

## TWO MEN TO AN OAR IN THE SIXTH CENTURY BC?

A panel on the side of an Attic black-figure hydria in the Louvre (F 735: Fig. 1), dated in the first half of the sixth century BC appears to show, somewhat crudely but strongly drawn, a one-level oared warship with ten oars on the port side, a bow-officer, a rowing master (keleustes), a helmsman and four clear pairs of oarsmen; Williams in *Greek Oared Ships* (1968) p.86 rightly identifies five pairs inferring that the rowing master is standing in between the two members of a fifth pair in the middle of the ship and obscuring the view of the starboard member of the pair. The disparity between the number of oars (10) and the number of oarsmen (5) on the port side can be taken at once as the outcome of the usual exaggeration in ancient ship representations of the size of the figures compared to the size of the ship. This practice is so common at all periods that no examples need be given.

The picture on the hydria belongs to a group of three ship representations of the same fifty year period (600-550 BC), the other two being the Athenian ship arriving to rescue Theseus on the François vase in Florence (4209; Fig. 2), and Attic black-figure fragment in the Acropolis Museum in Athens showing the stern of a warship in the act of departure (Fig. 3). The ship in the hydria is somewhat crudely drawn and does not show clearly the details of construction, while the other two ships are finely drawn and most realistic in detail. All three pictures share a vigorous portrayal of action, in one case certainly of a mythological scene and in the other two very probably so but without any clue as to what the scene is.

Lucien Basch (in *Musée imaginaire de la marine antique* (Athens 1987) pp. 216-222) claims that the ship shown on the hydria panel represents the Argo, quoting Williams' remark (GOSp. 86) that "the painter" of the hydria "may be trying to characterise a mythical, obsolete ship such as the Argo". B then argues that, since in Apollonius's *Argonautica* (mid 3rd century BC) the Argo is manifestly a fifty-oared ship, a pentecontor, the 6th century painter was trying to explain (expliquer) the ship as a pentecontor rather than to depict her realistically (montrer); and, in consequence that we must take the clearly shown pairs of oarsmen as in each case really two pairs, i.e. four oarsmen on each bench or thwart, and also that the observer who sees on the panel four (possibly five) pairs of oarsmen is to conclude that there are really twelve pairs and one single oarsman on each side, making twenty-five a side, fifty in all. What is more, because in Apollonius

Herakles and Ankaïos are exempted from the lot and unquestioningly allocated seats on the middle bench of the ship, the man standing up in the middle of the ship on the hydria panel is not the rowing master but Herakles showing off as a comic hero (*"on comprend même pourquoi un personnage debout au centre du navire gesticule d'un air de matadore: c'est Héracles, sujet de plaisanteries pendant toute l'antiquité"*).

*This last point was perhaps not made seriously; but it may be noted that whereas Héracles could have been shown as a comic hero from the fifth century it would not have been wise so to portray him in the last decade of the first half of the sixth century at Athens since, as Boardman has shown, "the tyrant Peisistratus identified himself and his fortunes with Herakles".* The main objections to B's proposal however are (i) from iconography and (ii) from the interpretation of Apollonius.

- (i) The panel on the François vase shares with the hydria, its contemporary, an air of realistic vigour in its representation of Theseus's triacontor, and shows, also like the hydria, clearly drawn (and exaggerated in size), oarsmen plainly in pairs, some standing up, some remaining seated. No observer could doubt that this is a representation of a ship with one file of rowers on each side. Apart from any other consideration the mast, which has been lowered, is visible resting between members of the pairs. There is such a degree of descriptive realism in this picture, and in the Acropolis fragment where the helmsman, seated in a carefully depicted stern, is turning to bid farewell to someone on shore and above him another ship's officer is pouring the customary libation on departure (Thuc. 6.32.2) that it is difficult to deny a similar degree of descriptive realism to the painter of the contemporary hydria, and to believe instead that what we see in his work "really" represents something quite different.
- (ii) The chief objection to B's proposal does however lie in his interpretation of the passage in Apollonius's *Argonautica* which describes the seating of the Argonauts in their ship and which he claims as support for his attribution of an a scaloccio oar arrangement (two men to an oar) both to Apollonius's *Argo* and, consequently, to the ship, as he claims, on the hydria.

