

Empedocles without Horseshoes. Delphi's Criticism of Large Sacrifices¹

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Abstract: Scholars have generally analysed Empedocles' criticism of sacrifices through a Pythagorean interpretation context. However, Empedocles' doctrinal affiliation with this school is problematic and also not needed to explain his rejection of the 'unspeakable slaughter of bulls.' His position is consistent with the wisdom tradition that emanated from the Sanctuary of Apollo in Delphi, an institution that underwent significant political and religious changes at the end of the 6th Century B.C., the impact of which was felt all over Magna Graecia. The ritual practice of sacrifice played an important role in Delphi, but the sanctuary also gave birth to a school of wisdom that was highly critical of the arrogance (*hybris*) of large sacrifices. Asocio-cultural analysis of the Akragas of the first half of the 5th Century B.C. provides new arguments that support this interpretation. The work of Empedocles contains more evidence of being influenced by the Delphi school of wisdom than by Orphism or Pythagoreanism.

Keywords: Akragas, Apollo, Magna Graecia, Presocratic Philosophy.

Introduction

R. L. Cardullo recently made a disturbing observation: although there are over a hundred references to the work of Empedocles in the preserved texts of Aristotle, the founder of the lyceum never attributes a direct doctrinal affiliation with Pythagoras or the second-generation Pythagoreans to the Agrigentian sage (Cardullo 2011, 817). The same is true in Plato's dialogues, which contain a much smaller number of references, but this did not hinder Plato from relating Empedocles with the work of other philosophers (Gorgias (Men. 76c), Heraclitus (Sph., 242d-e), Protagoras and Heraclitus (Tht. 152e). Cf. Cardullo 2011, 817). The idea that Empedocles *Pythagorizes* (to paraphrase the expression W. Burkert discovered in his research, 'Πλάτων πυθαγορίζει,' cf. Burkert 1972, 15) was mainly coined by Neo-Platonism and was so successful that it still divides scholars today. For its proponents, the silence of Plato and Aristotle does not seem to be a serious problem. In the end, it could be that that Neo-Platonists were capable of finding in Empedocles something that they had overlooked (Kingsley 1996, 103-104).²

If Empedocles Pythagorized, it makes sense that he would do so to the rhythm of an Orphic lyre. Orphism and Pythagoreanism were two different things, but due to the extraordinary circulation of ideas that occurred between

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² For a criticism of this position, cf. Cardullo (2011, 822).

them specialized literature usually groups his influence under the 'Orphic-Pythagorean' tag (Cf., for example, Cornford 1912, 240 and Laurenti 1999, 278). However, the truth is that being Orphic was not the same as being Pythagorean and it cannot even be said that being Orphic was the same everywhere.³ But the most significant problems arise when we cast our gaze back in time, starting from the 5th Century B.C., as we begin to realize that the reliability of our convictions about the characteristics of the Orphic and Pythagorean movements has faded to the point that comparing them has become a risky proposition. The discovery of the *Derveni Papyrus* in 1962 has somewhat mitigated the situation, but not enough to dispel the many doubts that assail us when we try to compare Empedocles' thinking with that of Orphism. J.-P. Picot expressed it explicitly. The information available before Empedocles "sont maigres et toujours contestables," which weakens "la valeur des conclusions sur une influence présumée de l'orphisme sur Empédocle." (Cf. Picot 2007)⁴ We have the same problem with Pythagoreanism. We know many of the ideas of Archytas, a few of those of Philolaus, and almost nothing about what Pythagoras himself sustained. But the school inspired by his name filled in the blanks with such imagination that many scholars have not been able to avoid getting caught up in the legend.⁵ This was, literally, the case of W. Jaeger: "Empedocles of Acragas was a philosophical centaur (*philosophischer Kentaur*), so to speak – a prodigious union of Ionian elemental physics and Orphic religion." (Jaeger 1946, 295) The metaphor is certainly beautiful, but it is no more than an ingenious attempt to poetically resolve a historical contradiction, or in words of G. Casertano, an "anacronismo cronológico." (Casertano 2009, 124)

The centaurian Empedocles is a fantastic creature, but it probably did not exist in the same place as the historical Empedocles. If we go back to the middle of the 5th Century B.C. it is impossible to find a school or wisdom tradition from which such a contradictory figure could have emerged, being conscious of this, W.

³ For differences between Orphism and Pythagoreanism, cf. Casadesús Bordoy 2013.

⁴ The relationship between Empedocles and Orphism is a hotly debated in Empedoclean studies. Examples of the arguments in favour of his affiliation with Orphism in Cornford (1912, 224); Bignone (1916, 273); Jaeger (1946, 295); (1947, 130-131); Guthrie (1965, 190); Kingsley (1995, 250-277); Laurenti (1999, 292); and Bremmer (2002, 15); against: Dodds (1951, 146-149); Zuntz (1971, 263ss.); Casertano (2000, 214-236); and Picot (2000), (2007). A nuanced position, in Wersinger (2004, 131-132). A broad bibliography in Megino Rodríguez (2005, 17 n14).

