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Topic of the Year: Connective (T)issue

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Ajax: life as a wingman

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Abstract

Ajax: life as a wingman is part of the series #raccontidalmuseo (stories from the museum) in the time of the Coronavirus. This project was launched by the Archeostorie Magazine during the long months of the spring lockdown. All cultural venues in Italy were shut down due to the law decree of March 8th, 2020, which listed the necessary measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. With our stories, we who love visiting museums, filled them with life in our way, while they remained justly empty. We remained hopeful that such a difficult moment would soon pass. At first, the editorial board worked on the project, then we began to receive a great number of stories. Even school groups guided by their teacher participated enthusiastically. Ajax is generally remembered almost exclusively for his massacre and suicide. However, he was the strongest among the Achaeans at Troy. With him, the age of heroes comes to an end.

∂ Open Access ■ Translated by: Michael Campeggi

Negwords: Ajax, hero, Troy, suicide, Etruscans



Fig. 1. Bronze statuette representing Ajax committing suicide, on display at the Etruscan Museum of Populonia – Gasparri Collection

Yes, it is true. I am guilty of causing a blood bath. Is this the reason why you all avoid me? Is this why you have kept me locked away for 2,500 years, first in a tomb and later in a warehouse?

Are you scared of me? Are you still scared of me? Have no fear. That Ajax is now gone, he died with the sheep he slaughtered believing they were men. It was a moment of madness, incontrollable madness. Nonetheless, I did not kill myself for that reason, as you all say. You really do not understand.

I, myself, only figured it out with time. I need to thank this Etruscan sculpture who depicted me in the moment before dying, when the sword is barely touching my skin and has not yet penetrated the flesh. That precise instant, when your whole life flows before your eyes in a time lapse, and one sees and hears everything as never before.

I have been re-living that moment for the past 2,500 years: an endless super motion. I see a life lived as a wingman, as a perennial runner up who never really achieved anything for himself. I was not able to even conquer my own woman. Tecmessa, of course: a slave who learned to love me out of necessity. But never have I seen a woman's eyes shine for me. How I desired to live such a thrill.

Yet, as a child, I felt predestined: I was number one! A giant already back then, the strongest. I would defeat everyone in every field. "Just like Heracles" my parents would say, with no fear of being irreverent. But the illusion was short-lived.

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Because then he arrived, the cousin. He, Achilles. Smaller, but almost as strong as me, and handsome beyond imagination. Everyone only had eyes for him, and not for me. He carried himself with that noble aura I never had. He was a leader: he always decided what game we should play. And they all only followed him. But he was the coward. The wimp. He not only tried to escape war, but he even did so by pretending to be a woman! Nonetheless, they were all desperately looking for him everywhere since there would be no departing without him. Until they found him in Skyros. Then, once at Troy, everyone begged him to resume fighting when he decided to withdraw. As a sign of protest, he said, against the injustice received from Agamemnon, who took his slave. But, in my view, he remained a coward. Even if, as a relative, I offered to be the peacemaker.

But was I able to do more? Was I able to take advantage of his absence to emerge? No, I was not. I fought as usual, alone against many. But when the duel with Hector, my true opportunity, presented itself, I missed it. I was the strongest, clearly. But in life it is not enough just to be superior: you need to win. And I tied, eventually agreeing to exchange weapons. The sword I used to kill myself was the one Hector gave me that day: they symbol of my failure.

Until then, however, I was still second only to Achilles, and the strongest with him. I was almost accustomed to the idea. And, after his death, his armor should have been mine. Mine by right. Who kept the Trojans far from the Achaean ships? I did, alone! And who recovered Patroclus' body during the assault on the ships and brought it to Achilles? Again, I did!

All this, unfortunately, had no more importance. We had fought for ten years, strong amongst the strongest, but still no end was in sight. To win, something different was needed. Now I understand. Back then I did not. I asked myself, why Odysseus? He was neither strong nor able at fighting...he was only cunning. Yes,

his cunningness was needed: take the Trojans by surprise, disorient them. The only path to victory. A victory void of glory... No, I would never climb into that wooden horse. Neither would have my cousin Achilles. That horse, those tricks, those expedients, they were not our world. Were we true heroes? I cannot say. But I do know that with our death our world was eclipsed by Odysseus'.

He won, he received Achilles' weapons. And I, once again, was number two. With dishonor. Swept into a corner as I was no longer needed. So, I took the extreme decision: I offered my side to the sword, to that sword, after having driven the hilt into the ground.

Ajax was unlucky, but so was the small Etruscan bronze depicting him. Smelted by an able artisan in the 5th century B.C., it was found in 1908 in the Tomb of the funeral beds in the San Cerbone necropolis, on the gulf of Baratti (Leghorn). For a few decades it was exhibited at the Topographic Museum of Etruria at Florence, but after the 1966 flood it ended up in the warehouses.

It remained closed away for decades in storage, with no one to admire it despite it being a small masterpiece. Just look at its muscles and its abdominals! But all the details are equally tended to with almost maniac precision: the splendid helmet, the beard, the mustache. They fully render the might and strength of the hero in all his drama, with that sword ready to pierce him and with his lost gaze. His current "liberators" are the archaeologists of PastExperience who, under the direction of Carolina Megale, manage the Museo etrusco di Populonia - Collezione Gasparri (Etruscan Museum of Populonia - Gasparri Collection). Since the summer of 2019, Ajax was on exhibit, admired by everyone when the museum was still open. With the end of 2020, however, he returned to what is now called Museo archeologico nazionale di Firenze (National Archaeological Museum of Florence). The director announced that he will not end up in the warehouse but that he will be in public view. Ajax will therefore be finally free. We are counting on it!



