

ACHELOÖS PEPLOPHOROS

A LOST STATUETTE OF A RIVER GOD IN FEMININE DRESS

ABSTRACT

In this study the author analyzes the iconography of a unique Early Classical bronze statuette that represents the river god Acheloös as a *peplophoros*. Formerly in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, the statuette is now lost. Using the myth of Herakles' peplos as a parallel, the author argues that Acheloös is represented wearing women's dress in order to counterbalance his excessive masculinity. The combination of masculine and feminine iconographic attributes serves to acknowledge the potentially destructive power of the river while also highlighting its life-giving beneficence.

In the current discussion of cross-dressing in Classical Greece, one intriguing image has been overlooked: a small bronze statuette representing the powerful river god Acheloös wearing women's dress (Fig. 1).¹ This statuette, formerly in the National Archaeological Museum but now lost, was excavated in the early 20th century at Oichalia, near modern Kyme, on Euboea.² It depicts the god as a standing, bearded man wearing a chiton underneath a peplos with kolpos and overfold. In his left hand he holds a cornucopia; the right hand is missing. The cornucopia, together with the findspot (see below), confirms the identification as Acheloös. Identified by Brunilde S. Ridgway as a unique representation of a male *peplophoros*,³

1. This paper was presented in an earlier form at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association, as part of the Lambda Classical Caucus panel "Cross-Dressing in Antiquity: Art and Text." I would like to thank the organizers of the panel, Laurel Fulkerson and H. Alan Shapiro, together with the other participants, for their comments. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous *Hesperia* reviewers, whose critical feedback was most valuable.

2. The statuette was discovered on

March 1, 1909, by K. Papaioannou, who reported his findings in the local newspaper *Ἡχώ*. The statuette is mentioned in Papavasileiou 1910, p. 34; a photograph appears in Papavasileiou 1912, p. 133, fig. 15 (reprinted in Gais 1978, p. 359, fig. 8; also Ostrowski 1991, fig. 18). Lippold (1950, p. 114, n. 3) cites the object, without illustration. The statuette is included in the monograph on Acheloös by Isler (1970, pp. 60, 112, 165, no. 264) and in his entry in *LIMC* I, 1981 (p. 18, no. 77, s.v. Acheloös). Weiss (1984, p. 166,

no. A1) notes that the location of the object, formerly in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, was unknown at that time. In response to my request to study the statuette in 2004, the Greek Ministry of Culture confirmed that the statuette could not be located. No additional information or photographs are obtainable from the Ministry.

3. Ridgway 1984, p. 46. The statuette is not included in the corpus of Early Classical *peplophoroi* by Tölle-Kastenbein (1980).



Figure 1. Acheloös, bronze statuette from Oichalia, Euboia. Second quarter of the 5th century B.C. Formerly National Archaeological Museum, Athens (no inv. no.); current location unknown. Photo from Papavasileiou 1912, p. 133, fig. 15; drawing G. Fawkes

its transvestism has not previously been explained. Comparative analysis of cross-dressing in both ancient literature and modern dress practices demonstrates that the cross-dressing Acheloös not only reflects Greek constructions of masculine and feminine gender, but also larger concerns about fertility, protection, and social boundaries.

Flowing from Epirus to the Ionian Sea, the Acheloös River is the longest in Greece.⁴ In antiquity it comprised the often-contested boundary between Akarnania and Aitolia. Acheloös was believed to be the source of all seas, rivers, and springs, and appears in classical literature as a synonym for water (e.g., Eur. *Andr.* 167; Eur. *Bacch.* 625; Ar. *Lys.* 381).⁵ The river god Acheloös, offspring of Okeanos and Tethys (Hes. *Theog.* 340), was worshipped together with his daughters, the nymphs, from a very early period.⁶ Acheloös is named in Homer (*Il.* 21.194), but does not feature in extant narrative until the early lines of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, when Deianeira describes her courtship by Acheloös and how she came to be the wife of Herakles:

I suffered painful affliction on the matter of my wedding, if any Aitolian woman did. For I had as a wooer a river, I mean Achelous, who came in three shapes to ask my father for me, at some times manifest as a bull, at others as a darting, coiling serpent, and again

