

AKRITAS AND THE DRAGONS

The heroes represented on Byzantine pottery have gone nameless until recently,¹ perhaps because of the predominantly secular character of this craft, with its corre-

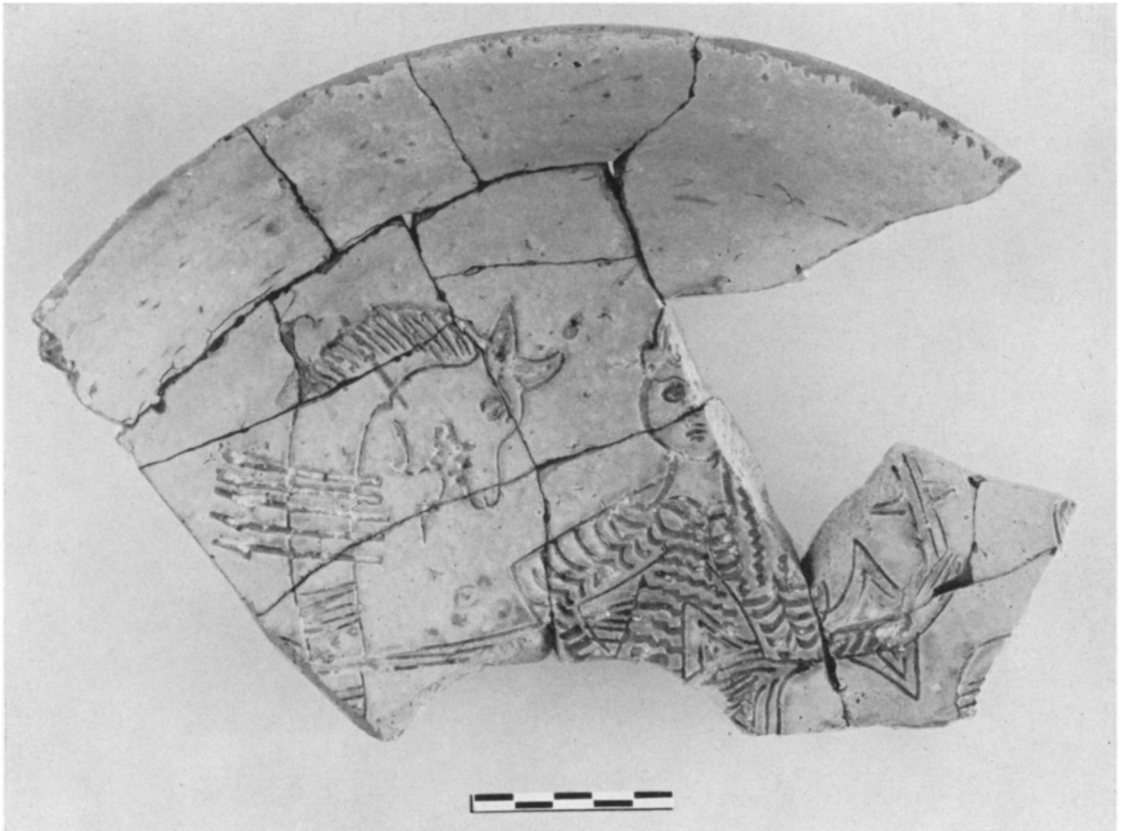


Fig. 1. Akritas and the Dragon

sponding absence of iconographic tradition. Recurring types suggest, however, that some scenes may be identifiable and, failing pictorial models, one is tempted to seek their sources in the secular literature of the day.

¹ Xyngopoulos has identified Alexander the Great on several pieces in Athens and Salonica in *Ἀρχ. Ἐφ.*, 1937 (Τόμος Ἑκατονταετηρίδος), pp. 192 ff., and *Ἐπετηρίς Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*, XIV, 1938, pp. 267 ff. I should be inclined to date the inscribed piece considerably later than Xyngopoulos suggests, on the basis of evidence from the Agora excavations.

A sgraffito plate from the Agora excavations,² shown in Figure 1, suggests that the painter had a definite personage and a definite episode in mind. The fragment preserves the upper half of a man, seen frontal. From beneath a high cap long curly hair falls over his left shoulder; he wears a tight-fitting long-sleeved tunic and carries a sword upraised in his left hand. To his right is the head and neck and the start of one coil of a dragon; he has equine ears and mane and from his open jaws issues a long tongue or a flame. At the opposite edge of the fragment are traces of the final coils of his body. Five darts or arrows pierce his neck. The converging lines reaching between the man and the dragon at first suggest a rope, but they may no less well be our artist's representation of the long scabbard which is almost invariably part of the equipment of warriors of this type. Under the arm is a double fan-shaped object.³ The sketch by J. Travlos (Fig. 2), restored with the help of various fragments from Corinth and Athens, suggests the original scheme of the composition, which is chiefly remarkable for its five arrows. The shape, technique, and style of the fragment all belong to the second half of the twelfth century or, at latest, to the early years of the thirteenth.