⁵ The relationship between Empedocles and Pythagoreanism has occupied as many pages of Empedoclean studies as his relationship with Orphism. Often, proponents of his affiliation with Orphism also defend some kind of affiliation with Pythagoreanism, such as Kingsley (1995), Guthrie (1965, 141) and Laurenti (1999, 277-279). Nevertheless, in favour of a Pythagorean influence, but not Orphic, cf., for example, Trépanier (2004, 123-126). More arguments in favour in Primavesi (2006, 56) and (2016, 5-29). Against, Gallavoti (1975, xiv), Casertano (2000, 214-236) and (2009, 124) and Cardullo (2011). J. Bollack sustains that "Empédocle est pythagoricien, mais à sa manière, autrement." (2003, 11)

Jaeger was forced to employ the unsatisfying 'prodigious union' (*seltsamem Bunde*) description. However, the centaur exits the stage quietly if we simply stop trying to force Empedocles to wear Orphic or Pythagorean clothes.

The *poleis* of Magna Graecia had been immersed in a genuine cultural, political and religious revolution since the end of the 6th Century B.C., the epicentre of which was at what the Greeks considered the *navel* of the world: the Sanctuary of Apollo in Delphi. Apollo was not just the god of wisdom, but also the source of a wisdom tradition that radiated out from Delphi to every corner of Greece. The worship of Apollo had deep roots. But in the final third of the 6th Century B.C. Delphi underwent a series of political and religious changes that vigorously renewed and revitalized the cult of Apollo. This renovation spread throughout Magna Graecia where often, as in the case of Metapontium, new sacred areas were dedicated to the god of the silver bow and laurel wreath which openly competed with the ancient temples dedicated to Apollo (De Juliis 2001, 170-173). Over the past few years historical and archaeological researchers have provided us with many reasons to confirm G. Colli's thesis that philosophy originated in Delphi (Cf. Colli (1975; 1977 and Oñate 2004). The mark of Apollo is so evident in the fragments of Empedocles we have preserved that the scholar J. Bollack remarked "tout chez Empédocle est 'apollinien' – sans Apollon." (Bollack 2003, 115) In my opinion, this wisdom tradition is perfectly consistent with an interpretation of Empedocles free of the ideological context Orphism or Pythagoreanism, or to return to W. Jaeger's metaphor, with an Empedocles *without horseshoes*.

Although the hypothesis of a Delphic Empedocles is supported by many factors, it must grapple with a major criticism. Empedocles is well known for his rejection of bloody sacrifices, yet one thing about Delphi that is impossible to ignore is the extraordinary role such sacrifices played in the rites used to worship Apollo. According to Detienne's graphic expression, Apollo was the god with *le couteau à la main* (Detienne 1998), a reality that many scholars have not been able to ignore when discussing the nature of the relationship between Empedocles and Apollo.⁶ It is true that we have a broad collection of fragments and testimonies that deal with Empedocles' criticism of the institution of

⁶ Cf. J.-C. Picot and W. Berg: "Empedocles is in strong ethical opposition to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, for the *Hymn* prizes sacrificial hecatombs, while the Agrigentine condemns all bloody sacrifice." (2018, 384) However, the position of these authors is difficult to reconcile with the fact that according to Diogenes Laertius Empedocles' poem may have been recited in Olympia (8.63), where sacrifices continued to be a key aspect of ritual. To address this problem J.-C. Picot and W. Berg are forced to assume that the rhapsode omitted the most compromising aspects of the poem: "Would Cleomenes, the rhapsode who lent his voice to the poems of Empedocles, have acquiesced in being involved with scandalous recitations that provoked the local authorities? Hardly likely. The *Purifications* declaimed at Olympia ought not therefore to have included fr. 128, 136 and 137. By contrast, fr. 127 and 146 – socially and religiously 'correct' representations of the blessed state – could have had a very favourable reception." (Picot and Berg 2015, 402 n47)

sacrifices,⁷ but the true scope of this criticism is not as evident as it seems at first glance. For example, it is striking that a man like Plutarch, an avid reader of Empedocles and high priest of the Oracle at Delphi, not only saw no contradiction between one thing and the other, but even wrote two small treatises on meat abstinence, with many allusions to Empedocles (Plu. *De esu carnium* I and II. Cf. Hershbell 1971), without seeming to care at all about what the owner of the knife might think. In my opinion, in one of these treatises Plutarch provides the key to unlocking this conundrum. In order to dramatize the sacrifices, he decides to give voice to one of its victims, who rebukes the butcher with these words: “I do not ask to be spared in ease of necessity; only spare me your arrogance!” (Plu. *Moralia* 994E)⁸ The true issue, therefore, is arrogance (ὑβρις) and the social and cultural meaning that the criticism of this *hybris* had in the context of Empedocles of Agrigento. In the Queen Cypris narrative, Empedocles places the focus on the ‘unspeakable slaughter of bulls’ (ταύρωνδ’ ἀρρήτοισιφόνοις, fr. 128.8). What I will try to demonstrate in this article is that Empedocles’ diatribe against such slaughter had a specific political meaning in the Akragas of the middle of the 5th Century B.C., and that this meaning, far from placing Empedocles at odds with the tradition of Apollo, allows us to recognize the lord of Delphi as the true source of his wisdom.

