are instead playing a game of 'dodgeball', where the aim of the player with the ball is to throw and hit another player.[9] If this is correct, we could also imagine a similar scenario where Nausicaa (or someone else) throws the ball at another girl intending to hit her, just as one throws a spear intending to hit the enemy; the ball hits the targeted girl, or the girl dodges it, and then the ball falls and rolls about at her feet or at the feet of the other girls, just like a spear falls and rolls around on the battlefield. In both of these cases, the point of the comparison between the ball and the spear is the speed of the throwing action, and the idea that the other players are targets. There is another Homeric ball game where this type of scenario would also fit: the ball-throwing dancing display put on by two of Nausicaa's brothers (*Od*. 8.370–84). But could we not also look beyond Homer to other scenarios? There are a number of early fourth-century B.C. Apulian vase depictions of mythological ball games, some of which may be related to or inspired by tragedies. An amphora portrays the ball game being played by Europa and her friends at the time of her abduction.[10] A hydria depicts a woman, probably Thalia, being grabbed by an eagle while playing alone with her ball.[11] A loutrophoros dealing with the abduction of Leda depicts a woman playing ball with Leda before the arrival of the swan.[12] And a volute-krater showing the departure of Amphiaraos includes a youth playing with a hoop and a ball.[13] These artistic depictions provide plausible mythological

[9] H.A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca, 1972), 81–2; J.P. Holoka, '*Iliad* 13.202–5: ΑΙΑΣ ΣΦΑΙΡΙΣΤΗΣ', *AJPh* 102 (1981), 351–2. Similarly, Anacreon describes Eros hitting the poet with a ball in another apparent example of dodgeball (*PMG* fr. 358).

[10] Naples Museum H 3218; cf. A. Lamari, *Reperforming Greek Tragedy. Theater, Politics, and Cultural Mobility in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (Berlin and Boston, 2017), 152–3.

[11] Trieste, Museo Civico S. 437; cf. Lamari (n. 10), 152.

[12] Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.680; cf. O. Taplin, *Pots & Plays. Interactions between Tragedy and Greek Vase-Painting of the Fourth Century B.C.* (Los Angeles, 2007), 229–30.

[13] Cleveland Museum of Art 88.41; cf. Taplin (n. 12), 237–8.

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scenarios in which a ball could fall to the ground and roll in and around someone's feet. Curiously, in one of these cases (Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.680) the woman about to throw a ball takes a stance reminiscent of warriors when they are about to throw a spear, and from this it is not hard to see how comparisons between ball-throwing and spear-throwing might arise. It is plausible. But another factor needs to be taken into account.

This whole debate rests on the assumption that the lexicographer's description of the meaning of ἔγχος in this fragment is correct. But when the lexicographer (*Etym. Magn.* s.v. ἔγχος 313.3–4) says that 'Sophocles has called the ball an ἔγχος' (Σοφοκλῆς τὴν σφαῖραν ἔγχος κέκληκεν), what exactly does it mean? If this refers to a *metaphorical* usage, then the word in fr. 781 can be adequately explained to a certain extent; this is what I have tried to do earlier (see above). The *Suda* (ε 184) even comments on a metaphorical usage of ἔγχος at Soph. *OT* 169 (ἔγχος· ἀλληγορικῶς παρὰ Σοφοκλεῖ ἡ βοήθεια), so the word had the potential to be used in this metaphorical way by Sophocles, or at least was read as such by Byzantine scholars (we cannot overlook the possibility that the explanation at *Etym. Magn*. 313.3–4 reflects a late metaphorical reading of ἔγχος rather than the original context). However, if the lexicographer's entry is intended as a comment on the *real* meaning of the word ἔγχος, this presents some problems. As Corthals points out, 'the idea of ἔγχος as referring to "ball" is by no means an obvious further extension' of the word's meaning. He adds that 'searches for closer parallels … have yielded no results'. This is indeed a perplexing difficulty. However, the only impediment to clarity is the lexicographer's gloss, which could well be quite wrong. Observe that in this same entry at *Etym. Magn.* 313.5–6, ἔγχος in fr. 782, ἔγχος ἱέμενον, is explained as τὸ πῦρ; there is no obvious connection here between the word in the gloss and the fragment, and the same might be the case with the treatment of fr. 781.[14] If fr. 781 were transmitted without the lexicographer's explanatory note, we would not hesitate to place it in a battle scenario, where a spear or weapon is rolling among warriors' feet. There are a number of epic passages in which fallen objects roll *among*, *next to* or *under* the feet of warriors (*Il.* 13.578–9, 14.411, 16.794); Janko even remarks that 'fallen objects rolling noisily on the battlefield are a topos'.[15] If the lexicographer is wrong, these battle scenarios could easily serve as the context for fr. 781. If, on the other hand, Sophocles did decide to use ἔγχος with the meaning 'ball', then there is no reason why this could not have occurred in the *Nausicaa* or in any other play that involved a ball game (including, perhaps, plays of which we know nothing). To suppose that Sophocles could not have expanded the meaning of this word for poetic reasons would be to discredit his originality as an artist. In any case, I hope to have shown that the range of possibilities for this fragment is much wider than Corthals and others would have us believe. As for Sophocles' 'ball', unfortunately it remains a mystery. We must hope that new evidence sheds light on this problem in the future.

The University of Melbourne KONSTANTINE PANEGYRES
konpanegyres@gmail.com

[14] On corruption in fr. 782 Radt, ἔγχος ἱέμενον, see Pearson (n. 1), 30.
[15] R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume IV: Books 13–16* (Cambridge, 1994), 112 (on 13.526–30).

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