

THE MEANING OF ΑΓΩΝ IN EPIC DICTION¹

The earliest meaning of ἀγών is generally considered to be 'assembly, gathering'. Of the 34 occurrences of ἀγών in epic, 22 designate an assembly of people gathered together to view games, an 'assembly-with-contests'. Five occurrences designate the ships of the Greeks (*Il.*: ἀγών νεῶν); elsewhere (*CPh* 49, 1974, pp. 258-64), I have shown that this usage is a metaphorical extension of the meaning 'assembly-with-contests'. Three occurrences have the later meaning 'contest'. Therefore, the opinion that ἀγών means 'assembly' in general rests on four occurrences only: *Hom. Il.* VII 298, XVIII 376; *Hes. Th.* 91, *Sc.* 205. In this article, it is shown that (1) these four occurrences have a partial deficiency in context, (2) hence, they are unable to stand as evidence for any meaning, (3) 'assembly-with-contests', however, is a suitable meaning for each one, and (4), in conclusion, the meaning 'assembly' must be eliminated as a possible meaning of ἀγών in epic.

It is widely held that the earliest meaning of ἀγών is 'assembly, gathering', i. e., that ἀγών may be used to designate any assembly of people or things. This opinion appears in the ancient scholia and lexica, as well as in modern commentaries and dictionaries².

Ἀγών occurs 34 times in early Greek epic. Of these, 22 occurrences designate an assembly of people gathered together for the purpose of

¹ This article is the last of a series which attempts to demonstrate that ἀγών never has the meaning 'assembly' in Greek. On ἀγών, 'assembly', in the classical period, see *Glotta* 54, 1976, pp. 228-35; on words formed from ἀγών 'assembly', see *TAPA* 106, 1976, pp. 101-111; see also note 4 below.

² Ancient opinion is summarized by H. J. Mette in *Lfgre* I, Göttingen 1955, s. u. ἀγών, Σχ (135.4-43); three of the occurrences of ἀγών discussed below, at *Hom. Il.* VII 298, XVIII 376, and *Hes. Th.* 91, were assigned the meaning 'assembly' by ancient scholarship. For modern views, see Mette, B (135.45-136.19), and LSJ, s. u. ἀγών I 1, 'gathering, assembly'. Among the commentaries to Homer, see especially W. Leaf, *The Iliad*, 2 vols., London 1900-02, II, p. 132, on *Il.* XV 428; opinions of other commentators will be cited below. For a partial critique of the traditional view, see T. G. Rosenmeyer, «Alcman's *Partheneion* I Reconsidered», *GRBS* 7, 1966, p. 336, n. 1.

viewing games, or, in short, an 'assembly-with-contests'³. In the *Iliad*, there are five occurrences of the phrase ἄγων νεῶν, which refers to the ships of the Greeks; ἄγων is generally understood as 'assembly'. In an earlier article⁴, I showed that this use of ἄγων is a metaphorical extension of the meaning 'assembly-with-contests'. Three occurrences have the meaning 'contest' (derived from 'assembly-with-contests')⁵, the usual meaning of ἄγων in the classical period.

This leaves four occurrences of ἄγων which are commonly assigned the meaning 'assembly': Hom. *Il.* VII 298, XVIII 376; Hes. *Th.* 91, Sc. 205. If my view about ἄγων νεῶν in the *Iliad* is correct, then these four occurrences are the basis for the view that 'assembly' is the earliest meaning of ἄγων⁶, with its necessary corollary that 'assembly-with-contests' represents a specialized usage already widely extended in Homer.

As will be seen below, these four occurrences of ἄγων have one thing in common, a partial deficiency in context: for each, there exists no information about the ἄγων beyond the immediate verbal context—the ἄγων, for one reason or another, is never identified or described, in contrast to occurrences of ἄγων such as those at *Il.* XXIII 258, 273, etc., which designate the assembly of Greeks gathered together to celebrate funeral games in honor of Patroclus (described in detail in *Il.* XXIII).

Since the referent of ἄγων is indefinite in these four instances, before conjecturing new meanings, or resorting to a lowest common denominator like 'assembly', one should attempt to assign a meaning

³ See Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἄγων B 1c, «Ensemble, Versammlung (Zusammensein einer Mehrzahl), ... c) von Teilnehmern an Wettkämpfen (dies akzessorisch)», and 2, «Versammlungsplatz der Wettkämpfer» (135.60-136.10).

⁴ «'ΑΓΩΝ ΝΕΩΝ: An Unrecognized Metaphor in the *Iliad*», *CPh* 49, 1974, pp. 258-64.

⁵ See Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἄγων B 3, «Wettkampf» (136.10-19).

