

Miron Wolny

Pyrrhus' Return to Epirus and Neoptolemos' Death (296 B.C.)

Echa Przeszłości 12, 7-13

2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

ARTICLES AND MATERIALS

Miron Wolny

PYRRHUS' RETURN TO EPIRUS AND NEOPTOLEMOS' DEATH (296 B.C.)

Having taken a thorough look at Pyrrhus' life and activity, one may conclude that the invincible hero of the Hellenistic period showed considerable inconsistency of character that ultimately made him the Don Quixote of Antiquity. Scholars have formulated discrepant judgments about Pyrrhus' political involvement, which resulted from a more or less holistic approach to his conduct or different opinions about the effects of this activity. Hence, the general assessment of Pyrrhus cannot be favorable. This is clearly visible in the conclusions formulated by J. Carcopino and the ensuing opinions¹. Detailed analyses of historical sources, where special attention was paid to the methods used by Pyrrhus to attain his political aims, undoubtedly unveil Pyrrhus' leadership skills², but at the same time depict him as a politician who resorted to rather brutal methods.

The article attempts to formulate a fresh interpretation of Pyrrhus' struggle for power during the second restoration of his reign in Epirus (297–295 B.C.). Pyrrhus first ruled in Epirus between 307–302 B.C. after he had risen to power with the support of Glaucias' Taulantians³, a measure designed to tighten the co-operation between the Epeirotes and the Ilirians.

¹ See J. Carcopino, *Pyrrhus, conquérant ou aventurier?*, in: *Profils de conquérants*, ed. J. Carcopino, Paris 1961, pp. 11–108; T. Hackens, *Why Pyrrhus, the Condotiere?*, in: *The Age of Pyrrhus. Archeology, History and Culture in Early Hellenistic Greece and Italy*. Proceedings of an international conference held at Brown University, April 8th-10th, 1988, ed. T. Hackens, D. Holloway, R. R. Holloway, G. Moucharte, Louvain-la-Neuve 1992, pp. 9–12. M. Wolny, *Współczesne badania nad Pyrrusem. Próba rekonesansu*, in: *Per Saecula. Dyplomacja – Gospodarka – Historiografia*. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Alfredowi Mierzwie w 45. rocznicę pracy naukowej, ed. A. Korytko, B. Krysztopa-Czupryńska, Olsztyn-Piotrków Trybunalski 2009, p. 206.

² P. Lévêque, *Pyrrhos*, Paris 1957, passim.

³ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 3, 5: καταγαγὼν εἰς Ἡπείρου ματὰ δυνάμεως βασιλεῖα κατέστησεν.

Nevertheless, Pyrrhus was not a puppet in the hands of his regents. At the time, he could have been older than suggested by contemporary biographies⁴. Regardless of the extent of his decision-making powers, Pyrrhus was not powerful enough to withstand the inner riots in Epirus. According to Pausanias, the rebellion of 302 B.C. broke out in consequence of a political provocation staged by Kassandros. At least, this is what most scholars agree on.⁵ However, other sources present a different standpoint. Plutarchus argues that it was Neoptolemos who contributed to the coup in Epirus⁶. P. Lévêque claims that this particular piece of information is merely a version of events taken from the biographer of Cheronea⁷. The said account does not contradict Pausanias' description, it simply completes his version. This is a significant clue in the history of the ensuing relationship between Neoptolemos and Pyrrhus.