Delphi or Pythagoras? The Origin of Empedocles’ Criticism of Sacrifices

Traditions change. Much more so when they are linked to an institution whose survival depended on its ability to adapt to social and political changes. Delphi, as sustained by the historian I. Malkin, may have been in favour of conservatism in questions regarding worship and morals, but not “with regard to social and political problems.” (1989, 152) In the final third of the 6th Century B.C. the authorities at the sanctuary were increasingly caught up in the political maelstrom that was shaking the Greek world, which could be seen in many aspects, none more significant than the emergence of the Alcmaeonids. The ties established between the internal politics of the sanctuary and the political interests of the Alcmaeonids were so close that Herodotus could not help but point out how the verdicts of the Oracle always favoured the side from which the money of the illustrious Athenian family flowed (Hdt. 5.63.1, 5.90, 6.123. Cf. Scott 2014, 98-101). The panorama of the Sanctuary of Delphi was transformed at the same velocity as the political panorama of Athens, a fact that left an unmistakable imprint on Athenian democracy, but also on the sanctuary itself. After the Alcmaeonids restored the temple, the Delphic religion emerged with

⁷ The consensus among scholars is that Empedocles deals with sacrifices and meat abstinence in at least the following fragments: 31 B 128, 135-139, 143 and 145 DK and d.5-6 MP (from now on I shall omit the chapter and section for all DK Empedoclean fragments. Unless otherwise indicated, I will follow B. Inwood’s edition of the fragments.)

⁸ “οὐπαραιτοῦμαίσουτῆνἀνάγκηνἀλλὰτὴνὑβρίν” (transl. H. Cherniss and C. Helmbold).

such force that it had a massive impact on Magna Graecia (Bowden 2005, Scott 2010 and 2014). From Metapontium to Syracuse, a multitude of temples and holy grounds were established as authentic *branches* of the god of the laurel branch (Mazzarino 1947, 181. Cf. Lane 2009). The tyrannies fought to improve their prestige by investing in sumptuous offerings, but Delphi was a disputed space, a formidable tool to provide political legitimacy which the young democracies never stopped trying to appropriate. The sanctuary became the centre of wisdom of Greece, and the spread of its ideas was favoured by the creation of a wide network of political and religious information beyond compare at the time (Malkin 2003).

Those ideas, however, spread upon the rising smoke from altars. The altar and the sacrificial rite were at the heart of the institution of *temenos*, a fact difficult to reconcile with someone as critical of the butcher's knife as Empedocles. Nevertheless, Plutarch has already put us on guard against easy answers. The relationship between the name of Apollo and the institution of sacrifices was much more complex than it may seem at first sight. We know this not only through Plutarch, but also through the vestiges of Pythagoreanism that have reached us. One must only peruse the pages of Iamblichus, Porphyry or Diogenes Laertius to see that the members of the Pythagorean school (or at least the testimony that these sources provide about them) saw no contradiction between the rejection of bloody sacrifices and the belief that the source of their wisdom was in Delphi.⁹ If this was possible for Plutarch and the Pythagoreans, it could also have been for Empedocles.

Moreover, the debate has been weighed down by an overly simplistic vision of the reasons why a Greek could oppose the practice of bloody sacrifices or the consumption of meat. They could be religious, moral or simply dietary, none of which necessarily involves Pythagorean doctrine. It is possible to be in favour of one thing (bloody sacrifices) and against the other (the consumption of sacrificed meat) (Porph. *Abst.* 2.2.2.). In either case (even among Pythagoreans) there were frequent exceptions. For example, the sacrifice of oxen was generally prohibited, but roosters were usually not so lucky (Porph. *VP* 36. Cf. *VP* 34). Furthermore, there was no consensus regarding the most appropriate way to follow such prescriptions. Some, as we have just seen, only abstained from eating the meat of certain animals. For others, abstinence must be absolute. And for yet others, it depended on the person (complete abstinence for philosophers, but more leeway for everyone else) (Porph. *VP* 150). There were, therefore, many ways of complying with the practice of abstinence and the prohibition of sacrifices. In this sense, the example of Porphyry is quite revealing. Not only because he is one of our main sources of Empedocles, but also for the subtlety with which he deals with an issue whose main obstacle has always been the lack

⁹ Inspiration in Delphi: D.L. 8.8, 21; Porph. *VP* 16, 41; Iambl. *VP* 5, 82, 161, 213, 247 | Rejection of bloody sacrifices: D.L. 8.13, 20, 33, 37; Porph. *VP* 7, Iambl. *VP* 35, 54, 107, 177.

of nuance. Porphyry highlights three important aspects. The first, is that killing animals (which, for example, pose a threat to humans) does not necessarily imply that they must be eaten. The second is that it is also not necessary when obligated to make a sacrifice to the gods. And third, that abstinence is not recommended for everybody, but rather it is specifically for philosophers, and among them, only for those who pursue happiness through the divine and imitation of the divine (Porph. *Abst.* 2-3). These three aspects are interesting because they provide a much more complex representation of these kinds of practices, which from Porphyry's perspective are perfectly compatible with complying with civic religious rites. This does not imply that his convictions or arguments were weak. Ending the life of an innocent creature is a deep injustice, and such injustice cannot be whitewashed by converting it into a sacrifice. However, Porphyry distinguishes between when this injustice is committed for our enjoyment and when it is committed to comply with the laws of the city or of the gods. If there is no good reason to sacrifice an innocent animal, neither is there reason to not piously honour the gods or the laws of the city. The conflict can only be resolved in one way and it is no coincidence that it was Plutarch's solution a few centuries earlier. As we shall see, Porphyry expresses it in many different ways: "The god is pleased not by the size of sacrifices, but by ordinary things".¹⁰ Meanwhile, Plutarch presents it by giving voice to the victims: "I do not ask to be spared in ease of necessity; only spare me your arrogance! Kill me to eat, but not to please your palate!"¹¹ In both cases, the criticism centres on excess, on ὕβρις, referring to the Delphic wisdom tradition.

