



Iphigeneia and the Taurians

Summary :

Greeks and Taurians got in close contact particularly after the establishment of the Greek colonies on their territory. The precise date concerning the emergence of Iphigeneia's legend remains obscure, but the written testimony refers to it already in the 6th century BC. There are many variants of that myth. Euripides was aware of them in the 5th century BC and the mingling of the different versions resulted in his famous work "Iphigeneia in Tauris" that was a huge success among his contemporaries as well as his descendants.

Date

6th-5th centuries BC

Geographical Location

Crimean peninsula, Black Sea

1. The Taurians

The Taurians (*Ταῦροι*, *Tauri*) were the inhabitants of the southern part of the Crimean peninsula, mainly the Crimean Mountains and their foothills, which lent their name to Crimea (*Chersonesos Taurike*). The Kizil-kobinskaya archaeological culture (9th – 3rd centuries BC) that has been attributed to the Taurians is represented both by settlements and burial-grounds (mainly group burials in stone sarcophagoi).¹ The origins of the Kizil-kobinskaya culture remain obscure: it is associated with the development of the local Timber-grave culture of the Bronze Age or with influences from the Caucasian Kobanskaya culture. The linguistic roots of the Taurians are also unknown to us. According to archaeological evidence, the Taurians were engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. They had been part of the Crimean Late [Scythian](#) kingdom, which had its capital in [Scythian Neapolis](#), since the 2nd century BC and they were mixing with the Scythians of the Crimea who had adopted a settled way of life. In Classical sources this mingling of people is reflected in the use of the term "Tauro-Scythians" that was in use for the first time in [Pliny](#) (*H.N.* 4.85).

2. Greeks and Taurians

Direct contacts between Greeks and Taurians started at the beginning of the 6th century BC after [Greek colonies](#) had been founded in the Bosphorus. However, they became particularly active from the end of the 6th century BC after the colony of [Tauric Chersonesos](#) had been founded within the territory settled by the Taurians. In classical literature the Taurians are represented as extremely wild and fierce people, which were not in contact with the Greeks, but engaged mainly in piracy and looting and sacrificing foreigners to the goddess Parthenos (*Hdt.* 4.103; *Strab.* 7.4.47; *Amm. Marc.* 22.8.34 et al.). This image is probably considerably exaggerated. In any case, the inscription on a gravestone from [Pantikapaion](#), which had been erected on the grave of a Taurian, with the Greek name Tykhon (*CIRB* 114), points to the presence of Hellenized Taurians in Greek cities as early as the 5th century BC. The possible adoption of the cult of Taurian Parthenos by the Greek colonists is also an indication of cultural contacts. In Tauric Chersonesos, Parthenos became the main state deity but her cult has also been recorded in Bosphorus.² It is precisely among the Greeks of the Black Sea region, who had been in contact with the Taurians, that the legend concerning the miraculous removal of Iphigeneia to their land emerged.³

3. The legend of Iphigeneia

Iphigeneia was in all probability a goddess of fertility and death, but written testimony attributes a hero cult to her.⁴ She has been mentioned in ancient sources since the 6th century BC; the texts of that time mention her sacrifice and miraculous rescue and then transformation into a goddess - Artemis Enodia, which was understood by ancient authors to mean that she became Hecate (*Hes. fr.* 23a-b;⁵ *Stesich. fr.* 215, cf. *Diod.* 4.45), but there is nothing about her being snatched away to distant lands. In the epic *Cypria* she is carried off to Tauris and made immortal by Artemis, but our knowledge concerning the epic cycle is doubtful, and, as a result it



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cannot be used for dating the emergence of this tradition. The local Pontic version of Iphigenia's legend was based on the 6th century BC widespread tradition concerning her transformation into a deity. The Greek colonists identified this deity with the local virgin-goddess of the Taurians under the influence of popular etymology: the epithet of the Ionian goddess [Artemis](#) Tauropolos identified with Iphigenia was connected to the Taurians' name. More important was that the cult of Artemis Tauropolos and her association with human sacrifices, although in historical times these were not practised by the Greeks.⁶ The Pontic Greeks in the spirit of *interpretatio graeca* identified Artemis Tauropolos / Iphigenia with a Tauric goddess – also a virgin – whose cult included human sacrifice (traces of this practice in the Crimea are attested by archaeological data).⁷

4. Iphigeneia in ancient greek literature

Around the middle of the 5th century BC the Pontic legend became known to [Herodotus](#), who made wide use of Pontic material. If it had not been for him, the legend would not have been spread beyond the Black Sea region and would not have become part of Greek literature. In his short account of the Taurians (4.103) Herodotus focuses mainly on a description of human sacrifice to Parthenos; he also identifies this goddess with Iphigenia.