After giving his support to Demerios Poliorketes and losing the battle of Ipsus (301 B.C.), Pyrrhus arrived in Ptolemy's court in Egypt. Backed by the Egyptian forces, Pyrrhus returned to Epirus which was ruled by Neoptolemos who had based his power on the following two factors. First of all, his power was legitimized by Kassandros. Secondly, Pyrrhus enjoyed the support of an influential aristocratic group in Epirus (οἱ κρᾶτιστοι). In return, Neoptolemos was to promote the group's political interests⁸. This is not to say that Neoptolemos' position was free of any threats. Shortly before Pyrrhus' return to Epirus, Neoptolemos had serious problems with maintaining power on account of several factors. Above all, the number of Neoptolemos' political opponents began to grow during Pyrrhus' absence from Epirus. Historical sources suggest that he was a strict ruler who had a tendency to resort to violence⁹. C. Klotzsch emphasizes that Neoptolemos exercised power in a conservative way, whereas Pyrrhus was perceived as a representative of a modern and progressive group that is euphemistically referred to as *die "jüngere" Partei* in C. Klotzsch's book¹⁰. Plutarch compares Neoptolemos' character traits to those of Alketas II who gave way to Pyrrhus during his attempts to restore his power (307–302 B.C.). Pyrrhus was supported by a political group that had an interest in the political independence of Epirus – this prospect seemed to be realistic, especially in the light of Kassandros'

⁴ See: M. Wolny, *Controversies Surrounding Pyrrhus' Birthdate*, in: *Hortus Historiae. Studies in Honour of Professor Józef Wolski on the 100th Anniversary of His Birthday*, ed. E. Dąbrowa, M. Dzielska, M. Salamon, S. Sprawski, Kraków 2010, pp. 183-189.

⁵ Paus., I, 11, 5; R. Schubert, *Geschichte des Pyrrhos*, Königsberg 1896, p. 110; C. Klotzsch, *Epeirische Geschichte bis zum Jahre 280 v. Chr.*, Berlin 1911, p. 134; P. Garoufalas, *Pyrrhus, King of Epirus*, London 1979, p. 222.

⁶ See: H. Berve, *Neoptolemos no. 4*, RE XVI, 2, Stuttgart 1935, col. 2463; F. Sandberger, *Prosopographie zur Geschichte des Pyrrhos*, Stuttgart 1970, p. 164.

⁷ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 4, 2; P. Lévêque, *Pyrrhos*, p. 105.

⁸ Por. Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 14.

⁹ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 2.

¹⁰ C. Klotzsch, *Epeirische Geschichte*, p. 153.

decline. The modern aristocratic group in Epirus expected Pyrrhus to safeguard their business interests. Ptolemy's court began to scrutinize the new ruler. It should be added that this issue has been thoroughly explored to support our understanding of Pyrrhus' activity, both in the Balkans and in the western part of the Mediterranean region¹¹.

On his return to Epirus, Pyrrhus was faced with a dilemma over whether he should get rid of Neoptolemos at once or strive for at least temporary agreement. Although Pyrrhus enjoyed quite high military support, his open struggle against Neoptolemos' forces was, in fact, doomed to failure since Neoptolemos was eager to look for allies in the Hellenistic world¹². The physical annihilation of Neoptolemos could have awakened a protest against Pyrrhus, as such an immediate solution would have been construed as usurpation of authority. Hence, Pyrrhus could only ascend to power by reaching a compromise. According to Plutarchus, both rulers agreed to share power in an atmosphere of friendship: διαλύσεις ἔθετο καὶ φιλίαν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐπὶ κοινωνία τῆς ἀρχῆς¹³. This agreement was purely fictitious as neither Neoptolemos nor Pyrrhus had really intended to share power. A solution to this problem was soon found. In order to eliminate Neoptolemos, Pyrrhus engineered a complicated plot which was described by Plutarchus. Despite a rather incredible overtone, this description requires a detailed analysis, and it should not be disregarded.