But before examining where this line of reasoning leads us, it is a good idea to reiterate the need to handle our sources carefully. Too often ancient sources tried to cover the distance that separated them from Empedocles by using the tool-kit of Plato and Pythagoreanism. A particularly significant case is Plutarch's allusion to fragment 137, in which he assumes that Empedocles is allegorically referring to souls, "ἀλληγορεῖ γὰρ ἐν ταῦθα τὰς ψυχάς." (Plu. *Moralia* 996b, and 997b)¹² This fragment, as we know, is one of the most common arguments used to support Empedocles' affiliation with Pythagoreanism. The text starts with a thunderous verse, where the first thing that comes on the scene is the transmutation of bodies:

1 μορφὴν δ' ἀλλάξαντα πατὴρ φίλον υἱὸν αἰείρας
σφάζει ἐπευχόμενος μεγάλης ἰσχύος· οἶδ' ἀπορεῖνται
λισσόμενον θύοντες, ὃ δ' αὐτῆς οὐκ ὁμοκλέων
σφάζας ἐν μεγάροισι κακῆν ἀλεγύνατο δαῖτα.
5 ὥς δ' αὐτῶς πατέρ' υἱὸς ἐλὼν καὶ μητέρα παῖδες

¹⁰ "Ὅτι δὲ οὐ τῶ ὄγκῳ χαίρει ἰσθῶς τῶν θυσιῶν, ἀλλὰ τῶ τυχόντι" (Porph. *Abst.* 2.20), (transl. G. Clark).

¹¹ "οὐ παρὰ τοῦ μαίσου τὴν ἀνάγκην ἀλλὰ τὴν ὑβρίν, ἵνα φάγησά ποκτεῖνον, ἵνα δ' ἡδίων φάγησμήμ' ἀναίρει" (Plu. *Moralia* 994e), (transl. H. Cherniss and C. Helmbold).

¹² Plutarch does not explicitly cite fr. 137, but the allusion is clear due to the context.

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Θυμὸν ἀπορραΐσαν τε φίλας κατὰ σάρκα ζέδουσιν.

- 1 A father lifts up his dear son, who has changed his form
And prays and slaughters him, in great folly, and they are at a loss
As they sacrifice the suppliant. But he, on the other hand, deaf to the rebukes,
sacrificed him in his halls, and prepared himself an evil meal.
- 5 In the same way, a son seizes his father and the children their mother,
and tearing out their life-breath devour their own dear flesh (transl. B.
Inwood).

It is almost inevitable that someone educated in the Platonic tradition will think of metempsychosis when they hear of children meeting their parents again in the form of sacrificial victims. In reality, however, Empedocles never speaks of the soul (in the sense the word has for Plato or the Pythagoreans), and he had no reason to refer to it to explain the process by which life changes form. In all likelihood, Empedocles only sought dramatic effect to highlight his theory of the community of living beings. All living beings are made from the same roots. These roots are divine and always guided by the powerful influence of Love and Strife. Empedocles describes them as constantly running through each other (fr. 17.34), mixing and interchanging (fr. 8.3), giving rise, as a result of their union, to the diffusion of a 'thousand tribes of mortals' (ἔθνεα μυρία θνητῶν), 'fitted together in all kinds of forms' (παντοίαισι δέησιν ἀρηρότα) (fr. 35.16-17). Sometimes these forms are human; other times that of a savage beast; and others, that of a shrub or bird (fr. 9.1-3). According to Empedocles, everything that exists belongs to the divine, which is very different than considering that the divine belongs to everything that exists. Let me restate this. Men are made from divine roots, but we are not gods. However, we belong to them, just like the animals, trees and mountains. The pulse that makes the heart of all creatures beat is divine. That is why for Empedocles all life is sacred and deserves to be treated with the same respect and piety that we owe the gods.

I doubt that Empedocles believed, as Plutarch claims (*Moralia* 997e), that the sacrificial victim contains the life (or soul) of the child of the person who wields the knife. It is much more probable that his intention was to construct a powerful metaphor to express the profound bonds that unite all living beings. Above all, he wanted to express the ruthlessness involved in acts of violence. On various occasions, Porphyry refers to the fact that the invention of bloody sacrifices was closely related to the invention of war (Porph. *Abst.* 2.7.2, 2.12.1, 2.57.3. Cf. Plu. *Moralia* 998a-b).¹³ I believe that this relation was present in Empedocles and that it is impossible to comprehend the success of his discourse unless his contemporaries also had this relation in their heads. The blood on the altars evoked the blood on battlefields. Thus, what was important in Empedocles' narrative was not that the victim of the sacrifice was in fact the child of the butcher, but rather the attempt to make the butcher see the eyes of

¹³ In which the institution of sacrifice is related to war and tyranny.

his child in the eyes of the creatures whose throats he was slitting. Not just because life is sacred, but also because there is a relation between the way we treat animals and the way that we treat each other. When parents lose their compassion for life, their children, in one way or another, usually find themselves at the end of the knife.