4. On the river and river god Acheloös, see Brewster 1997, pp. 9–14.

5. D'Alessio 2004.

6. Larson 2001, p. 98.



Figure 2. Herakles and Acheloös, Attic black-figure kylix, attributed to the Painter of Boston C.A., said to be from Thebes. Ca. 560–550 B.C. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 99.519. Photo courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

at others with a man's trunk and a bull's head; and from his shaggy beard there poured streams of water from his springs. Expecting such a suitor as that I was always praying, poor creature, that I might die before ever coming near his bed. But at the last moment, and to my relief, there came the famous son of Zeus and Alcmene, who contended him in battle and released me. I cannot tell of the manner of his struggle, for I know nothing of it; whoever was sitting there not terrified by the sight, he could tell you.⁷

7. Soph. *Trach.* 7–23, trans. H. Lloyd-Jones, Cambridge, Mass., 1994.

8. Ov. *Met.* 9.98–100, trans. A. D. Melville, Oxford 1986.

9. Isler 1970; *LIMC* I, 1981, pp. 12–36, s.v. Acheloös (H. P. Isler). See also Ostrowski 1991, pp. 16–20.

10. *LIMC* I, 1981, pp. 13–17, 25–27, nos. 1–56, 213–228, 241–244, s.v. Acheloös (Isler). Conversely, a few images represent the god as a bull-headed man (*LIMC* I, 1981, p. 18, nos. 75, 76). On bull imagery generally in the ancient Near East and the eastern Mediterranean, see Rice 1998.

11. The shape-changing aspect of Acheloös parallels the constant fluctuation of moving water.

12. For other images of Acheloös as a centaur, see *LIMC* I, 1981, pp. 27–28, nos. 246–259, s.v. Acheloös (Isler).

13. For other opponents of Herakles represented with large genitalia, see McNiven 1995, pp. 11–13.

The chorus of women from Trachis reiterate the struggle at lines 508–522, but do not explain how Acheloös was ultimately defeated. A more elaborate version of the myth is told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 9.1–100, in which Herakles defeats the river god by breaking off one of his horns. Magically the horn fills with fruits and flowers, the cornucopia. But, as Ovid tells us: “Humbled though he was to lose that elegance, all else was sound, and he concealed his loss with willow leaves or reeds and rushes worn upon his head.”⁸

The iconography of Acheloös has been thoroughly examined by Hans Peter Isler, who traced the development of Acheloös imagery from the 7th century B.C. through the Roman period.⁹ Early Greek images of the god are clearly derived from Near Eastern prototypes, in particular the man-headed bull (Fig. 2), which has Sumerian origins.¹⁰ The existence of other zoomorphic images of the god suggests that the bull iconography was not so firmly established, especially in earlier representations. Alternatively, they may reflect Acheloös's ability to change shape, as described in the early lines of the *Trachiniae*.¹¹ In vase painting he is sometimes represented with the body of a centaur (Fig. 3), and once as a triton (Fig. 4).¹² Most images of Acheloös emphasize his genitals (e.g., Fig. 2), which signify both fecundity and his bestial aspect.¹³ Some depict him with the ears and snub nose typical of satyrs (e.g., Fig. 4), which likewise



Figure 3. Herakles and Acheloös, Attic black-figure neck amphora, Acheloös Painter. Early 5th century B.C. Libbey Endowment, 1952.65. Photo courtesy Toledo Museum of Art

emphasize his sexual nature.¹⁴ Other early representations include votive masks and protomes of a bearded man with the ears and horns of a bull.¹⁵ These images are also found on coins as well as gold pendants,¹⁶ which perhaps functioned as amulets for fertility and protection.¹⁷ From the middle of the 5th century onward, a parallel tradition develops in which the god is represented as a nude, bearded, mature man with bull's horns.¹⁸

The statuette, dated by Isler to the second quarter of the 5th century B.C.,¹⁹ was found together with an inscribed boundary marker delineating the limits of a local sanctuary of Acheloös and the nymphs.²⁰ The identification of the statuette as the river god is therefore secure despite the absence of Acheloös's usual taurine features, save for the cornucopia, which is a kind of symbolic transcription of the older bull imagery. In contrast to earlier representations of the god, which are either zoomorphic images or nude males, the figure is heavily dressed. What is especially curious is that he wears a distinctly feminine garment, the peplos, together with a long chiton, also worn by women in the Classical period.²¹

14. Schefold 1992, p. 159.

15. *LIMC* I, 1981, pp. 18–20, nos. 80–115, s.v. Acheloös (Isler).

