

HERECELE - HERACLES AND MLACUCH - IOLE

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A male figure struggling, abducting or merely carrying a female figure is shown on several 5th. century B.C. Etruscan mirrors¹. The male figure is clearly recognized as Heracles by the lion skin that he wears, as well as by the club held in his right hand, and the bow and quiver shown in the background on the left hand side of the mirror. The scheme is repeated on the mirrors with slight variations. The one in the British Museum is inscribed, bearing the names of Herecele and Mlacuch (Fig. 1)². The inscription confirms the identification of the male figure but seems to give no hint for the identification of the female figure.

Scholars have argued whether the word Mlacuch is of Greek, Latin or Semitic origin, and whether it is a derivation from *Malacia* or from *Salacia*³. Various interpretations and identifications have been offered for Mlacuch. It has been suggested that the name is that of a goddess or of a feminine genius⁴, a heroine⁵, a chthonic goddess or a water demon⁶. Moreover Deianeira, Alceste⁷, Uni, Thetis, Turan⁸ and Minerva have also been considered. Gerhard⁹ associated the word Mlacuch with Malacisch, which appears on Etruscan mirrors with bridal toilet scenes, and thus interpreted the scene as the love affair between Heracles and Minerva¹⁰. Walters¹¹ considered Mlacuch as a probable epithet of a bride, while Colonna¹² proposed that she is Bona Dea.

Despite everything written, Mlacuch remained a mystery, an unknown figure whose connection with Heracles is obscure. As the scene was not associated with any specific Greek myth it has been considered "a purely Etruscan episode which is otherwise unknown among the exploits of Herakles"¹³. I would like to suggest a new identification for Mlacuch as Iole, the daughter of king Eurytus, whom Heracles won in an archery contest. This argument is based on interpreting the derivation and meaning of the name Mlacuch, as well as on interpreting the composition in relation to the Greek myth and visual representations.

It seems obvious from glossaries and indexes of books dealing with the Etruscan language that the appellative for *Mlacuch* is *młax*, and that *młax* is

derived from *mul-*¹⁴. Based upon the inscriptions *młax* is interpreted as an offering, a donation or a votive; *mul-*, as a verb, points to the act of offering or donating¹⁵.

Realizing that Mlacuch is not an Etruscan equivalent to a certain Greek female name, I considered the possibility that it is a sort of an *epithet*, a descriptive or an indicative name. On reviewing the adventures of Heracles in Greek Mythology, the resemblance between the Greek myth of Heracles and Iole¹⁶ and the depiction of Herecele and Mlacuch on the Etruscan mirrors seemed evident to me. Though all the written sources seem to be later than the mirrors, still they can be used for establishing the argument. According to Apollodorus¹⁷ Eurytus, the king of Oechalia, offered the hand of his daughter Iole as a prize to anyone who would overcome him and his sons in an archery contest. Though Heracles proved himself better than them, the king and his sons (except the eldest) refused to give Iole to the hero, saying that he might kill his future children as he did before¹⁸. Heracles left without his prize, but came back with an army he gathered in Trachis. He killed Eurytus¹⁹ and his sons, destroyed Oechalia and led Iole captive.

That the Etruscans must have been familiar with the Oechalia myth might be deduced from the fact that some of the Greek vases depicting the myth were found on Etrurian soil, in Cerveteri, Vulci and Chiusi²⁰. On one of these vases Heracles meets Iole banqueting in Oechalia; on the others the archery contest and Heracles' vengeance are depicted²¹. Although the motif of Heracles leading Iole captive does not appear on any of these vases, yet it is represented, in my opinion, on a calyx-krater by the Aegisthus Painter in the Louvre²².

The scene on the Louvre krater (Fig. 2) was identified as Apollo pursuing Tityos, and the woman whom Tityos clasps with his left arm as either Leto or Ge²³. The arrows stuck into the circular object seen on the woman's right shoulder were interpreted by Buschor as a "chunk of earth into which Ge has deflected Apollo's arrows to save Tityos"²⁴ and by Griffiths²⁵ as the 'darts of love', the 'arrows of desire'.