The plot was organized in the town of Passaron during a religious feast to celebrate Zeus. As P. Garoufalas rightly notices, it was an annual celebration in the form of a plebiscite¹⁴. Plutarch remarks that the event made a reference to the kings of Epirus¹⁵. His opinion is not shared by the German scholar C. Klotzsch who argues that the event was unrelated to the citizens of Epirus (Ἡπειρώταις), instead, it was focused on the relationship between the Molossians (σύμμαχοι τῶν Μολοσσῶν) and their leaders¹⁶. Plutarchus' description of the celebration implies that its original aim was to consolidate the tribal community. It remains unknown whether this annual celebration was always organized in the same form. Apparently, some elements were fixed, whereas other were probably modified, depending on the circumstances. Plutarchus mentions that according to standard practice during such festivals, a sacrifice was made in honor of Zeus. Cheronea's biographer reports that during the celebrations, the leaders would take an oath before the entire community, promising to exercise their powers in accordance with legal provisions (νόμος). The oath was then taken by community

¹¹ G. Nenci, *Pirro, aspirazioni egemoniche ed equilibrio mediterraneo*, Torino 1953, passim.

¹² Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 2-3.

¹³ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 3.

¹⁴ P. Garoufalas, *Pyrrus King of Epirus*, p. 28.

¹⁵ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 5.

¹⁶ C. Klotzsch, *Epeirische Geschichte*, p. 32; D. Strauch, *Molossoi (Μολοσσοί)*, DNP 8, Stuttgart 2000, col. 348-349.

members who vowed to obey their leaders. This is a clear sign of limitation of royal power¹⁷. It also confirms the previous assumptions about the support given to the rulers by the society. Celebrations of the type were popular in the Greek world, and Epirus also organized such festivals even though it had undergone the Hellenization process relatively late. Xenophon writes that Spartan kings took an oath before one another every month, promising to abide by the law. A similar oath had to be taken by other subjects¹⁸. The Hellenistic world, which followed Middle Eastern traditions, also popularized the idea of validating significant events with oaths¹⁹.

At the end of the celebration, both rulers, accompanied by their close friends, would exchange valuable gifts²⁰. Gelon, Neoptolemos' faithful companion, greeted Pyrrhus with a friendly handshake and presented him with two pairs of oxen hitched up to a plow²¹. Myrtilus, Pyrrhus' cupbearer, liked the gift so much that he dared ask his ruler to give it to him²². Pyrrhus refused, but then gave the oxen to someone else, which hurt Myrtilus' feelings. Plutarch reports that Gelon was a witness to this event, and he made clever use of the resentment that had built up between Pyrrhus and his companion²³. Gelon invited Myrtilus to his table. Plutarch even suggests that Gelon's intentions were of a sexual nature, especially given the fact that the feast abounded with alcohol, Myrtilus was an incredibly charming young man, and Gelon couldn't resist the beauty of young boys. The plot was discussed in the lovers' bedroom. Gelon offered to join the group of Neoptolemos' followers, and he tried to persuade Myrtilus to poison Pyrrhus. Paradoxically, Myrtilus acted with surprising sobriety – he pretended to accept Gelon's offer with a great deal of enthusiasm, and a moment later, he informed Pyrrhus of the intended assassination attempt²⁴. Plutarch presents this story as a fantastic psychological game between the characters, full of fast moving action. In response to this news, Pyrrhus devised an intrigue against Neoptolemos. According to Plutarch, Pyrrhus wanted to give publicity to the alleged assassination attempt. He persuaded Myrtilus to bring another conspirer from his milieu into the plot, and that man was Alexikrates, the senior cupbearer. Gelon and Myrtilus were to reveal the secret plot to Alexikrates²⁵. Gelon was misled. Neoptolemos soon learned

¹⁷ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 5; W. W. Tarn, *The New Hellenistic Kingdoms*, CAH VII, Cambridge 1954, p. 83; P. Cabanes, *L'Épire de la mort de Pyrrhos à la conquête romaine (272–167 av. J. C.)*, Paris 1976, pp. 246–247.

¹⁸ Xen., *Lac.*, XV, 7; cf. A. B. Nederlof, *Pyrrhus van Epirus*, Amsterdam 1978, p. 43.

¹⁹ E. J. Bickermann, *Hannibal's Covenant*, *AJPh* 73, 1952, p. 1 n.

²⁰ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 6; P. Garoufalas, *Pyrrus King of Epirus*, pp. 237–238.

