

## δημοβόρος

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Among the angered Akhilleus' outbursts against Agamemnon during the great quarrel in the beginning of the Iliad we read (1,231)

*δημοβόρος βασιλεύς, ἐπεὶ οὐτιδανοῖσιν ἀνάσσεις.*

*δημοβόρος*, one of the many words used by Akhilleus that never recur in Homer,<sup>1)</sup> means, of course, 'devourer of the people'; but from antiquity to the recent commentary by G. S. Kirk<sup>2)</sup> the word has been explained as 'devourer of (the) people's *property*' and taken to refer to Agamemnon's avarice.<sup>3)</sup> The purpose of the present note is to show that neither the word itself nor the context support this interpretation, and to rescue a forceful metaphor with parallels both in Greek and Hebrew literature.

The ancient explanation of the word, *ὁ τὰ δημόσια κατεσθίων*, widespread (with variations) in lexica and Homeric scholia,<sup>4)</sup> is obviously wrong, – if for no other reason, because Briseis, the captive girl who is the object of the quarrel, is not at all public property; she is a prize (*γέρας*) awarded to Akhilleus personally by the Akhaians, as he himself repeatedly insists (vv. 162, 299, 392).

Still, this explanation of *δημοβόρος* has lived on in commentaries of modern times, *δημο-* being taken to equal *δήμια*. Thus Leaf finds the word used "of the king who does nothing but feast at the public cost".<sup>5)</sup> It is true that more recently some have rightly rejected the

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<sup>1)</sup> The uniqueness of Akhilleus' language has been the object of several studies, see most recently S. Scully, 'The Language of Achilles: the *Ἰχθήσας* Formulas', *TAPhA* 114 (1984) 11–27, with bibliography n. 31.

<sup>2)</sup> *The Iliad: A Commentary*. Vol. I, books 1–4, by G. S. Kirk. Cambridge 1985.

<sup>3)</sup> So also the standard Greek dictionaries (Liddell–Scott–Jones, Pape, Passow), as well as the Homeric dictionaries by G. Autenrieth (*Wörterbuch zu den Homerischen Gedichten*, Leipzig 1881) and R. J. Cunliffe (*A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, Norman Oklahoma 1963).

<sup>4)</sup> See A. Henrichs, *ZPE* 7 (1971) 134–5 ('Scholia minora zu Homer I', 97–149), a reference I owe Professor Tomas Hägg, who in various ways has improved the present note with his suggestions.

<sup>5)</sup> *The Iliad*, ed. W. Leaf, London 1900 (repr. Amsterdam 1971), on 18,301, cp. also on 2,547. See also Homer, *Iliad*, ed. D. B. Monro, Oxford 1884, on 1,231; and K. F. Ameis–C. Hentze, *Homers Ilias*, Leipzig 1894, where references to earlier discussions are found in the *Anhang* to v. 231.

equation  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\varsigma = \delta\eta\mu\iota\alpha$  in this context, so the great lexicon currently being edited by the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae,<sup>6)</sup> which recognizes the first part of the compound as  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\varsigma$ ; but it still interprets the word as an expression of Agamemnon's abuse of his position to enrich himself.

Thus the meaning of  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\beta\omicron\rho\omicron\varsigma$  has strayed even further away from the etymology of its first part: if  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\varsigma$  cannot stand for  $\delta\eta\mu\iota\alpha$ , the people's property, it can even less refer to the property of individual persons, and this is what Akhilleus' and Agamemnon's quarrel is about.

A more fruitful way towards understanding Akhilleus' special taunt here may be found by viewing it in its context. I should first like to point out that there is a clear thematic development between Akhilleus' three speeches. Agamemnon's avarice is the theme of his *first* speech (122–29) following Agamemnon's demand to be recompensated for the loss of Khryseis (122 *φιλοκτεανώτατε πάντων*). In his next speech (149–71), he is reviling Agamemnon for his insolence (149 *ἀναιδείην ἐπιειμένε*, 158 *ὦ μέγ' ἀναιδές*, 159 *κυνῶπα*). The message of the third speech (225–44), in which we find  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\beta\omicron\rho\omicron\varsigma$ , is that Agamemnon also is a bad leader of his men.