The passage runs as follows (l 394-400): "When they had skilfully attended to the various items of gear, they first allocated among themselves the rowing benches (kleidas) by lot, two men occupying each one. But they reserved the

middle one for Herakles and Ankaios. For them alone they left the middle bench (kleida), unquestioningly, not by lot”.

There is no doubt whatever that here and throughout Apollonius’s poem kleis, as B agrees, means a rowing bench, whatever it may mean in Homer. The word has the meaning “bar” which fits well with thwart. H. de Ville de Mirmont in his excellent translation with notes of Apollonius (Paris/Bordeaux 1892) quotes Vars *L’Art nautique dans l’antiquité* (Paris 1887) “Le kleis est une barre, une traverse, et les bancs de rameurs sont proprement les planches transversales (transtra) du navire. Dans Apollonius de Rhodes les kleides sont les bancs de rameurs et non les tolets” (tholepins). “Les tolets se nomment dans Apollonius hoi skalmoi”.

Uncertainty about the meaning of kleis in Homer, if it remains, only affects the interpretation on the passage of Apollonius under discussion in so far as B uses the “Homeric” identification kleis - tholepin in his argument.

Since Apollonius uses skalmos consistently for “tholepin” (l 379, 392), and kleis consistently for rowing bench, it seems safe that when he says that the heroes allocated two men to each rowing bench by lot, and left the middle rowing bench to Herakles and Ankaios “unquestioningly, not by lot”, he is speaking of a single file of oarsmen on each side of a pentecontor, as we should expect. The distinction made between Herakles and Ankaios on the one hand and the rest of the heroes on the other is that they “alone” were exempted from the lot (since as the strongest and heaviest pair they were obvious candidates for the middle bench). De Mirmont *op.cit.* p.200, notes: “Je crois que c’est par mesure de sécurité qu’on place le géant Héraclès au centre du vaisseau”. The Greek does not mean that Herakles and Ankaios alone were not, whereas the others were, members of a pair, as B proceeds to argue. It means that they alone were not subject to the lot in the allocation of benches because their weight automatically qualified them for the middle bench.

B claims that kleis is the part at each end of a bench which provides seating for the rowers and is so called because it is near the tholepin which Homer possibly called (but Apollonius certainly did not) kleis. The consequence is that, when Apollonius speaks of two men occupying one kleis, his meaning, in B’s view, is that on each side two men occupied the end parts of each bench, except in the case of the middle bench where only one man on each side occupied those parts. Thus there were in his view, four files, two of thirteen and two of twelve oarsmen, fore-and-aft throughout the ship, making fifty oarsmen in all.

B's interpretation of Apollonius breaks down finally on the seating of Herakles and Ankaios. Apollonius says "for them alone they left the middle kleis". The noun kleis there is in the singular number, but the meaning, (seating on the part of the rowing bench near the tholepin), which B attaches to the word, requires two kleides, one at each end of the bench to accommodate the two heroes. He can hardly claim, as he would have to do, that in this phrase and not elsewhere kleis means the whole rowing bench. The only alternative is to interpret "the middle kleis as meaning one end only of the middle bench, but even the Argo could hardly be comfortable with the two heaviest men on one side of the ship. The singular number plainly demonstrates that the meaning of kleis throughout this passage is the whole rowing bench; and that in the Argo as described by Apollonius there are two, not four, fore-and-aft files of oarsmen, twenty-five men a side, as has always been supposed.

The consequence of the oar arrangement which B attributes to Apollonius's Argo is that, for the pairs of oarsmen which he envisages at one level on each side of the ship, he must choose one or other of the two systems used later in the Mediterranean, the a zenzile and the a scaloccio. He chooses the latter, with, in this case, two men pulling each oar, since it fits his idea of the ship on the hydria panel. B uses his interpretation of Apollonius to support the claim that the a scaloccio system was known in the early sixth century BC., appearing on the hydria panel. It would not, of course, be very surprising to find the a scaloccio system in Apollonius (although Apollonius is too good an archaeologist to attribute it to the Argo), since it was practised certainly in the larger oared galleys of his time. But in the case of the ship on the hydria panel such a discovery would be very surprising indeed since there is no indication of the use of that system until the beginning of the fourth century BC, two hundred years later. To antedate the system in Greek oared ships by 200 years is therefore a step of some importance in the interpretation of their representations and has needed careful examination.