⁶ The etymology of ἄγων is too uncertain to be taken into account. Modern etymologists invariably connect ἄγων with ἄγω, but differ as to the original meaning of ἄγων. There are three views: (1) ἄγων 'assembly' Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἄγων E (134.71-74), and P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: histoire des mots*, Paris 1968- , p. 17. (2) ἄγων 'contest', E. Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Heidelberg 1950, s. u. ἄγω (ἄγων 'contest'), is often compared to Sanscrit *ājih* 'running match, contest', and Middle Irish *āg* 'fight, combat'; cf. J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* I, Bern 1959, pp. 45; M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* I, Heidelberg 1956, p. 71; J. Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'Irlandais ancien*, Fasc. 1, Dublin 1959, A 22-23). (3) ἄγων 'assembly, contest', J. B. Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Griechischen*, Munich 1950, s. u. ἄγω, and H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* I, Heidelberg 1960, s. u. ἄγω.

supported by sound evidence. If that meaning is appropriate to the immediate verbal context, and to whatever information can be obtained from the situational context (the conventions of the literary genre, the customs of the Greeks at the time, etc.), then it must be preferred to an unattested and conjectural meaning. The purpose of this paper is to examine these four occurrences of ἀγών usually assigned the meaning 'assembly', and to inquire whether the well-attested 'assembly-with-contests' is a possible and appropriate meaning for them.

HOM., *Il.* VII 293-98

νῦξ δ' ἤδη τελέθει· ἀγαθὸν καὶ νυκτὶ πιθέσθαι,
ὥς σύ τ' εὐφρήνης πάντας παρὰ νηυσὶν Ἀχαιοῦς,
σοὺς τε μάλιστα ἔτας καὶ ἑταίρους, οἳ τοι ἔασιν·
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ κατὰ ἄστυ μέγα Πριάμοιο ἄνακτος
Τρῶας εὐφρανέω καὶ Τρῳάδας ἐλκεσιπέπλους,
αἳ τέ μοι εὐχόμεναι θεῖον δύσονται ἀγῶνα.

Hector addresses these words to Ajax in order to put an end to their inconclusive duel before the Greek and Trojan armies. Most scholars think that ἀγῶνα in line 298 refers to a religious assembly. Two words in the immediate context have generated this interpretation: θεῖον and εὐχόμεναι. The exact meaning of these words, however, is a matter of dispute. The adjective θεῖον is understood as (1) 'of statues of the gods' or (2) 'of [actual] gods' (θεῖον = τῶν θεῶν), or (3) 'divine, holy'⁷. The phrase μοι εὐχόμεναι has also been interpreted in three ways: the Trojan women will (1) pray to Hector or (2) praise him (μοι as indirect object), or (3) pray to the gods for Hector (i. e., in thanksgiving for his safe return; μοι as ethical dative)⁸. The reason for this variety of opinion is that the ἀγῶνα is never described in the

⁷ For (1), see Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἀγών B 1 a (135.45-49); K. F. Ameis, C. Hentze, and P. Cauer, *Homers Ilias*, 2 vols. in 8, Leipzig 1905-32, I 3, p. 25; for (2), see Leaf (above, note 2) I, p. 318; for (3), see J. van Leeuwen *Homeri carmina: Ilias*, Leiden 1912-13, p. 259.

⁸ For (1), see J. La Roche, *Homers Ilias für den Schulgebrauch erklärt* II, Berlin 1870, p. 91; H. Ebeling, *Lexicon Homericum*, 2 vols., Leipzig 1880-85, s. u. εὐχομαι 4 b 'precor, supplico, diis... τινί', cf. J. L. Perpillou, «La signification du verbe εὐχομαι dans l'épopée», *Mélanges de linguistique et de philologie grecques offerts à Pierre Chantraine*, Paris 1972, p. 177, n. 12; for (2), see van Leeuwen (above, note 7), p. 259; Z. Ritoók, «Εὐχομαι», *AAntHung* 3, 1955, p. 294; for (3), see Leaf (above, note 2) I, p. 318; Ameis-Hentze-Cauer (above, note 7) I 3, p. 25; A. Corlu, *Recherches sur les mots relatifs à l'idée de prière, d'Homère aux tragiques*, *Études et Commentaires* 64, Paris 1966, pp. 82-83 (Corlu thinks this the only example of its kind of prayer in Homer).

Iliad; this is the only place it is mentioned. No one knows, then, what happens at this assembly; the opinion that ἀγῶνα designates a religious assembly is merely a conjecture based on impressions formed from θεῖον and εὐχόμεναι. For this reason, it is worthwhile to look at these two words more closely.

The adjective θεῖον in Homer rarely = τῶν θεῶν; usually it means 'divine', occasionally no more than 'excellent'.⁹ With respect to εὐχόμεναι, the usual meanings of εὐχεσθαι elsewhere in Homer, 'praying to' and 'praising'—despite problems of exact translation due to varying cultural attitudes towards religion—¹⁰, and the normal construction of εὐχεσθαι with the dative of indirect object, indicate that the Trojan women will honor Hector in some verbal manner.¹¹ The larger context supports this interpretation. Hector speaks these words before the assembled armies of the Greek and Trojan soldiers. In such a situation, he would certainly maintain the proud attitude of the Homeric hero by claiming success in the duel and looking forward to honors at home. Also, the parallel structure of lines 294-98, ὥς σὺ τ' ἐὺφρήνης (294) and αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ... ἐὺφρανέω (296-97), suggests that Hector expects to receive in Troy treatment similar to that which Ajax will receive among the Greeks. What happens to Ajax is described later in Book VII: he is the guest of honor at a sacrifice and feast given by Agamemnon (313-22).