A similar object with arrows is attached to Iole's neck on the Madrid belly amphora by the Sappho Painter (Fig. 3)²⁶, and to her breast on a stamnos by the Eucharides Painter²⁷. Griffiths' hypothesis on the 'darts of love', though based on literary sources, does not seem to correspond with the representations of the vases under discussion. The absence of the motif in depictions of other myths of desirable women seems to justify a reconsideration of Griffiths' hypothesis. The lack of literary evidence and visual comparisons for Buschor's hypothesis on Ge implies the need for a reinterpretation of the scene depicted on the Louvre calyx-krater²⁸.

It is true that giants are sometimes depicted wearing animal skins in scenes of the Gigantomachy²⁹, but in the representations of Apollo and Tityos the giant is usually shown naked or wrapped in garment³⁰. As the lion skin is a common attribute of Heracles, and the arrows are associated with Iole, the scene on the Louvre calyx-krater may well be that of Heracles and Iole. The object with arrows is simply the target. "Herakles" writes Olmos "is dishonoured when not given his corresponding τιμή- Iole. That is why she appears associated with the target with stuck arrows, since she is the prize... The stuck arrow on a strange target on her own breast... alludes to the winner's immediate possession of the νόμῳ: target and woman are the same thing"³¹. Olmos' explanation agrees with the depiction on the Louvre calyx-krater (Fig. 2), where Heracles implements Eurytus' promise by taking his prize by force³². Since the τόξα (bow and arrows), as well as the instructions in their use, were given to Heracles by Apollo³³, the presence of the god on the left hand side of the scene is not surprising. After all, it is with the help of Apollo's bow, arrows and skill that Heracles won the contest and his new bride. As neither the contest nor the vengeance are depicted, Apollo, the bow and the quiver, like the target, allude to the former events at Oechalia. Furthermore, we may assume that Apollo's presence on the vase also points to Eurytus' *hybris*, for Eurytus had offended Apollo as well as Heracles by trying to back out of his promise. Apollonius Rhodius³⁴ mentions that Apollo gave Eurytus a bow, a gift which eventually caused his death either by Apollo or by Heracles³⁵. Though not explicitly recorded in the surviving literary sources, one may not rule out the possibility that Heracles killed Eurytus on Apollo's behalf, as he had killed Phylas, the king of the Dryopians³⁶. The altar on the right (Fig. 2) has been related to Apollo's sanctuary³⁷; in the context of the Oechalia myth it

should rather be interpreted as the altar which Heracles consecrated at Cenaeum in honour of his father Zeus³⁸. Thus it seems not only that the former events may be deduced from the depiction, but also the future events, perhaps even Heracles' apotheosis.

On the Etruscan mirrors the altar, the target and the figure of Apollo are omitted. Apollo is replaced by the bow and quiver, and the target (on the British Museum mirror, Fig. 1) by the inscription *Mlacux*, which here appears to be an Etruscan equivalent of the Greek τιμή³⁹. Τιμή like *młax* usually results from a promise or a vow. Eurytus, had promised to give Iole in marriage to anybody capable of defeating him and his sons in an archery contest. Heracles did so, but Eurytus did not keep his promise. Consequently Iole, the present of honour, was taken captive by Heracles. *Mlacuch* is not the mythical name of the woman carried by Heracles, but it is an indicative name, a definition of her status – she is the reward. Like the bow and quiver the inscription alludes to the former events at Oechalia and justifies Heracles' reaction to Eurytus' refusal.

In Apollodorus' paragraph⁴⁰ on the Oechalia events τιμή is not used, but, instead Apollodorus makes use of ἄδλον. Though the words are not synonyms, it is apparent from the context that the prize is Heracles' reward, his present of honour. It should be remembered that the contemporary written sources for the early Greek and Etruscan representations of the myth are lost. Though it is possible that the *Sack of Oechalia* by Kreophylos of Samos⁴¹ was the direct literary source of inspiration for the 6th. and 5th. centuries representations of the myth, we may never know the details of the plot, nor the vocabulary used by the poet. We may only assume, in view of the Etruscan *Mlacux*, that the word τιμή was associated with at least one of the lost versions of the Oechalia myth.

