

Making Change for a Tripod

A Footnote on Homeric Economics (*Iliad* 23.736-37)

The wrestling match at the funeral games for Patroklos pits Odysseus against Telamonian Aias.¹ First prize is a tripod worth twelve oxen, second prize a slave-woman worth four (700-5):²

Πηλείδης δ' αἴψ' ἄλλα κατὰ τρίτα θῆκεν ἄεθλα	700
δεικνύμενος Δαναοῖσι παλαιμοσύνης ἀλεγεινῆς,	
τῶι μὲν νικήσαντι μέγαν τρίποδ' ἐμπυριβήτην,	
τὸν δὲ δυωδεκάβοιον ἐνὶ σφίσι τῖον Ἀχαιοί·	
ἀνδρὶ δὲ νικηθέντι γυναῖκ' ἐς μέσσον ἔθηκε,	
πολλὰ δ' ἐπίστατο ἔργα, τῖον δὲ ἑτεσσαράβοιον.	705

After various difficult-to-interpret maneuvers, Achilles stops the match, declares a draw, and tells the two to take 'equal prizes' (736-38):

“μηκέτ' ἐρείδεσθον, μὴ δὲ τρίβεσθε κακοῖσι·	735
νίκη δ' ἀμφοτέροισιν· ἀέθλια δ' ἴσ' ἀνελόντες	
ἔρχεσθ', ὄφρα καὶ ἄλλοι ἀεθλεύωσιν Ἀχαιοί.”	

How Aias and Odysseus could possibly take equal prizes puzzled Eustathius and the scholiasts, and still puzzles modern commentators. As Richardson puts it in the last volume of the Cambridge *Iliad* commentary,³

Eustathius and the scholia are at a loss as to how the prizes could be equally divided. The poet presumably wishes to press on to the next contest, before his audience loses interest.

¹ Homer is quoted from T. W. Allen (ed.), *Homeri Ilias* (Oxford, 2 vols., 1931). I really should get hold of a newer and better text, shouldn't I?

² As David Schaps notes in *The Invention of Coinage and the Monetization of Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor, 2004, 78), “When Achilles offered a bronze tripod for the winner and a slave woman for the loser, Homer must tell us the value of each, because a younger, stronger, more beautiful or more highly born woman might have been worth more than the tripod.” This is true as far as it goes, but I will propose a second reason. In the accompanying footnote 68, he adds “These are the only prizes for which Homer gives a value.”

³ N. Richardson (ed.), *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume VI: books 21-24* (Cambridge, 1993), 249 ad 23.736.

More recently, and more pungently, M. L. West ('P' is the poet who wrote most of our *Iliad*):⁴

P does not explain how the prizes were made equal; neither a tripod nor a woman is much use if cut in half.

I am almost ashamed to point out what must have occurred to others before me, though I have not seen it anywhere in print: surely the whole point of giving the values of the prizes in oxen is to make them, as a modern economist would put it, fungible. The total value of the prizes is sixteen oxen, so tied contestants must end up with eight oxen-equivalents of prize each, and this can be very easily done. Either Odysseus took the slave-woman and Aias the tripod, paying Odysseus four oxen to make up the difference in value, or Aias took the slave-woman and four of Odysseus' oxen while Odysseus took the tripod. We are not told who got which prize, or how that was decided,⁵ because it did not matter. If neither happened to have four oxen in stock (as it were), they or their henchmen presumably went around the Greek camp looking for someone who had twelve oxen to spare and so could 'make change' for the tripod.⁶

As Richardson notes (on 704-5): "τεσσαράβοιος is an absolute *hapax*". I suspect that at some point Homer (however defined – perhaps some Deutero- or Trito-Homer) edited the passage to answer the objections of some primeval pedant in the audience. Did he add 703 and the second half of 705? The first half of 705 looks essential, so something inessential – perhaps a more specific account of the slave-woman's housekeeping skills – was presumably deleted to make room for the valuation in 705b. Whether the editor was West's 'P', I would not care to guess.

Besides providing a convenient λύσις for a traditional ζήτημα, my solution has at least one interesting implication: it appears that the concept of 'making change' antedates the invention of money by several centuries.

⁴ M. L. West, *The Making of the 'Iliad'* (Oxford, 2011), 407 ad 23.736-7.

⁵ Not by flipping a coin: they had not been invented.

⁶ Perhaps I have let my imagination run away with me here. As Schaps notes (*Op. cit.*, 70), "even when a sum was paid, no oxen need have changed hands".