The long curly hair and large black-browed eyes of our plate are reminiscent of the description of a typical Byzantine hero in the following lines:

Εἶχε γὰρ ὁ νεώτερος εὐνοστον ἠλικίαν,
 κόμην ξανθὴν, ἐπίσγουρον, ὀμμάτια μεγάλα,
 πρόσωπον ἄσπρον, ῥοδιόν, κατάμαυρον ὀφρύδι,
 καὶ στῆθος ὡσπερ κρύσταλλον, ὀργυιὰν εἶχε τὸ πλάτος.

(Grottaferrata, IV, 196-9)

Such is Digenis Akritas, dragon-slayer *par excellence* of Byzantine secular legend, and hero of one of the most popular poems of the Greek middle ages,⁴ as well as of hundreds of songs which have had a continuous life down to the present day.

² Inv. No. P 8623. Height, 0.075-0.08 m.; diameter estimated, *ca.* 0.31 m. The profile is a coarser version of the warrior plate, *Hesperia*, VII, 1938, p. 464, fig. 30, and p. 467, fig. 33, E 2. In shape, style, and fabric alike our piece gives the local Athenian imitation of such twelfth-century imports.

³ This may be one of the usual trappings of a Byzantine warrior, but as bow, shield, or even musical instrument it appears most unconvincing. If the lines which converge at the dragon's neck are not a scabbard but leading-strings, disappearing behind the man's back, then the three strokes extending from the man's left elbow to his right hand might be thought of as their ends and not as part of the fan-shaped object.

⁴ For the sake of convenience I list here in abbreviated form the editions of the published manuscripts of the epic. For the complete titles, the reader is referred to Paschalis' publication of Andros II in *Λαογραφία*, IX, 1926-8, pp. 310-311. Trebizond: E. Sathas and E. Legrand, *Les Exploits de Digénis Akritas*, Paris, 1875; Grottaferrata: E. Legrand, *Les Exploits de Digénis Acritas*, Paris, 1892; Andros I: A. Miliarakis, *Βασίλειος Διγενῆς Ἀκρίτας*, Athens, 1881; Andros II: D. Paschalis, *Λαογραφία*, IX, 1926-8, pp. 305-440; Oxford: S. Lambros, *Collection de Romans grecs*,

Akritas' early zeal for dragon-hunting is well attested by all versions of the epic. At the age of twelve he begs his father to let him hunt, among other beasts, bears, lions, and dragons,⁵ and all the manuscripts include dragons specifically among the creatures of whom he had no fear. In the epic only one episode with a dragon receives detailed attention: the slaying of the three-headed monster which attacked Digenis' wife Eudokia when she went to the brook to bathe,⁶ but in the *τραγούδια*, especially in the group of songs centering around the death of Digenis, an event usually attended by the recital of his exploits, dragons abound. In some songs he claims to have killed four hundred, in others the number is more modest.⁷

In five versions of the epic⁸ Digenis is described as attacking the dragon of Blattolibadi in the conventional fashion, with a sword; in one⁹ he uses a club. Two versions, however, speak of his early love for the bow:

*καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἀγάπησε κνήγια καὶ τόξα.*¹⁰

In the songs another dragon exploit recurs, and it is with this that I venture to associate the scene on our plate. The accounts vary in detail but are essentially the same. The two following passages,¹¹ the first from Cyprus, the second from Arcadia, combine the elements of our picture:

*Καὶ πὰ ᾽ς τὰ γλυκοξίφωτα, ποῦ πᾶ νὰ ξημερώσῃ,
σκιαστήκασιν τὰ μμάδκια μου κ' ἕναν μεγάλοφ φίιν
ἐξήγητα κύκλους ἔκαμνεν, βδομηνταδκνὸ καμάραις,*

Paris, 1880; Escorial: D. C. Hesseling, *Λαογραφία*, III, 1912, pp. 537-604. For the recent literature, see H. Grégoire in *Byzantion*, V, 1929-30, pp. 327-346; VI, 1931, pp. 481-508; VII, 1932, pp. 287-302.

⁵ Trebizond, IV, 871.

⁶ E. g. Grottaferrata, VI, 45 ff.

⁷ For a collection of seventy-two songs of this group, see N. G. Politis, *Λαογραφία*, I, 1909, pp. 169-275.

⁸ Grottaferrata, VI, 74; Trebizond, VII, 1951; Escorial, 1118; Andros I, VII, 2911, Andros II, VII.

⁹ Oxford, VII, 2417.

¹⁰ Andros I, IV, 1388; compare also Oxford, IV, 1250.

¹¹ Politis, *loc. cit.*, p. 209, lines 52-57, and pp. 223-4, lines 12-21 (omitting lines 14 and 17-18 which are irrelevant to the description).