Following the above method of interpretation, I would like to suggest an explanation to the *Menerca/Menerva* inscription added to the depiction of Herecele and Mlacuch on the Byres mirror⁴². Athena appears as Heracles' patron in Greek literature and art. In many of the scenes of his apotheosis Heracles is driven to the Olympus by Athena, who is also introducing him to the gods⁴³. The goddess is also represented at Heracles' side on many of the Etruscan mirrors⁴⁴. Though not actually present on the Byres mirror the goddess' name, like the altar on the Louvre calyx-krater (Fig. 2), alludes to the hero's future.

It is agreed that the composition of Herecele and

Mlacuch is based on Greek prototypes⁴⁵. The scenes of Peleus and Thetis by Peithinos⁴⁶, Theseus and Helen by Euthymides⁴⁷, and Tityos abducting Leto by Phintias⁴⁸ are possible sources of inspiration. All three vases were found in Vulci, and since a Vulcian origin has been suggested for the Etruscan mirror in the British Museum⁴⁹, each one of them, theoretically, can be considered its prototype. The closest resemblance exists between the mirror and Phintias' painting of Tityos carrying off Leto, where a bow and a quiver are seen in the background on the left (Fig. 4).

Unlike Iole on the Louvre calyx-krater (Fig. 2), Mlacuch like Leto is lifted up; Iole, on the other hand, is conducted by Heracles while both her feet are touching the ground. Iole's posture is very much like that of Thetis struggling with Peleus on a stamnos by the Berlin Painter (Fig. 5)⁵⁰. The resemblance between the figures of Iole and Thetis, as well as the altars seen on the right side of each of the scenes, suggests that the same prototype was adopted for the two paintings; or, that the Aegistius Painter adopted

a group of Peleus and Thetis for Heracles and Iole while making the necessary changes in some of the details. The figure of Apollo on the Louvre krater could have been inspired by one of the representations of Apollo pursuing Tityos⁵¹ or some other giant. This may explain why Apollo is holding a sword in his left hand⁵².

In the light of the above comparative analysis it seems obvious that though the mirrors and the Louvre calyx-krater are decorated with the same scene of Heracles carrying off Iole, they reflect various visual traditions and are based on two, or even more, different prototypes. The narrative however, is similarly indicated either by the presence of Apollo, the target and the altar on the Greek vase, or by the bow, quiver and the inscriptions of *Mlacuch* and *Menerca* on the Etruscan mirrors.

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¹ GERHARD 1863, 147-50 Taf. CLIX-CLX; *idem* 1867, 88-90 Taf. CCCXLIV; WALTERS 1899, 75 No. 542; DELATTE 1935; PFISTER-ROESGEN 1975, 17-20. It has been argued (see: PFISTER-ROESGEN 1975) that with the exception of the example in the British Museum the authenticity of the other mirrors is doubtful.

² GERHARD 1867, 88-90; WALTERS 1899, 75; PFISTER-ROESGEN 1975, 17-8.

³ DELATTE 1835, 125-6; BAYET 1926, 205-8; DUMÉZIL 1970, 680.

⁴ PALLOTTINO 1936, 106.

⁵ DELATTE 1935, 124.

⁶ DUCATI 1927, 328.

⁷ Deianeira has been suggested by MILLIN and MÜLLER, Alcestis by PANOFKA: see GERHARD 1863, 148; DELATTE 1935, 124 note 3.

⁸ BAYET 1926, 208ff.

⁹ 1867, 89.

¹⁰ Due to the inscription of *Menerca* or *Menerva* (= Minerva) on the Byres mirror it has been suggested to identify the scene as Heracles and Minerva. Since the female figure lacks the attributes of the goddess this interpretation is rejected by most scholars (see e.g. GERHARD 1863, 147; DELATTE 1935, 117-9; DE RUYT 1936, 668-9, 673; PFISTER-ROESGEN 1975, 20).

¹¹ 1899, 75.

¹² 1987, 20-21; 1993, 14-25. From the following discussion it is clear that I disagree with COLONNA's interpretation based on translating *mlax* as *bella* or *bona*, and on the mythical version of Heracles killing the Etruscan king Faunus and abducting (?) his wife, daughter or sister.

¹³ THOMSON DE GRUMMOND 1982, 118. See *supra* note 12.