‘Unspeakable Slaughter of Bulls’: Akragas and the Tyranny

Empedocles’ posture, therefore, was not exactly the same as that of Plutarch or Porphyry. But there was enough in common for those authors to consider Empedocles a rich source of material to use in their own discourses. Many fragments have come down to us thanks to this practice. Among them, fragment 128, which has also been preserved through other sources, but that in Porphyry plays a particularly important role for our topic. Porphyry mentions it in the second book of *On Abstinence*, where he pays particular attention to the question of sacrifices.

1 οὐδέτις ἤνκεινοισιν Ἄρησθεοῦ οὐδέ Κυδοιμῶς
οὐδέ Ζεὺς βασιλεὺς οὐδέ Κρόνος οὐδ’ Ὀπσειδῶν,
ἀλλὰ Κύπρις βασίλεια...

...
τῆνοῖγ’ εὐσεβέεσσιν ἀγάλμασιν ἰλάσκοντο

5 γραπτοῖς τε ζώοισι μύροις ἰτεδαῖδα λέοσμοις
σμήρνηστ’ ἀκρήτου θυσιάεσι βάνου τε θύωδους
ξανθῶν τε σπονδάεσι τῶν ῥίπτων τε ζέσοῦ δας,
ταύρων δ’ ἀρρήτοισι φόνου οὐδέυετο βωμός,
ἀλλὰ μύσος τοῦτ’ ἔσκεν ἐν ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστον,

10 θυμὸν ἀπορραΐσαντα ζέεδμεναιήεα γυῖα. (128.8: ἀκρήτοισι Scaliger
DK/Inwood: ἀρρήτοισι Fabricius (Kirk, Raven and Schofield). Cf. Wright 1981,
143, 282-283)

1 They had no god Ares or Battle-Din,
nor Zeus the King nor Kronos nor Poseidon;
but Kupris the queen [Aphrodite]

...
her they worshipped with pious images,

5 painted pictures and perfumes of varied odours,
and sacrifices of unmixed myrrh and fragrant frankincense,
dashing onto the ground libations of yellow honey.
Their altar was not drenched by the unspeakable slaughter of bulls,
but this was the greatest abomination among men,

10 to tear out their life-breath and eat their goodly limbs (transl. B. Inwood,
modified).

In my opinion, this fragment, along with the others that seem to deal with the topic of abstinence and sacrifices, is part of a narrative that Empedocles

introduced, according to a valuable reference from Porphyry, when he addressed "the theogony and sacrifices." (Porph. *Abst.* 2.21.1) The narrative must be divided into at least two sequences: the first, around fragment 128, describes life under the reign of Cypris. Men follow the law of Aphrodite's Justice and do not carry out bloody sacrifices (Cf. fr. 135 and Arist. *Rh.* 1376b 14-17).¹⁴ The second, around 137, narrates the consequences of the increase in Strife among men. Bloody sacrifices are instituted, and friendliness (φιλοφροσύνη), which once gleamed in the reign of Aphrodite (fr. 130), is replaced by evil quarrels. According to this interpretation, Empedocles' narrative is not only meant to criticize the institution of sacrifice, but also the institution of strife among men, of which the blood spilled on the altars is merely a reflection. Without question Empedocles was scandalized by the cruelty of sacrifices, but he was far more scandalized by the cruelty with which men sacrificed each other. And in Ancient Greece, one of the most impressive celebrations of this cruelty was no other than the 'unspeakable slaughter of bulls.' The entire significance of the Queen Cypris narrative is related to the significance such slaughter had within the socio-cultural context of Empedocles. For us it is easy to disassociate one thing from the other, but for the people who listened to Empedocles, the 'unspeakable slaughter of bulls' immediately evoked the celebration of war and deaths on the battlefield. The more deaths there were, more bulls were sacrificed on the altar. And in Empedocles' era the greatest aficionados of this kind of boast were the tyrants.

If we return to *On Abstinence*, a few paragraphs before the Queen Cypris narrative appears we can find an extremely interesting anecdote regarding the tyrants of Sicily. Porphyry echoes the information of some historians who claim that "the tyrants, after their victory over the Carthaginians, offered hecatombs to Apollo with great rivalry among themselves for the most splendid." (Porph. *Abst.* 2.17.1) These sacrifices must have been truly impressive. In all likelihood, Porphyry refers to the hecatombs established by Gelo of Syracuse and Theron of Akragas after the battle of Himera (480 B.C.). Porphyry's anecdote places them in the Sanctuary of Delphi, but we know that these hecatombs were not even close to being the greatest expenditure carried out by Theron to celebrate his triumph over the Carthaginians. To discover the extent of his extravagance, we must travel to the tyrant's city, ancient Akragas, where we can find, according to Diodorus Siculus (D.S. 11.25, 13.82), the Temple of Olympian Zeus, one of the most colossal ever built in the Greek world (Mertens 2006, 261-266). Thanks to Diodorus' description, we know that its eastern and western façades were decorated with large reliefs that recreated scenes from the Gigantomachy and the Sack of Troy. Reflecting the opinion of most scholars, T. Van Compernelle, wrote that it must be understood as an integral part of the tyrant's propaganda,