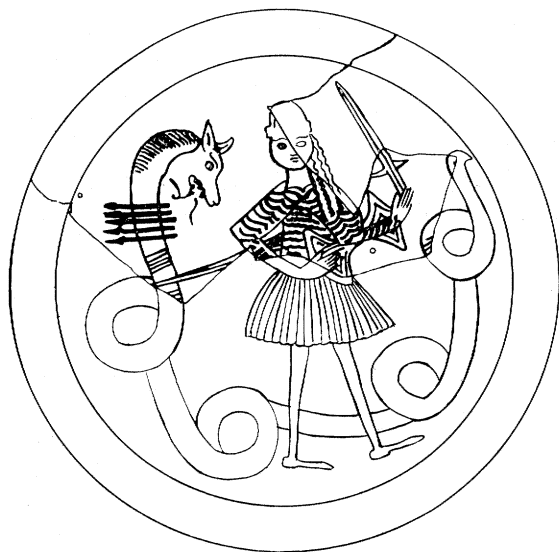


Fig. 2. Akritas and the Dragon
(Restored Sketch by J. Travlos)

κ' ἀκόμα δκυὸ κυκλίσματα τὸν Ἑλενον γὰ φάη.
 Μὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ τῆδ' δύναμιν, μὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν χάριν,
 μπαίννω καὶ σαῖττεύω τὸν ἄ τῆμ μεσακὴν καμάραν.

Ξῆντα λοντάρια σκότωσα καὶ τετρακόσιους δράκους.
 Σὰν ἓνα φίδ' δικέφαλο, φίδι μὲ δυὸ κεφάλια.
 Εἶχε τὰ πόδια ἀλοῖνά, καὶ μάτια σὰν τὸ βόιδι,
 κ' εἶχε καὶ κάτι κέρατα πὸ μάλαμα καθάριο.
 Πέντε κοντάρια τοῦ δωκα καὶ μιὰ σπαθιά ἄ τῆ μέση,
 μαῖδε τὸ βόλι τὸ κολλᾶ, μαῖδε σπαθὶ τὸ παίρνει,
 καὶ μόνο μὲ τὸ δαμασκὶ τὸ τρύπησα μαχαῖρι.

In the first passage the crucial word is of course *σαῖττεύω*. The other passage is more explicit about the nature of the dragon. Not enough is preserved of the dragon on the plate to make possible a close comparison, but there is a certain similarity, at least in the un-serpentine aspect of both. It is even possible that what first appear to be ears are actually the "horns of pure gold" mentioned in the text; the eye could easily be considered bovine, and if there are no feet visible, the equine character is preserved in the mane. More important are the words *πέντε κοντάρια*. Five spears would be a burden even for an Akritas; but for the blow of a spear elsewhere the feminine *κονταριᾶ* is used. Possibly the five spears replace five arrows or darts named in an earlier version. Either reading would fit our scene. There seems to be no longer any doubt as to the antiquity of the *τραγούδια*,¹² and the strong conservatism of Cyprus argues for a comparatively faithful adherence to the original models, so that they may be accepted as providing subjects for a twelfth-century artist.

If we examine the claims of the other principal dragon-slayers, one objection answers for all: the wrong method of slaying. The saints, George and Theodore, seldom if ever undertake this exploit without the aid of the horses and spears provided them by the traditions of religious iconography.¹³ Kallimachos, the hero of the romance of Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe, who rescued a lady from the *Δρακοντόκαστρον*, is also described in the only extant manuscript as using a sword.¹⁴ Alexander, mounted and carrying bow and arrows, appears at grips with a dragon on a Persian miniature of the sixteenth century.¹⁵ The weapon in action is a short stout knife or dagger (recalling the *δαμασκὶ μαχαῖρι* of our second passage above), but I have found no account of any relevant episode among Alexander's deeds. It is

¹² Politis, *loc. cit.*, pp. 169 ff., and Grégoire, *Byzantion*, VII, 1932, pp. 290 ff.

¹³ Karl Krumbacher, "Der heilige Georg in den griechischen Überlieferung," *Abh. Ak. München*, XXV, 3, 1911, pp. 296 ff., and J. B. Aufhäuser, "Das Drachenvunder des Heiligen Georg," *Byzantinisches Archiv*, V, 1911, pp. 163 ff.

¹⁴ Lambros, *Collection de Romans grecs*, p. 25, line 565.

¹⁵ F. R. Martin, *The Miniature Painting of Persia, India and Turkey*, II, pl. 148.

probable that there was considerable interchange of exploits between Akritas and Alexander,¹⁶ and that as at least one deed of Alexander's, the slaying of the gigantic crab,¹⁷ was transferred to Akritas, so also Akritas' prowess over dragons may have redounded to the credit of Alexander.

Even though the identification of our figure with Akritas be not in itself conclusive, the indifference of Byzantine potters to religious subjects, coupled with the profusion of scenes having an epic flavor,¹⁸ lends support to the theory that the artist drew his subjects from the popular songs and ballads. And the presumption is strong that the events presented most vividly to his ear were the exploits of Basileios Digenis Akritas.

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¹⁶ For a discussion of this subject see S. Kyriakidis, *Λαογραφία*, VI, 1918, pp. 368 ff., especially pp. 386-90.

¹⁷ *Loc. cit.*, pp. 372 ff.

¹⁸ C. H. Morgan's forthcoming publication of the Byzantine pottery from Corinth will include a representative collection.