The next stage in the development of Iphigenia's legend is represented by Euripides' tragedy "Iphigenia in Tauris". Euripides relies on the account of Herodotus, but he introduces substantial changes to the tradition. In his version, Iphigenia is not a goddess, but a mortal woman, who becomes a priestess of Artemis, first in the Taurid and then at Brauron. In the Taurid she was forced to practise human sacrifices; one of the prospective victims was her brother Orestes. After having recognized him she fled with him and Artemis's statue, as [Athena](#) had instructed them to take to Attica.

Apart from Herodotus, Euripides' source was a local Attic version of Iphigenia's mythical tradition linked to two Attic cults of Artemis, that of Tauropolos at Halai and of Brauronia at Brauron.⁸ According to the Attic legend - as opposed to the one known throughout Greece – the mortal Iphigenia had died in Attica, where she received a hero cult (her heroon was located in Brauron). Her sacrifice took place not at Aulis, but Brauron and it had not been associated with the Trojan cycle. It aimed at saving Attica from the wrath of Artemis after a non-fulfillment of a vow. Iphigenia had been regarded as the daughter of the local hero Theseus and Helen. She was saved by Artemis and became her principal priestess in Brauron.

5. The legend's variants

Under Peisistratus the legend underwent major changes. In keeping with the general trends during the rule of Peisistratus and in order to enhance the prestige of the Brauron sanctuary, the legend was drawn into a common Greek context, in particular into the Trojan epic cycle, as a result of which Iphigenia received a new genealogy – as the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra – and her sacrifice was transferred to Aulis. Yet the link between Iphigenia and Brauron survived and as before she was considered a mortal heroine, who had instituted the cult in Brauron. It was approximately at that time that the Athenian propaganda legend took shape. Herodotus had already recorded (4.145; 6.138) the abduction of Athenian girls by barbarians inhabiting Lemnos (Pelasgians or Tyrsenians); it provided the ideological framework for the capture of the island by Miltiades the Elder. According to that legend, the Lemnians had seized Athenian maidens, who had been enacting rituals in the temple of Artemis Brauronia along with the cultic statue of Artemis and probably at the same time her priestess Iphigenia. It would appear that the seizure of the Athenian maidens was assigned to the legend of Thoas, the best known hero of Lemnos. Moreover, in this legend a goddess of Lemnos, to whom human sacrifices were offered, also had some part to play.

6. Evaluation of "Iphigeneia in Tauris"

Consequently, the version of Iphigenia's legend presented in the tragedy of Euripides is the result of his own creative work. He brought together the temple tradition of Brauron (which had already changed under the influence of common Greek legends and the political propaganda of the Peisistratus period) and the information about the bloody cult of Iphigenia in distant Tauris, gleaned from the writings of Herodotus. The main change to the traditional version was the omission of the Lemnos episode, which had long ceased to be politically topical, and the relocation of the action from familiar Lemnos to exotic Tauris. The traditional figure of Thoas from



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Lemnos was now replaced by his double, Thoas, King of the Taurians; Euripides even used the original name. His Iphigenia, in accordance with the traditional version, was the daughter of Agamemnon, who was sacrificed in Aulis and saved by Artemis, who replaced her on the altar with a sacrificial animal. Euripides, however, did add the episode of her being carried off to Tauris. Despite Euripides' efforts to harmonize the elements of different origins, some details survived in "Iphigenia in Tauris", which have no explanation within the framework of the drama, but which are on their place in the traditional Lemnos version of the legend.⁹

Euripides' "Iphigenia in Tauris" was an enormous success among his contemporaries, just as it was amongst their descendants (cf., for example, the constant references to it in Aristotle's "Poetics").¹⁰ Not to mention, all the authors who have written about this heroine ever since were influenced by the tragedy. The version of the legend created by Euripides has ousted earlier ones, which have survived only in an extremely fragmentary form. The legends attributing the foundation of this or that cult of Artemis to Orestes, and assigning Tauric origin to the local cultic statue were linked not only with Attica, but also with other places, but they were all late legends and had taken shape under the influence of the Euripidean tragedy. Most of them were results of the activity of late mythographers.¹¹

Euripides' tragedy influenced also vase-painting. Since the first quarter of the 4th century BC, previously unknown depictions of Iphigenia in Tauris appeared, on a particularly wide scale in Southern Italy.¹² The legend about the posthumous marriage between Iphigenia and Achilles on the [island of Leuke](#), is also the result of late mythographic studies, based, on the one hand, on the association of both figures with the Black Sea and, on the other, on the tradition, according to which Iphigenia was brought to Aulis on the pretext of marriage with Achilles (Procl. *Cypr.* 59-60; Eur. *IA* 98-105).