¹⁴ Empedocles seems to be contrasting the law of Aphrodite's Justice (not to kill what is living) with the law of Zeus' Justice, which excludes animals (Hes. *Op.* 276-279). Cf. Wright (1981, 285).

the saviour of the city: “d’une part, par l’établissement d’un ordre nouveau et, d’autre part, par la défaite des Barbares.” (Van Compernelle 1993, 249) The Gigantomachy, therefore, was one of the most important decorations of Akragas in the 5th Century B.C. and there is reason to consider that Empedocles may have had it in mind as a symbol of the tyrant’s power. At least two authors from Antiquity, Plutarch and Proclus, established an explicit relationship between the strife (νεῖκος) of Empedocles and Zeus’ fight against the Titans and the Giants (Plu. *Moralia* 926E, Procl. in *Prm.* 849. Cf. Hershbell 1970, 157). It is unlikely that these authors knew the context of Empedocles, but what they did know was the context of the fragments in which Empedocles spoke of Strife and the fact that both of them related it to Zeus’ battle could be that it was taken from the text itself. Of course, it could have been established independently. But the reliefs of the Temple of Zeus were so famous in Antiquity that four centuries later they continued to impress an author such as Diodorus Siculus. If somebody would have wanted to launch a criticism against the excess of those who erected the temple it would have been enough to evoke the relief of its main façade. The question is if Empedocles really had motives to do so. We do not need to move far from the temple to find out that he did.

Only 50 metres from its eastern façade, just in front of the scene of the Gigantomachy, Theron ordered the construction of an altar as monumental as the temple itself. D. Mertens summed up his impressions with a single word: ‘Gigantesco.’ (2006, 265) It was as big as two basketball courts (placed one after the other: 54 x 15.70 m.) and visitors to the Archaeological Park are still left breathless by its ruins. Two centuries passed, as D. Mertens points out, before another monument of this category appeared in the West that could rival it. It was created (unsurprisingly) by another tyrant, Hiero II of Syracuse. The conclusion of D. Martens speaks for itself: “e dovette essere il centro di grandi feste, con sacrifici sulla piazza quasi quadrata e simmetricamente delimitata da tempio e altare.” (2006, 265) To sum up, if there was a place in Akragas that could be associated with the ‘unspeakable slaughter of bulls,’ it would be the altar of the Temple of Olympian Zeus, the largest altar in Magna Graecia and a symbol of the tyranny.

Let us return to Porphyry, who we had abandoned in the middle of his description of the splendid hecatombs that the tyrants of Sicily had offered Apollo. After carrying out these sacrifices, the tyrants asked the god which of them had pleased him more, “and his reply was wholly unexpected: that it was the ground grain from Dokimos.” (Porph. *Abst.* 2.17.1) A very disappointing answer for the vanity of a tyrant. Dokimos was a Delphian who farmed a hard, stony patch of ground who, according to Porphyry, “came down from his piece of land that day and offered a few handfuls of barley-groats from the pouch he wore, giving the god more satisfaction than those who had offered splendid sacrifices.” (Porph. *Abst.* 2.17.2) The meaning of this story seems quite clear. As Porphyry himself points out, what most pleases the divine power is not the size

of the sacrifices, but rather ordinary things (Porph. *Abst.* 2.20.1). A completely Delphic interpretation, which Porphyry illustrates with other examples. Among them, the narrative of Queen Cypris, and two new anecdotes that are also related to Delphi (Cfr. Porph. *Abst.* 2.15-16).¹⁵ The message of these anecdotes is the same as the prior one. The first is about a citizen from Hermione whose sacrifice of three finger-breadths of ground grain from his pouch pleased the deity more than the sumptuous hecatombs offered by a Thessalian. The other is about a rich citizen from Magnesia who is dismayed to discover that the gods favour the humble sacrifices of a poor farmer from a backwater in Arcadia who offered no more than incense, ground grain and cakes, while honouring all the divine precepts and festivals. H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell recorded these three stories in their catalogue of oracular responses, numbered 241, 239-240 and 238, and based on a reflection by M. P. Nilsson, proposed interpreting them according to the best-known aspect of Delphic wisdom: "The Pythia has been made to express the Greek aversion from *hybris*." (Parke y Wormell 1956a, 384. Cf. Nilsson 1949 [=1925], 198) "Man – says Nilsson – is not to exalt himself even in his piety." (Nilsson 1949 [=1925], 198) The arrogance of those who make sumptuous gifts to the gods must be condemned. And M.P. Nilsson highlights that this has to do with Apollo's opposition to tyrants, such as the Peisistratids of Athens and the Orthagorids of Sycione. Although many Greeks hated the tyrants, they "could not help admiring them as 'the equals of the gods', who, like the gods, could permit themselves to do whatever they pleased." (Nilsson 1949 [=1925], 198. Cf. Plu. *Moralia* 998a-b) The god condemned this impiety with a sentence that was inscribed in the stone of the Sanctuary at Delphi: μηδὲν ἄγαν ('nothing in excess').

