PELEUS AND AKASTOS

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The wine jug illustrated on the following pages was acquired by the Museum last year. It was formerly in the Melchett collection and has long been known.

Shape, plastic decoration of handle and lip, formal patterns, and the delicate and spirited drawing and the subject of the scene combine to make this jug one of the outstanding examples of Attic pottery of the sixth century B.C. The low foot and the trefoil mouth are covered with lustrous black glaze. The outer ribs of the tripartite handle also are black. Their ends, which have the form of two serpents crawling along the lip, are of the reddish orange color of the clay with black glaze markings. The central rib is clay colored. At the base of the handle at the back is a female head in relief painted in colors (of which a few traces remain) on a white ground, and a similar head adorns the juncture of handle and lip. The body of the jug is covered with a pale beige engobe on which formal patterns and scene are drawn in black glaze. The black is relieved by a beautiful dark purplish red used for some tufts of the lion’s mane and shaggy hair and for dots on the forepart of the boar and a stripe along his belly.

These two handsome animals, the boar and the lion, flank a slender tree in whose branches a man crouches. He bends over and gazes anxiously at the fierce beasts. That he is no ordinary mortal is proved, as Paul Wolters pointed out, by another Attic black-figured vase, an amphora in the Villa Giulia Museum. There, too, we see a man in a tree, but this time armed with a knife. Below is a whole congress of wild animals: two hinds, a boar, a wolf, and a lion. On the other side of the amphora stands a centaur. He wears a cloak, and his gestures show that he is engaged in amicable conversation with the man in the tree. Obviously he is Chiron, “the most civilized of the centaurs.” The man in the tree, then, must be his protégé, Peleus.

Peleus, who was later to be famous as the father of Achilles, was, as a young man, compelled to flee from his native island of Aigina, for he had killed (some say by accident, some by design) his half brother Phokos. He took refuge with Eurytion, king of Phthia in central Thessaly, who not only gave him the ceremonial purification which even an involuntary killer had to receive before he could associate with other men, but also made him his son-in-law and the ruler of one third of his kingdom. On a boar hunt, however, Peleus in aiming at the boar missed, and killed Eurytion instead. He had again to flee and went east to Iolkos on the bay of Pagasai, near Mount Pelion, where he was kindly received by King Akastos, who purified him from the stain of Eurytion’s death and invited him to take part in the funeral games he was giving for his father Pelias. But Peleus’ misfortunes were not over. Akastos’ wife fell in love with him and, when he refused her, falsely denounced him to her husband as having tried to seduce her. Akastos believed her but was prevented by religious scruples from killing with his own hands a man whom he had purified. He therefore lured Peleus to the deserted slopes of Mount Pelion and left him there alone and without a weapon that he might fall a prey to the wild beasts. But the gods took pity on Peleus and as a reward for his continence sent Chiron to him with a knife made by the divine smith Hephaistos. With this irresistible weapon he killed the animals that threatened him and escaped.

Though the story is rare in art, it was well known in Athens, as is proved by a brief allusion to it by Aristophanes in his comedy The Clouds (1061-3):

“Come tell me, did you ever know one single blessed man
Gain the least good by chastity . . . ?”
“Yes many, many, Peleus gained the knife
by being chaste.”
A different account is given in the ancient mythological handbook known as the Library of Apollodorus. Akastos, after his wife’s defamation of Peleus, invites him to go hunting on Mount Pelion. There is a contest to see who can kill the most animals. Peleus cuts out the tongues of the animals he kills and leaves the carcasses. The members of Akastos’ party, coming upon the slain animals, claim them as their own and jeer at Peleus for his failure in the chase, but Peleus displays the tongues and claims the kill. Then he falls asleep and Akastos steals his knife, hides it, and withdraws, leaving him alone. Peleus, waking, goes in
search of the knife and is set upon by the wild centaurs of the mountain. But Chiron rescues him from them, discovers the knife, and returns it to him.

Since the scenes on our jug and on the amphora in the Villa Giulia Museum show wild animals, not centaurs, as the hero’s assailants, they must illustrate the form of the myth we summarized first. On the Villa Giulia vase Chiron has evidently just arrived, yet Peleus holds the knife. Has the painter given it to him as a characteristic weapon? (The knife of Peleus was proverbial.) Or has he, as is the way of Greek artists, combined different stages of the action.
in a single scene? Unfortunately, the damage to our jug prevents our knowing whether its Peleus once held a knife.