1. Лесков, А.М., *Горный Крым в I тысячелетии до нашей эры* (Киев 1965); Крис, Х.И., *Кизил-кобинская культура и тавры* (Археология СССР. Свод археологических источников Д1-7, Москва 1981), cf. Щеглов, А.Н., «Тавры и греческие колонии в Таврике», в *Демографическая ситуация в Причерноморье в период Великой греческой колонизации. Материалы II Всесоюзного симпозиума по древней истории Причерноморья. Цхалтубо – 1979* (Тбилиси 1981), с. 204-218.

2. See Русыева, А.С. – Русыева, М.В., *Верховная богиня античной Таврики* (Киев 1999), with references, cf. Braund, D., «Parthenos and the Nymphs at Crimean Chersonesos: Colonial Appropriation and Native Integration», in *Une koinè pontique. Cités grecques, sociétés indigènes et Empires mondiaux sur le littoral nord de la Mer Noire (VIIe s. a.C. – IIIe s. p.C.)*, ed. A. Bresson, A. Ivantchik, J.-L. Ferrary (Bordeaux 2007), p. 191-200.

3. A more detailed approach on the emergence and development of this legend can be found in: Ivantchik, A.I., *Am Vorabend der Kolonisation. Das nördliche Schwarzmeergebiet und die Steppennomaden des 8. – 7. Jhs. v. Chr. in der klassischen Literaturtradition: Mündliche Überlieferung, Literatur und Geschichte* (Moskau - Berlin 2005), p. 85-98.

4. *RE* 9 (1916), col. 2588 ff, s.v. "Iphigeneia" (Kjellberg); Euripide, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, (ed.) H. Grégoire, in Euripide, Tome IV (Paris 1959), p. 86-92; Kahil, L. «La déesse Artémis: mythologie et iconographie», in *Greece and Italy in the Classical World. Acta of the XI International Congress of Classical Archaeology* (London 1979), p. 74-82; Lloyd-Jones, P.H.J., «Artemis and Iphigeneia», *JHS* 103 (1983), p. 91-96; Hollinshead, M.B. «Against Iphigeneia's Adyton in Three Mainland Temples», *AJA* 89 (1985), p. 420-430; Kearns, E., *The Heroes of Attica*, Supplement University of London, Institute of Classical Studies, Bulletin 57 (London 1989), p. 27-35; Bonnechère, P., *Le sacrifice humain en Grèce ancienne*, Supplement Kernos 3 (Athènes - Liège 1994), p. 40 ff; Lyons, D., *Gender and Immortality. Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult* (Princeton 1997), p. 137-168.

5. Here Iphigenia bears the name Iphimede, which is found in the list of deities on a tablet from Pylos: Ventris, M. – Chadwick, J., *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*² (Cambridge 1973), p. 286-289, 459-465, 548, No. 172. Cf. Hughes, D.D., *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (London - New York 1991), p. 199-202, with references.

6. On this cult, see : *RL* 1 (1884), p. 558 ff, s.v. Artemis (Schreiber); Gruppe, O., *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte* 2 (München 1906), p. 943 ff; Henrichs, A., «Human Sacrifice in Greek Religion: Three Case Studies», in *Le sacrifice dans l'Antiquité* (Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique 27, Vandœuvres - Genève), p. 198-208; Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 96-97; Graf, F., *Nordionische Kulte. Religionsgeschichtliche und epigraphische Untersuchungen zu den Kulturen von Chios, Erythrai, Klazomenai und Phokaia* (Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana 21, Roma 1985), p.



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410-416; Burkert, W., *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical* (Oxford 1985), p. 59; Bonnechère, *op. cit.*, p. 48-52.

7. Грач, А.Д., «К вопросу о позднем этапе «тавро-скифских» культовых представлений», *Советская этнография* (1952: 4), с. 174 слл.; Щепинский, А.А., «Пещерные святилища времени раннего железа в горном Крыму», в *Труды комплексной карстовой экспедиции АН УССР 1* (Киев 1963), с. 145, 151.

8. A detailed reconstruction of this legend and its development can be seen in: Ivantchik, *op.cit.*, p. 89-94.

9. Cf. *ibid.*

10. On the popularity of Euripides' *Iphigenia*, see: Grégoire, *op. cit.*, p. 106-111.

11. For the material, see : *RE* 18 (1939), col. 998-1003, s.v. Orestes (A. Lesky), cf. Graf, F., «Das Götterbild aus dem Taurerland», *Antike Welt* 10:4 (1979), p. 34-41.

12. *LIMC* 5 (1990), p. 713-719, s.v. Iphigeneia (L. Kahil), cf. Cambitoglou, A., «Iphigeneia in Tauris», *Antike Kunst* 18 (1975), p. 56-66.

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