The fragments of Empedocles do not reveal many details regarding his criticism of the institution of sacrifices or of his position on abstinence. Many questions still up in the air. Is the speaker who laments having devoured meat in fragment 139 referring to any kind of meat or a specific type? And what really provoked his lament, the act of eating the meat itself, or perhaps the abominable action that led to it (cf. the alternative version of fr. d.6 MP)? Should only he regret the action or every other person who hears him? Is it a man speaking or a god? Do the same rules that apply to men also apply to the gods? These are questions for which not even the Pythagoreans had a unanimous answer. Earlier I provided various citations to demonstrate that the Pythagoreans rejected the institution of sacrifice, but we have also seen that the same sources offer more nuanced positions. For example, if we read Diogenes Laertius, we see how after speaking about Pythagoras and bloodless sacrifices he immediately backtracks and points out that others say that Pythagoras sometimes sacrificed animals, although only roosters, kids, and, as little as possible, lambs (D.L. 8.20). We find similar information in Porphyry. Either with a rooster or 'a very young piglet,'

¹⁵ Porphyry cites Theopompus (4th Century B.C.) as the source of the second story.

some Pythagoreans found a way to circumvent the prohibition (Porph. *VP* 36. Cf. *VP* 34). On other occasions, it was not so much a question of the type of animal but rather of the type of person who made the sacrifice. Contemplative philosophers had to abstain completely, but everyone else could sacrifice the occasional rooster or lamb (Porph. *VP* 150).

In my opinion, more than a defence of 'végétarisme radical,' as claimed by J.-F. Balaudé (1997, 33) Empedocles' narrative is a condemnation of the arrogance of large sacrifices. To this end he ruminates about the times in which men lived in community with all other living beings and denounces that the spectacle of long chains of bulls walking to the altar only contributed to the vanity of men and the corruption of our view of life.¹⁶ For Empedocles all the creatures with which we share the world have divine roots, from abundant schools of fish, to a simple snail, or a fierce lion who sleeps on the mountain, and all that is divine deserves to be treated with piety and respect. This perspective on life can lead to an ethics based on abstinence, but more commonly it results in one based on moderation and the pious treatment of all living beings. Vegetarianism (not to mention radical vegetarianism, what today we refer to as veganism) was an exception and it continues to be so in any other part of the world. In my opinion, the interpretation most consistent with the historical context of Empedocles puts his discourse in the sphere of influence of Delphi and of narratives regarding the unapologetic ὕβρις of the powerful and the tyrants, a ὕβρις that on many occasions the democrats did not hesitate to imitate. Fifteen years after the battle of Himera, the dictatorship of Thrasybulus, the brother of Gelo, was overthrown in Syracuse and to celebrate the city instituted festivals to honour Zeus *Eleutherios* in which four hundred and fifty bulls were sacrificed and consumed in a banquet for the citizens (D.S. 11.72). Syracuse was not Akragas, but such a slaughter must not have gone unnoticed, and there is no reason to doubt that Empedocles could have had it in mind when he launched his diatribe against the 'unspeakable slaughter of bulls' and how abominable it was "to tear out their life-breath and eat their goodly limbs." (fr. 128.8-10) Empedocles' criticism was fed by the alimentary substrate of democracy, but it was a criticism directed at any type of ὕβρις, including that of democracy itself, and this was probably what made him a sage worthy of the Delphic tradition.

In a noteworthy take on our topic, G. Wersinger observed that the target of Empedocles' barbs was the deeply-rooted worship of chthonic deities in Akragas. This worship was closely tied to the tyranny and to the large sacrifices that were held around the altar of Zeus (Wersinger 2004). I think G. Wersinger was correct, but I do not agree with the arguments that lead her to claim that Empedocles

¹⁶ Cf. G. Casertano: "V'è, certamente, ancora, la condanna dei sacrifici sontuosi e cruenti; ma più che in un'ottica vegetariana, essa andrebbe inquadrata nell'ambito di una polemica contro il lusso e lo spreco delle classi ricche (...). Se non esiste dunque in Empedocle la persistenza del divieto orfico di mangiar carne, a maggior ragione non esiste a rigore nemmeno la prescrizione di una dieta vegetariana." (2000, 230-231)

