

“Accusations of Athenian Interpolation: The Case of Aithra’s Rescue”

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The Athenians have long been accused of interpolating lines into the Homeric epics for political and patriotic reasons. Some of the most commonly targeted lines are those mentioning Theseus (*Il.* 1.265; *Od.* 11.322 and 11.631) and his mother Aithra (*Il.* 3.144). Most scholars would point to the period of the Peisistratid tyranny as the most opportune time for these interpolations to have occurred (the so-called Peisistratean Recension). However, numerous studies on the iconography of Theseus point to his relatively late identification as the Athenian patriotic hero, starting in the last decade or so of the sixth century B.C., and thereby postdating any possible Peisistratean influence. We should focus, therefore, on the fifth century as a more likely period for Theseus’ popularity to make an impact on epic poetry. We should also stop concentrating on the Homeric epics as vehicles for patriotic expression (which are hardly flattering to the Athenians, no matter how hard one attempts to find fault with them) and look towards other epic works that could more easily be manipulated and controlled, namely the epics comprising what is collectively referred to as the Epic Cycle. Although these epics are no longer extant, we can still observe some of the general trends that they exhibited, especially the fact that they were episodic in nature and often narrated more local tales of specific cities. The hodgepodge character of these stories and their high state of fluctuation would certainly make them easier targets for insertion of a specifically Athenian story.

This case can be made for the story of Aithra’s Rescue as told by the *Ilioupersis*, whereby Theseus’ mother, Aithra, who had been a maidservant of Helen at Troy, was rescued by Theseus’ sons (her grandsons) Akamas and Demophon. As most scholars assign a roughly seventh century date for the Epic Cycle, the Athenians ought to have been familiar with this story from an early time. However, a quick survey of both literary and pictorial representations of the Theseïdai from the sixth century shows no knowledge of this episode. Sixth century representations portray them only in non-narrative scenes, while the few fragments of Stesichoros and the *Ilioupersis* we possess make no connection between them and their grandmother. Rather, it is only at the beginning of the fifth century that Aithra’s Rescue is portrayed. In fact, the number and variety of scenes involving the Theseïdai increase dramatically, both in Athenian and non-Athenian contexts. As all the other major episodes of the *Ilioupersis* were portrayed in Greek art prior to the fifth century (e.g., the Trojan Horse, the deaths of Priam and Astyanax, the sacrifice of Polyxena, etc.), we can conclude that the story of Aithra’s Rescue was a later invention of the Athenians that was incorporated into the overall account of the *Ilioupersis*. This story was no doubt developed within the patriotic environment of Athens of the time, during Theseus’ own rise in popularity (and possible creation of a *Theseid*), as well as the induction of Akamas as one of the new eponymous heroes in Kleisthenes’ tribal reforms.