²¹ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 7.

²² Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 7.

²³ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 8; A. B. Nederlof, *Pyrrus van Epirus*, p. 43.

²⁴ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 8–9.

²⁵ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 9.

about the assassination attempt, and the news made him so happy that he found it difficult to keep the secret.

Neoptolemos first conveyed the secret plan to his sister, Cadmeia, during a reception organized at her house²⁶. Neoptolemos was certain that nobody was listening in on their conversation – there was only one woman in the room, who appeared to be sleeping. The woman, Pheanarete²⁷, was the wife of Samon, the main administrator of the royal farm²⁸. Pheanarete was lying on a sofa, only pretending to be asleep. She heard the whole conversation, and on the following day, she revealed the secret to Antigone, Pyrrhus' wife²⁹.

Before we interpret the intrigue, we must first analyze its characters. Gelon probably descended from the Molossian tribe³⁰. The relevant epigraphic material suggests that Γέλων was a common name in Epirus³¹. In Plutarchus' report (ἀνὴρ πιστὸς Νεωπτολέμῳ), Gelon is depicted as one of Neoptolemos' closest companions, therefore, we can speculate that he was one of Neoptolemos' advisors. The research on Myrtilus has confirmed source descriptions to be true³², just as it was the case with Alexikrates³³. Cadmeia (Καδμεία), in turn, is believed to be the daughter of Alexander the Molossian, although some scholars do not subscribe to this opinion³⁴. As regards Pheanarete (Φαιναρέτη), she appears as the *Molossian woman* in N. G. L. Hammond's *Onomastiokon Epeirotikon*. The question which arises at this point is – why was this woman present at the royal court? Was she a friend of Cadmeia's or a mistress of someone from the royal court? Historical sources do not give answers to these questions. Similarly to Cadmeia and Pheanarete, there are no documented references to Samon (Σάμων) in the existing body of epigraphic material³⁵.

The discussed characters' names suggest that the plot involved real people who were also witnesses at Neoptolemos' trial³⁶, which will be discussed later on. For the moment, let us analyze the credibility of the whole scheme.

²⁶ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 11.

²⁷ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 12.

²⁸ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 12.

²⁹ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 12-13.

³⁰ F. Sandberger, *Prosopographie*, p. 103.

³¹ N. G. L. Hammond, *Epirus. The Geography, the Ancient Remains, the History and the Topography of Epirus and Adjacent Areas*, Oxford 1967, p. 801 (*Onomastiokon Epeirotikon*); B. Niese, *Gelon no. 5*, RE VII, 1, Stuttgart 1910, col. 244.

³² F. Sandberger, *Prosopographie*, p. 163: *M(yrtilos). war Mundschenk odel Kellermeister am Hofe des Pyrrhos*.

³³ F. Sandberger, *Prosopographie*, p. 25: *A(lexikrates). war Obermundschenk am Hofe des Pyrrhos*.

³⁴ Por. G. N. Cross, *Epirus. A Study in Greek Constitutional Development*, Cambridge 1932, p. 106 n.

³⁵ N. G. L. Hammond, *Epirus*, p. 813 (*Onomastiokon Epeirotikon*); F. Sandberger, *Prosopographie*, p. 202.

Contemporary historians are undoubtedly familiar with the official version of events, which was promulgated to justify Neoptolemos' execution. Nevertheless, the overtone of the whole story lacks credibility. Gelon, Neoptolemos' servant, persuaded Myrtilus, Pyrrhus' cupbearer, to poison his master as he became aware of Myrtilus' resentment. The cause of the resentment, however, seemed to be too trivial to provoke such a cruel revenge. Gelon informed his master about the plot after it had been planned. Neoptolemos was overjoyed, but he was probably aware that he would pay the highest price if the plot were to backfire. Unable to control his euphoria, Neoptolemos shared the secret with his sister, and he was naive enough to think that the woman lying on the sofa was asleep and would not overhear their conversation. Myrtilus engaged another witness, Alexikrates, in the plot, and he made Gelon reveal his plan once again. It is hardly probable that this quasi-conspirative farce actually took place. It was probably devised for the needs of a fabricated trial which bore a semblance of a legal procedure, but in fact it was an effective way to eliminate Neoptolemos.