Further, it should be remembered that Akhilleus is not primarily complaining because he is being robbed of his prize. His prayer to Thetis a little later (352–56) makes it quite clear that the main reason for his resentment is the loss of honour (*τιμή*). In this context,  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\beta\omicron\rho\omicron\varsigma$  acquires a new significance, and provides an overlooked illustration of the heroic code. The desire for honour, we know, is the driving force of the Homeric heroes, but the seeking of honour presupposes fair competition. Agamemnon, with his arrogant and humiliating behaviour makes fair competition impossible, and becomes thus an obstacle to heroic prowess. Akhilleus, then, accuses Agamemnon of 'devouring (*the strength of*) *his men*',<sup>7)</sup> and making them, precisely, *οὐτιδανοί*, 'worthless'.

Notable is the grim oxymoron-like effect of the juxtaposition of  $\delta\eta\mu\omicron\beta\omicron\rho\omicron\varsigma$  and *βασιλεύς*, 'a king devouring (instead of leading) his

<sup>6)</sup> *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos*, 10. Lieferung, ed. E.-M. Voigt, Göttingen 1982 (hereafter *LfrgE*). See also H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, München 1969<sup>2</sup>, p. 135, n. 18.

<sup>7)</sup>  $\Delta\eta\mu\omicron\varsigma$  in Homer sometimes refers to the assembly, *i. e.* in practice, as in the present case, the warriors (see *LfrgE s. v. δημος* 1 b), sometimes it directly means 'army' (*ib.* 1 d).

people', especially so since *ποιμένα λάων* otherwise is one of the fixed epithets of Agamemnon.

Hesiod's *βασιλῆς δωροφάγοι* (*Erga* 263–4), quoted by Kirk (and others before him) as a parallel, belongs to a different world, that of the oppressed peasant. More relevant is Alkaios 70,7 (Voigt) *δαπτέτω πόλιν*, and 129,23–24 *δάπτει τὰν πόλιν*, where the subject in both cases is the tyrant Pittakos (tyrant at least in Alkaios' eyes).

In Theognis 1181–2

*δημοφάγον δὲ τύραννον ὅπως ἐθέλεις κατακλῖναι  
οὐ νέμεσις πρὸς θεῶν γίνεται οὐδεμία*

(also often cited as a parallel), the phrase *δημοφάγος τύραννος* is clearly modelled on *δημοβόρος βασιλεύς*, and raises the question how Theognis understood the Homeric phrase. Now Theognis nowhere complains of the tyrant's greediness, nor indeed is greediness elsewhere in the literature among the vices ascribed to the tyrant.<sup>8)</sup>

The aristocrats' main grievance against the tyrant was that he prevented them from playing their traditional role in Greek political life.<sup>9)</sup> Thus, I suggest, *δημοφάγος τύραννος* expresses the aristocrats' reaction against the depressing effect of a rule that deprived them of access to political rivalry.

It may be of interest that the metaphor 'devour' for 'destroy', 'debilitate' (men) also has numerous Biblical parallels, so Jer. 51,34 Nebuchadnessar king of Babylon has devoured me and sucked me dry; Hos. 8,8 Israel is now swallowed up, lost among the nations, a worthless nothing. The verb used by the Septuaginta in these cases is usually *καταπίνω*;<sup>10)</sup> the Jeremiah passage, however (28,34 by the Septuaginta numbering), has *κατέφαγεν*.

<sup>8)</sup> To judge from the 'catalogue' of the tyrant's traditional vices in H. Berve, *Die Tyrannis bei den Griechen*, München 1967, vol. 2, p. 741 f.

<sup>9)</sup> Cp. M. I. Finley, *Early Greece. The Bronze and Archaic Ages*, London 1970, p. 107–8, and, for Theognis and the Theognidea especially, H. Fränkel (above, n. 6) p. 483.

<sup>10)</sup> See *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, vol. 6, Stuttgart 1965, p. 158. I thank Dr. David Hellholm for assistance in localizing the Biblical parallels.