16. E.g., *LIMC* I, 1981, p. 19, nos. 90, 91, s.v. Acheloös (Isler).

17. For the magico-religious function of amulets, see Kotansky 1991.

18. *LIMC* I, 1981, pp. 24–25, nos. 210–212, s.v. Acheloös (Isler).

19. Presumably on the basis of style. The statuette exhibits several of the basic traits of the Severe Style outlined by Ridgway, including a “severe,” almost

somber, facial expression, short hairstyle, and reserved gesture and pose. The peplos, rendered with broad, thick, drapery folds, is itself a hallmark of the Early Classical period (Ridgway 1970, pp. 8–11).

20. *IG* XII 9 135: Νυμφῶν | Ἀχελώϊου (3rd century B.C.); Papavasileiou 1910, p. 34. The inscription and statuette comprise the sole evidence for the cult of Acheloös on Euboeia in the 5th century (see Larson 2001, p. 144).

21. The hairstyle, though indistinct

in the extant photograph, may also reflect feminine styles of the Early Classical period. The hair appears to be parted in the middle, with soft waves framing the face, possibly bound in a chignon at the base of the neck. A band encircling the head may be a braid, a frequent feature of male figures of this period (e.g., the Artemision bronze). The statuette, however, lacks the bangs that usually accompany this hairstyle. I thank one of the anonymous *Hesperia* reviewers for these observations.



Figure 4. Herakles and Acheloös, Attic red-figure stamnos, Oltos, from Caere. Ca. 520 B.C. E 437.
Photo courtesy British Museum, London

How can we explain the unique appearance of the feminine peplos on a male figure for whom there is no preexisting tradition of drapery or dress? It is unlikely that the artist has misunderstood the significance of this garment. The Early Classical peplos functions iconographically as an indicator of idealized feminine Hellenic identity, the enveloping garment reflecting ideologies of protection and containment.²² But since the Acheloös statuette is the only example known in Greek art of a male figure wearing a peplos, no pattern can be established that might indicate its significance.

Cross-dressing in antiquity is often identified as ritual behavior, especially for rituals of initiation.²³ Unfortunately, little is known about the specific cult activities associated with the worship of Acheloös. Acheloös was venerated together with the nymphs throughout Greece, especially in caves containing freshwater springs.²⁴ The primary function of these cults was to ensure the proper upbringing of children, especially male children. Jennifer Larson has suggested that the Athenian *koureion* ritual, in which young men dedicated their hair to a local river, reflects the special function of rivers in the maturation rituals of young boys.²⁵ Certainly cross-dressing also features in similar rituals of initiation (for example, the Hellenistic *ekdusia*),²⁶ but evidence for cross-dressing in an initiation ritual involving Acheloös is lacking. Nevertheless, the notion that cross-dressing reflects liminality is surely relevant to the shape-changing Acheloös, a river in constant flux, marking the border between regions.

22. Lee 2005. The protective function of the peplos is underscored by its role in the Panathenaia at Athens as a protective garment for Athena Polias. See below, n. 32. The scholarship on the ideological significance of women's dress generally has vastly increased in the past decade. See Darling 1998; Llewellyn-Jones 2002, 2003; Cleland,

Harlow, and Llewellyn-Jones 2005.

23. On cross-dressing in antiquity, see especially Delcourt 1961, pp. 1–16; Frontisi-Ducroux and Lissarrague 1990; Leitao 1995; Cyrino 1998; Bremmer 1999; Miller 1999; Llewellyn-Jones 2005.

24. Larson 2001, pp. 98–100, 226–231. The widespread veneration of

Acheloös from the 5th century on may be the result of propaganda by the oracle at Dodona (D'Alessio 2004, p. 32).