The account in Apollodoros led Mannhardt, and later Lesky, to suppose that the story is an adaptation of the widespread folk tale which forms, for example, the central part of “The Tale of the Two Brothers” (Grimm, no. 60). A hero, with the help of a magical weapon and a group of faithful animals, rescues a princess from a dragon. He cuts out the dragon’s tongue and falls asleep, exhausted from the fight. Another man finds him, takes the weapon, kills him and, claiming to be the slayer of the dragon, demands the promised reward, the hand of the princess. But the faithful animals, by means of a magic herb, bring the hero back to life. Just as the princess is about to be married to the
false claimant the hero arrives, displays the dragon's tongue, and receives his bride.

This story, in part at least, was known to the Greeks, for it is told of Alkathous of Megara. Nothing is said, however, of the magic weapon or of the sleep, death, and resurrection of the hero. These omissions, it is true, may be due to the rationalistic tendency of the Greeks, which sometimes led them to expurgate the more fantastic elements of folk tales. But the evidence for the theory that our story is a distorted form of this tale is rather weak. The only exact coincidence between the two is the motive of the severed tongues, and it is by no means certain that this is an integral part of the story of Peleus. The hunting contest in which it appears does not further the action, but merely serves to glorify the hero. Such an episode, as Wolters
observed, must have formed part of a literary work of some extent—quite possibly a "Hesiodic" epic. We are told elsewhere that Hesiod dwelt at length on the episode of Peleus and Akastos’ wife, and five lines are quoted from him describing Akastos’ plan to hide the knife. It is therefore possible that Hesiod—or whoever was the author of the poem attributed to him—invited the hunting contest and that he was the first to connect the popular theme of the severed tongues with Peleus.

A few other things in our story call for comment. The motivation is supplied by the tale which we know from one of its most famous examples as "Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife." The Greeks were fond of this tale and told it of other heroes—Hippolytos, Bellerophon, and Eunostos of Tanagra. The two killings of kinsmen in which Peleus is involved may seem to the modern reader surprising for a virtuous hero. Killing, with the consequent banishment of the killer, is a device frequently employed in Greek legends to explain how a hero happened to turn up in widely separated places. Tradition made Peleus the son of Aiakos, king of Aigina, and himself the ruler of Phthia in central Thessaly, but placed his most important adventures on Mount Pelion on the eastern coast. The reason is probably to be sought in tribal and other connections of the prehistoric age.

The accession number of the jug is 46.11.7. Its height is 11 1/2 inches (29.2 cm.) with the handle and 9 3/4 inches (24.8 cm.) without it. It has been put together from fragments, with the missing pieces restored; for restorations in the scene and decorative borders see below. It is probably identical with the vase mentioned by S. Birch in Archäologischer Anzeiger, 1849, col. 100 (as was pointed out to me by Mr. Dietrich von Bothmer). It was published in the Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition of Ancient Greek Art, 1904, p. 115, Case i, no. 62, pls. xcix, xcviii, and by Eugenie Strong in Catalogue of Greek and Roman Antiques in the Possession of the Right Honourable Lord Melchett, 1928, pp. 43 ff., no. 44, pl. xl. The photographs published with the present article give a truer picture of the jug than it was possible to obtain before, for they show it without any except absolutely certain restorations, such as pieces of the trunk and branches—but not the leaves—of the tree, a small piece of the lion’s back (behind his shoulder), parts of the formal pattern above and below the scene, and patches of the background.

For the amphora in the Villa Giulia Museum see Notizie degli scavi, 1913, pp. 366 ff., figs. 3a, 3b, and Corpus vasorum antiquorum: Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, n.d., III B e, pl. ix, figs. 3-5.


The lines from Aristophanes are quoted in the translation of B. Rogers, but with the substitution of “knife” for the inexact “sword.” “Chastity” is a narrower term than θησεωτική, but suits the present passage well enough. For the proverb “the knife of Peleus,” see Zenobios, Proverbiorum centuria, v, 20, and for Alkathous, Dieuchidas, fragment 8 (Müller), and Pausanias i. 41. 5. The effect of Greek rationalism on folk tales is discussed by M. P. Nilsson, A History of Greek Religion, 1925, pp. 49 ff.