¹⁴ See e.g. PFFIFFIG 1969, 234, 295; PALLOTTINO 1979, 494; *idem* 1988, 484. AGOSTINIANI (1981, 105f.) finds this derivation difficult to support, though he admits that "... chi traduce *mlax mlakas* con «donum datum» ovvero con «donum ex voto/ex votis» non può assolutamente ignorare: ... (*idem*, 106).

¹⁵ PFFIFFIG 1969, 295; PALLOTTINO 1988, 484; BONFANTE AND BONFANTE 1983, 144; On the usage of *mlax* and *mul-* derivatives see RIX 1991, the index in Vol. I, 144-5 and the bibliographical references for each entry in Vol. II; PFFIFFIG 1969, 96, 100, 127, 159, 164, 210, 218.

¹⁶ On the literary sources for the various versions of the myth see: LIMC IV/1, 117; LIMC V/1, 701; OLMOS ROMERA 1977, 142-7; HUXLEY 1969, 105-6, 178-9.

¹⁷ II.6.1; II.7.7.

¹⁸ In Sophocles' Trachinian Women 254ff. the reason for Eurytus' refusal is the slavery of Heracles.

¹⁹ According to Homer (Od. 8.226-8) Eurytus was killed by Apollo, whom he had offended by challenging his archer's skill. In Diodorus Siculus IV.37.5 it is mentioned that only the sons of Eurytus were killed by Heracles at Oechalia.

²⁰ The Greek vases depicting the Oechalia myth are dated between the end of the 6th. and the beginning of the 5th. century. See: OLMOS ROMERA 1977; LIMC IV/1, 118 Nos. 1-7; LIMC V/1, 701-2 Nos. 1-5.

²¹ The identification of two other vases - Heracles shooting Eurytus and the match between Apollo and Eurytus - are doubtful. See: LIMC IV/1, 118 Nos. 8-9.

²² LIMC IV/1, 175 No. 44; GREIFENHAGEN 1959, 23, 26-8 Abb.

²⁴ FR, 280 (quoted from LIMC IV/1, 175 No. 44).

²⁵ 1990.

²⁶ OLMOS ROMERA 1977, Taf. 32b. The figures are identified by inscriptions. For the inscriptions see: NEUMANN 1977.

²⁷ LIMC V/1, 702 No. 5; GRIFFITHS 1990, 131 Pl. 7b.

²⁸ On the difficulties in accepting Buschor's hypothesis see: GRIFFITHS 1990, 132; M.B. MOORE LIMC IV/1, 175-6.

²⁹ LIMC IV/2, 142 f. Nos. 316, 322, 324, 329, 391, 396.

³⁰ GREIFENHAGEN 1959. Only one example of Tityos wearing animal skin, on the Berlin pelike, is mentioned by BUSCHOR (FR, 279 Abb. 128. See also Roscher's Lexikon V, 1048-9 No. 16; FURTWÄNGLER 1892, 100-2). The Berlin pelike is not discussed by GREIFENHAGEN (1959) nor is included under Apollo and Tityos in Beazley's ARV² or in the LIMC (II/1, 310-11). Even if the identification of the scene as Apollo and Tityos is correct, there is no literary source to prove the theory that Apollo used both the arrows and sword to kill Tityos. In several scenes of the Gigantomachy Apollo is shown holding a bow in one hand and a sword in the other (e.g. CVA Berlin 3 Taf. 119/2; VIAN 1951, 84 No. 88 Pl. XLIII). As a matter of fact the sword, bow, spear and torch are Apollo's weapon in the Gigantomachy (LIMC II/1, 309-10 Nos. 1055-9). Thus it seems possible that the Gigantomachy was the visual source of inspiration for the depiction on the Berlin pelike. This also may explain why Tityos is wearing the animal skin.

³¹ LIMC V/1, 702.

³² If not for the target, the scene could have been associated with the myth of Heracles and Meda. Heracles slew Phylas for violating Apollo's temple at Delphi and took his daughter Meda captive (Diodorus Siculus IV.37.1; Pausanias I.5.2).

³³ Apollodorus II.4.11; Diodorus Siculus IV.14.3. According to Apollodorus II.4.9, II.4.11 Heracles was taught to shoot with the bow by Eurytus.

³⁴ I.88-9.

³⁵ On Eurytus' *hybris* see OLMOS ROMERA 1977, 144; and *supra* note 19.