25. Larson 2001, p. 98. For the Koureion, see Cole 1984; Golden 1990, pp. 26–28.

26. See Leitao 1995.

As noted above, the Acheloös statuette is the lone example of a male *peplophoros* in Greek art. Male characters do wear peploi in Greek literature, however, and although we cannot assume that the literary peplos corresponds with the garment represented in sculpture,²⁷ the comparison is instructive. In early Greek epic and lyric, the peplos is worn exclusively by women and goddesses. Starting in the Classical period (the date of the Acheloös statuette), the tragedians manipulate the feminine connotations of the peplos to convey the emasculation of male characters.²⁸ In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra slays Agamemnon after ensnaring him in a peplos (*Ag.* 1125–1128; *Cho.* 999–1000; *Eum.* 633–635). Similarly, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus dresses in a peplos in order to spy on the Theban women, with horrible results (*Bacch.* 821–838, 927–938). Hippolytos wears a peplos in Euripides' play to indicate the impropriety of his exclusive worship of Artemis (*Hipp.* 606, 1458). Herakles wears a peplos in at least two plays, Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (600–613, 674, 756–776) and Euripides' play about his madness (*HF* 520, 626–627, 629–630). In each of these cases, the adoption of a peplos by a male character symbolizes his feminization, and therefore his destruction.²⁹ But these examples do not explain the Acheloös statuette, which, despite the feminine dress (and perhaps the fruits and flowers in the cornucopia), exhibits no signs of emasculation. Indeed, as Ovid notes, Acheloös remained otherwise unharmed despite the humiliating removal of his horn. Given the literary tradition of male figures destroyed by peploi, how can Acheloös retain his virility (even a beard!) despite his feminine dress?

Nicole Loraux has explained a similar instance of male cross-dressing in her essay "Herakles: The Super-Male and the Feminine."³⁰ Despite his (in)famous hypermasculinity, Herakles wears a peplos with no adverse effects. The story is preserved in Diodoros's account of the life of the hero, which, although written during the 1st century B.C., may help explain the constructions of gender at play in the Classical statuette of Acheloös. According to Diodoros, when Herakles retired from his life of exploits, "each one of the gods honored him with appropriate gifts; Athena with a peplos, Hephaistos with a war-club and a coat of mail, these two gods vying with one another in accordance with the arts they practiced, the one with an eye to the enjoyment and delight afforded in times of peace, the other looking to his safety amid the perils of war."³¹

The peplos is associated with Athena on account of the sacred textile woven with scenes of the Gigantomachy, which was ritually woven by selected women and girls and presented to the goddess at the Panathenaia. While the Panathenaic peplos represents the victory of the gods and the protection of the polis, the literary peplos, as discussed above, is specifically gendered as feminine.³² In the *Iliad* (5.733–737, 8.384–388), Athena herself removes her peplos in order to participate in the fighting,

27. For the tenuous identification of the garment conventionally known as a peplos, see Lee 2003.

28. Lee 2004.

29. In this I disagree with Llewellyn-Jones (2005), who maintains that

the peplos is not a gendered garment.

I thank the author for sharing with me an advance draft of his chapter.

30. Loraux 1990.

31. Diod. Sic. 4.14.3, trans. adapted from C. H. Oldfather, Cambridge,

Mass., 1935.

32. See Barber 1992, with earlier references. For the political significance of the Panathenaic peplos, see Scheid and Svenbro 1996, pp. 18–33; Fowler 2000, p. 325.

exchanging this feminine garment for the war chiton of Zeus. Athena's transvestism underscores her own gender ambiguity, as does her choice of gift to Herakles.³³ She is the goddess of weaving, but also of war; why should she select an article of clothing as her gift to Herakles, warrior par excellence?³⁴

The answer, Loraux suggests, lies in Herakles' excessive masculinity.³⁵ She proposes that "an excess of virility leaves Herakles' strength in constant danger of being exhausted, and so it is appropriate for him periodically to return to a more reasonable level of male energy."³⁶ Athena's gift of the peplos is intended to restore the loss of equilibrium that is the result of his exploits.³⁷ The peplos does not therefore feminize him, but, conversely, underscores the power of his masculinity.³⁸ The same may be true for the figure of Acheloös, who is regularly depicted in excessively masculine terms—so excessive, in fact, that he is more typically represented as part beast.³⁹ The representation of the river god wearing a peplos can therefore be interpreted as emphasizing the benevolent side of his character, which is also suggested by the cornucopia, a symbol of fertility. In this way, the destructive capacities of the river are counterbalanced by its life-giving aspects.⁴⁰