Plutarch does not mention the trial, probably because his report is simplified with much attention given to stylistic expression. Cheronea's biographer mentions yet another religious celebration (θυσία) which was attended by Neoptolemos at Pyrrhus' invitation. During the feast, Neoptolemos tried to inquire about the political affiliations of the aristocracy. When it turned out that Neoptolemos could enjoy the support of the most influential aristocrats, Pyrrhus decided to eliminate his opponent. According to Plutarchus, a considerable part of the elite tried to persuade Pyrrhus to get rid of Neoptolemos and to become the only ruler in Epirus³⁷. The elimination had to be carried out quickly, so it must have taken place before 296 B.C.³⁸

Let us take another look at the group of Pyrrhus' supporters. At this point, our interpretation of Plutarch is wrought with problems relating to the semantic range of the terms used by Cheronea's biographer. Plutarchus mentions that Pyrrhus gained the support of the most highly acclaimed citizens of Epirus: τῶν Ἡπειρωτῶν τοὺς κρατίστους. This phrase obviously corresponds to οἱ κρᾶτιστοι, suggesting that the supporter group consisted of aristocrats who expected Pyrrhus to safeguard their business interests³⁹. We cannot rule out that the aristocracy gave their support to Pyrrhus because his agreement with Ptolemy I Soter had created new opportunities for eco-

³⁶ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 14; cf. P. Lévêque, *Pyrrhos*, pp. 120–121.

³⁷ Plut., *Pyrrh.*, 5, 14.

³⁸ The given date seems to have been established by way of compromise, cf. P. Lévêque, *Pyrrhos*, p. 114.

³⁹ In line with C. Klotzsch's theory, the phrase τῶν Ἡπειρωτῶν τοὺς κρατίστους did not refer to the citizens of Epirus (Ἡπειρώταις), but the association of the Molossians (σύμμαχοι τῶν Μολοσσῶν).

conomic exchange⁴⁰. The above arguments seem even more convincing when we take into account the decline of Kassandros, Neoptolemos' protector.

The elimination of Neoptolemos became a necessity for Pyrrhus. The only way he could rise to full power was by making his rule absolute. Pyrrhus had to find a legal solution to avoid riots, and all he needed was a well-crafted excuse. He devised a plot in which Neoptolemos would be charged with responsibility for an assassination attempt on Pyrrhus. The official account could have been written by Proksenus, the chronicler responsible for drafting a proper version of events⁴¹. Once again, Pyrrhus followed the example of Alexander who had gotten rid of Parmenio through a conspiracy based on suspicion. There was no room for experimentation or fondness in Pyrrhus' political activity. Neoptolemos became Pyrrhus' second (after Alketas) rival in Epirus, and he had to be eliminated in order for Pyrrhus to enjoy absolute power. Nevertheless, it soon turned out that a throne in this region of the Greek world was not enough to satisfy Pyrrhus' ambitions.

⁴⁰ S. Kondis, *New Thoughts on the Relations between Pyrrhus and Ptolemy I*, in: *The Age of Pyrrhus. Archeology, History and Culture in Early Hellenistic Greece and Italy*. Proceedings of an international conference held at Brown University, April 8th-10th, 1988, ed. T. Hackens, D. Holloway, R. R. Holloway, G. Moucharte, Louvain-la-Neuve 1992, pp. 73-82.

⁴¹ V. La Bua, *Prosseno e gli υπομνήματα Πύρρου*, *Terza Miscellanea Greca e Romana*. Studi Pubblicati dall'Istituto Italiano per la Storia Antica, fasc. XXI, Roma 1971, pp. 1-6