³⁶ See *supra* note 32.

³⁷ GREIFENHAGEN 1959, 26.

³⁸ APOLLODORUS II.7.7.

³⁹ Τιμή is a reward, a present of honour, an offering to the gods (LIDDELL AND SCOTT 1968, 1793 § 4).

⁴⁰ II.6.1.

⁴¹ HUXLEY 1969, 105-6.

⁴² Assuming it is an authentic mirror: See *supra* notes 1 and 10.

⁴³ LIMC V/1, 121 ff.

⁴⁴ LIMC V/1, 213 f; Nos. 129-30, 135-9, 173-4, 189, 209, 262-4, 406.

⁴⁵ PFISTER-ROESGEN 1975, 89f.

⁴⁶ BOARDMAN 1975, Fig. 214.1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Fig. 34.1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Fig. 41.1.

⁴⁹ HAYNES 1985, 272.

⁵⁰ München CVA Pl. 259-60; ARV², 209, 1633 No. 161. Later depictions of Peleus and Thetis by the Eretria (Krieger 1975, 28, 156 No. 19 Pl. 3b) and the Sisyphos Painters (*idem*, 28, 164 No. 86 Pl. 3c) are based on the same visual prototype of Thetis holding the garment of her dress in the left hand while the right hand is stretched forwards.

⁵¹ See for example the cup by the Penthesilea Painter in Munich (GREIFENHAGEN 1959, Abb. 16-7).

⁵² See *supra* note 30.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of identifying Herecele and Mlacuch with Heracles and Iole occurred to me during a course on Etruscan Art which I delivered in 1989/90 at the Tel-Aviv University. The paper was written during my sabbatical in Ann-Arbor Michigan, April-July 1994. I owe my thanks to Professor John H. Humphrey for inviting me to Ann-Arbor and for his help in getting library privileges; and to my colleague and friend Dr. Y. Turnheim for calling my attention to Griffiths' article.

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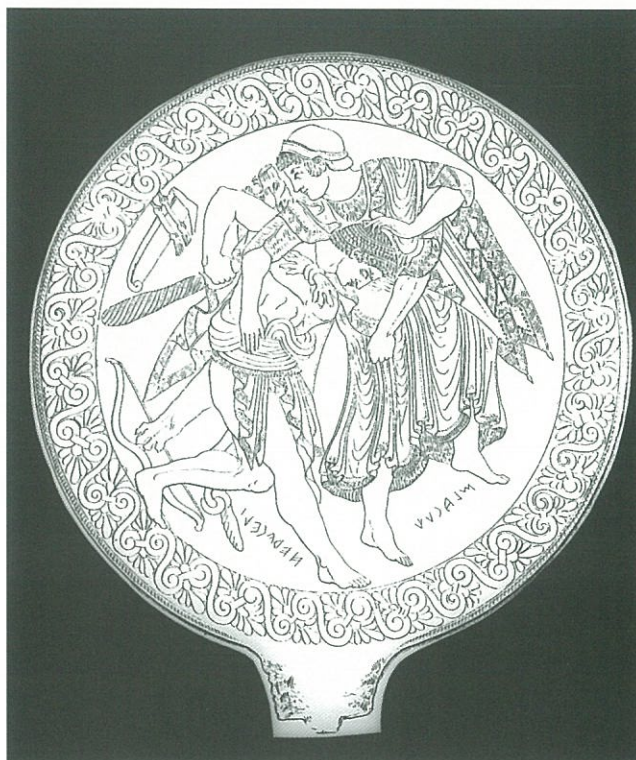


Fig. 1. Herecele and Mlacuch. Etruscan Mirror. British Museum (After Gerhard 1867: Pl. CCCXLIV).



Fig. 2. Heracles and Iole. Calyx-krater. Louvre. The Aegisthus Painter (After FR: Taf. 164).



Fig. 3. Heracles' vengeance. Belly-amphora. Madrid. The Sappho Painter. (After Schefold 1978: Abb. 199).



Fig. 4. Tityos abducting Leto. Phintias. (After Schefold 1978: Abb. 82).



Fig. 5. Peleus and Tetis. Stamnos. Munich. Berlin Painter. (After CVA: Pl. 260/1).