As Marjorie Garber has shown, an important function of transvestism is as a means of reconciling contradictions, not only masculine and feminine gender, but also other fundamental cultural categories such as race and class.⁴¹ She argues that transvestism often represents a displacement of other, apparently unrelated, "category crises." Margaret Miller has effectively adopted Garber's model to demonstrate that the transvestism of the so-called Anacreontic vases dating to the late 6th century reflects broader Athenian anxieties about the breakdown of old, aristocratic institutions.⁴²

33. On the gender ambiguity of Athena, see most recently Deacy and Villing 2001, pp. 15–16, with earlier references.

34. Llewellyn-Jones's (2005, p. 60) suggestion that the gift of the peplos reflects Athena's role as patron goddess of textile production (Athena Ergane) is not inconsistent with Loraux's reading of this passage (below).

35. Loraux (1990, pp. 35–36) cites as evidence for Herakles' superabundance of virility his extreme sexual behavior, coupled (perhaps ironically) with his misogyny.

36. Loraux 1990, p. 39. Cyrino (1998) fruitfully expands upon Loraux's interpretations, citing parallels in modern cinema and sports (e.g., basketball star Dennis Rodman).

37. Though Diodoros does not indicate that Herakles actually *wore* the garment, the gendered connotations of the gift would have been understood by an ancient audience. Herakles wears

women's clothing in several episodes in Greek and Latin literature (see Cyrino 1998; Llewellyn-Jones 2005); however, artistic representations of Herakles wearing feminine dress do not appear until the Late Hellenistic period (see Schauenburg 1960, esp. fig. 1; Kampen 1996, pp. 237–238, figs. 98, 99).

38. For a similar interpretation of the so-called Anacreontic vases (discussed below), see Frontisi-Ducroux and Lissarrague 1990.

39. Animal imagery is unusual for Greek gods (see Padgett 2003). The bull iconography for Acheloös, while derived from Near Eastern sources, is likely to have been retained on account of its particular resonance for the Greeks, who associated excessive (especially sexual) behavior with animals (see Lissarrague 1990). On the Greek notion of hypermasculinity giving way to bestiality, see duBois 1982, p. 31.

40. I have likened the constructions of gender in the Acheloös statuette to

those surrounding Herakles in the literary tradition. But is such a connection justified, given the fact that Herakles and Acheloös are adversaries in the contest over Deianeira? In a study of river-god iconography, Gais (1978, pp. 367–370) demonstrated that, while in early periods Herakles and Acheloös are conventionally represented as combatants, beginning in the 4th century B.C. they are conflated iconographically as a means of emphasizing the theme of fertility.

41. Garber 1992, pp. 16–17.

42. Miller 1999. For earlier interpretations of the costume, see Miller 1999, pp. 232–236; also Frontisi-Ducroux and Lissarrague 1990. The concern for the maintenance of proper boundaries is similarly reflected in the Greek practice of ritual transvestism, which is in all cases temporary, and underscores the desired preservation of established social categories (Miller 1999, pp. 241–244).

The feminine dress of the Acheloös figure likewise embodies multiple categories of crisis: animal/human; destructive/beneficent; virile/feminine. The findspot of the statuette, marking the border of a sanctuary, further suggests a concern with the categories of inside and outside, sacred and profane.

The reconciliation of these categories made this votive statuette especially efficacious for its dedicants, who, as devotees of Acheloös and the nymphs, were presumably concerned with securing fertility. As Marie Delcourt has argued, the combination of masculine and feminine has the special effect of bringing about increased fertility, "each sex receiving something of the powers of the other."⁴³ Acheloös *peplophoros*, with his feminine dress and the Freudian removal of his horn, is neither feminized nor emasculated; he is uniquely equipped to bring fertility and abundance to his devotees.

43. Delcourt 1961, p. 16.

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