was part of this tradition. There is, first of all, an obstacle to identifying Orphism with the large cults of chthonic deities. Both are mystery religions, so needless to say the worship of Demeter and Persephone played an important role in both. But their rituals, their historical dating, and how deeply they penetrated the urban fabric of the city were very different. What has left a clear trace in Akragas is the worship of chthonic deities, not Orphism. Furthermore, considering Empedocles a follower of Orphism is problematic, as pointed out by G. Wersinger herself,¹⁷ and his discourse is not consistent with that of a reformer, but rather that of an adversary from a rival school of wisdom. In reality, I think that it is more likely that Empedocles' criticisms were directed against the political sphere of the two most important religious centres of his city, the magnificent Temple of Olympian Zeus and the Sanctuary of Chthonic Deities. Both had a prominent place in the sacred area known as the Valley of the Temples and close ties with the tyranny (De Miro 1994, 29-30). The main areas from which these cults radiated were Olympia and Eleusis, whose sanctuaries must have been shaken by the inexorable rise of Delphi that began in the final third of the 6th Century B.C.¹⁸ But there is another one important aspect. Archaeological excavations have allowed historians to confirm that the construction projects in these temples sponsored by Theron were abruptly stopped with the fall of the tyranny, a circumstance that could not be explained by economic reasons (temples continued to be built in Akragas) and therefore must have been politically motivated: the democracy was reluctant to continue the tyrant's projects (De Miro 1994, 29-30; Greco 2007, 200-201). If democrats associated the Temple of Olympian Zeus and, by extension, the great extravagance of the Gigantomachy and the large sacrifices carried out at its altar, with the tyranny, then it is possible that Empedocles' discourse could have acted as narrative to legitimize the democracy. There has been much discussion regarding the soundness of the testimonies that render account of Empedocles' democratic

¹⁷ Wersinger is unconvinced by the arguments made by Kingsley (1995, 260 ss.) to downplay the fact that Dionysus was not mentioned even once in the fragments that we have preserved, cf. Wersinger (2004, 131-132).

¹⁸ For the differences between Orphism and the large cults worshipping chthonic deities, cf. Ricciardelli (2005, 276); for the archaeological remains in the environs of the Temple of Zeus and the Sanctuary of the Chthonic Deities of Akragas, cf. De Miro (2000) and De Miro and Calli (2007); in particular, for the parallels between the sacred area of the *terrazzo dei donatori* and the *Eleusinion* of Athens, cf. De Miro and Calli (2007, 47); for the relations between the sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia, cf. Scott (2010): "The two sanctuaries were the de facto possession of two increasingly competing poleis, Athens and Sparta. Most mainland Greek poleis were allied to one or the other, although those alliances kept shifting over time." (235) It is noteworthy that the Alcaemonids' rapprochement with Delphi in the final third of the 6th Century B.C. coincided not only with Peisistratos distancing himself from this sanctuary (Scott 2014, 99-100), but also with the broad programme of reforms that occurred during the tyranny in the Sanctuary of Eleusis (Mylonas 1961, 77-106). This might imply that at the end of the 6th Century B.C. the rivalry between the cults of Delphi and Eleusis had gained political significance.

affiliation.¹⁹ The debate is complex. We do not know much about the type of democracy that was instituted in Akragas, and the epithet 'δημοτικός' attributed to Empedocles by Diogenes Laertius can be interpreted in different ways. But everything we have seen to this point indicates that Empedocles must have had some kind of commitment to the democratic changes that took place in his city after the fall of the tyranny. If this is the case, it is difficult to believe that the new democracy would not have reserved a significant role for a sage of his calibre.²⁰

Conclusion

Empedocles' criticism of the institution of bloody sacrifices has traditionally been framed within the ideological context of Pythagoreanism. Our research has allowed us to establish that the source of this criticism can be found in the wisdom tradition that emanated from the Sanctuary of Delphi. For many authors the emergence of a personality such as Empedocles was an exceptional case, a rare confluence of different traditions, combining Pythagoreanism, Ionian elemental physics and Orphism. Empedocles was, in the words of W. Jaeger, a 'philosophical centaur.' However, our approach to the social and cultural context of Magna Graecia has provided a much more consistent image of Empedocles, that of a sage trained in the Delphic tradition who was heavily involved in the political changes taking place in his city. His criticism of the institution of sacrifices coincides with the Delphic criticism of the arrogance of large hecatombs, a criticism that the sources associate with tyranny in particular. The problems with the Empedocles without horseshoes interpretation, that is, of an Empedocles liberated from the Orphic and Pythagorean influences, are much smaller than the problems that arise from W. Jaeger's centaur interpretation.

Empedocles' objection to the violence, vanity and absurd waste of life characterized by the hecatombs, were undoubtedly directed at the impiety that these hecatombs usually celebrated, which was the slaughter perpetrated among Greeks, whether to dominate others or with the vain excuse of being liberated from domination. There are many things we cannot confirm about Empedocles, but his disdain for those who spilled the blood of others is not one of them. His voice was an outcry against strife. His narrative, a warning that life is rooted in the divine and that we cannot dispose of it any way we please. Life does not belong to us. It is we who belong to life. Ultimately, Empedocles' narrative was an invitation to the Greeks to put out the fire of their strife and to feel the benevolent and sacred breeze of Friendship, a breeze whose presence was impossible not to feel in Delphi, the navel of the world and the cradle of wisdom.

¹⁹ For more on Empedocles as a political reformer, democrat and his aversion to accepting public office, cf. 31 A1 DK (=D.L. 8.64, *FHG* 214 fr. 88a; D.L. 8.66; D.L. 8.63 [=Arist. *Fr.* 66]).

²⁰ Difficulties with a democratic interpretation, in Asheri (1992). In favour, Kirk and Raven (1957, 321), Guthrie (1965; 131), Capizzi (1982, 369-378), Inwood (2001, 7), Palumbo (2008, 139-142). Some, such as Chitwood (1986), are sceptical regarding the sources.

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