The conclusion must be that the interpretation of the relevant passage does not support the attribution of an a scaloccio system to Apollonius's Argo. Even if it did, it would not firmly support the attribution of that system to the ship on the hydria panel since there is no firm reason to believe that the latter actually represents the Argo. Further, examination of the hydria painting and comparison of it with other sixth-century ship representations makes it extremely unlikely that it gives anything other than a realistic representation, apart from the usual exaggeration of human figures, of a one-level oared galley with one file of ten oarsmen on each side. She is an eikosoros (twenty-oared ship), a common type of small oared galley

in the Homeric poems and later.

NOTE: On the Homeric use of the word *kleis*.

In *GOSp.* 52, against the authority of LSJ, I wrote: "The *kleides* at which the oarsmen sit in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are undoubtedly *tholepins*". The reason for this certainty was the observation on geometric ship pictures of *tholepins* in the form of hooks, and recognition that *kleis* often means a hooked object. Also, there is another word used in the Homeric poems for *thwarts*, i.e. *zuga* (which does not appear in Apollonius, as far as I am aware, with this meaning).

I now think, after experience of *Olympias*, that I was wrong in this identification. In the *Odyssey* when Alcinous is proposing (8 26ff) to send Odysseus back to *Ithaca* he bids the leading men of *Phaeacia* launch a new ship and man it, and he then tells the crew "after they have all well tied down their oars to the *kleides*" to come ashore and have dinner. I wrongly regarded this last operation as the same as "fitting the oars" (to the *tholepins*) "with leather loops" which is described as part of the preparation of a ship for sea at *Odyssey* 4 782. But I failed to notice that in the *Phaeacian* scene this preparation has been completed and the ship is left all ready for sea while the crew go ashore for dinner. At this stage it is necessary to tie the oarlocks down to the benches with the blades in the air to prevent them fouling each other as they trail in the water.

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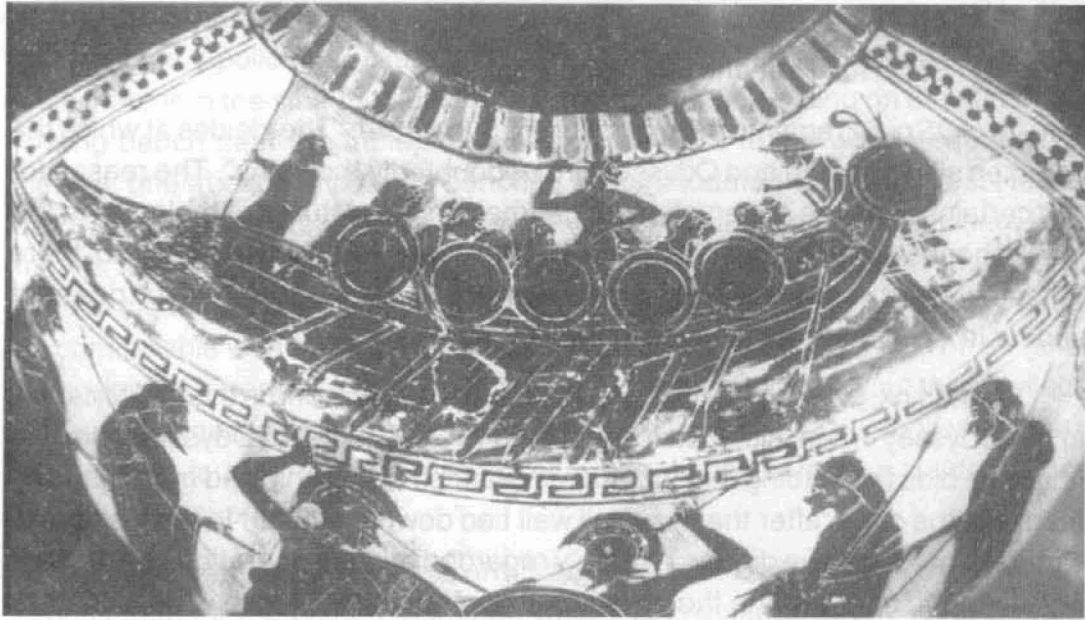


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