The context of the occurrence, then, does not lead one inevitably to the conclusion that ἀγῶνα refers to a religious assembly; rather, it merely suggests an assembly which is 'divine, excellent', and suitable for the verbal honoring of Hector. The 'assembly-with-contests' was certainly considered a thing of great value by the Greeks of all periods. Moreover, one of the many activities at such an assembly was the honoring of a person. In *Iliad* XXIII, the games are held in honor of the dead Patroclus (ἀγών: XXIII 258, 273, etc.); the living are honored

⁹ See Ebeling (above, note 8) s. u. θεῖος. θεῖος = τῶν θεῶν at *Il.* VI 180 and perhaps XVIII 376. For θεῖος in the sense 'excellent', cf. *Od.* VIII 264, χορὸν θεῖον, where χορὸν is the dancing place of the Phaeacians, located within their ἀγών (*Od.* VIII 260, 380).

¹⁰ There are several examples of the phrase εὐχεσθαί (εὐχετᾶσθαί) τινι ὥς θεῷ in Homer: *Il.* XXII 394; *Od.* VIII 467, XIII 230-31, XV 181; cf. *Il.* XI 761. Leaf (above, note 2) I, p. 319, and Corlu (above, note 8), p. 83, find the absence of ὥς objectionable, thus making the error of applying their own religious sensibilities to a community with a different attitude toward the divine (cf. A. W. H. Adkins, 'Εὐχομαι, Εὐχολή, and Εὐχος in Homer', *CQ* N. S. 19, 1969, pp. 20-21).

¹¹ Cf. the words of Achilles over Hector's dead body: ἐπέφνομεν Ἑκτορα δῖον, / ᾧ Τρῶες κατὰ ἄστυ θεῷ ὥς εὐχετόωντο (*Il.* XXII 293-94), and those of Hecuba after Hector's death: ὁ μοι νύκτας τε καὶ ἡμᾶρ / εὐχολή κατὰ ἄστυ πελέσκεο (*XXII* 432-33).

as well: Nestor receives an unclaimed prize as a mark of respect to his old age (616-52), and Agamemnon is awarded a prize without having to compete, in honor of his position as chief of the Achaeans (884-95). In *Odyssey* VIII, the Phaeacians honor Odysseus at their after-dinner games (ἀγών: VIII 260, 380) by giving him valuable gifts (385-445).

Hector expects, therefore, to be honored verbally at a festal assembly which will include contests of some kind. The exact nature of the activities at the ἀγῶνα must of necessity remain unclear, including how Hector is honored —perhaps by a formal song of praise¹², or perhaps only by offhand remarks of the Trojan women in the crowd¹³.

HOM., *Il.* XVIII 375-77

χρύσεα δέ σφ' ὑπὸ κύκλα ἐκάστω πυθμένι θῆκεν,
 ὄφρα οἱ αὐτόματοι θεῖον δυσσαίετ' ἀγῶνα
 ἥδ' αὖτις πρὸς δῶμα νεοίετο, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι.

These lines refer to the 20 gold tripods Hephaestus has been making when he is visited by Thetis, who intends to request new armor for her son. Most scholars understand θεῖον ἀγῶνα in line 376 as 'assembly of the gods'¹⁴; few, however, specify the kind of assembly¹⁵. This is because no assembly of the gods is mentioned in epic at which tripods are present.

The immediate context informs us that this ἀγῶνα is an assembly where tripods would have an appropriate place. In epic, tripods are used to heat water for washing; otherwise, they are not functional—they are objects of great value, either given as gifts, or awarded as prizes at the games¹⁶. The kind of assembly normally associated with tripods, then, is the 'assembly-with-contests'¹⁷.

¹² Van Leeuwen (above, note 7), p. 259.

¹³ Ritoók (above, note 8), p. 294.

¹⁴ Thus Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἀγών B 1 a (135.49-52); among commentators, see Leaf (above, note 2) II, p. 295; Ameis-Hentze-Cauer (above, note 7) II 2, p. 130.

¹⁵ Van Leeuwen (above, note 7), p. 664 on *Il.* XVIII 373, conjectures that the assembly is a «cenaculum», and that the tripods are used as tables.

¹⁶ Cf. Ebeling (above, note 8) s. u. τρίπους.

¹⁷ Since these tripods are being furnished with wheels in order to enter the ἀγῶνα, ἥδ' αὖτις πρὸς δῶμα νεοίετο, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι (line 377), one may find it difficult to consider them prizes. Most likely, the author of the *Iliad* has combined two incompatible motifs (cf. C. R. Beye, *Ancient Greek Literature and Society*, Anchor Books, New York 1975, pp. 44-49): (1) tripods as customary objects (as prizes) at the games, (2) Hephaestus' predilection for making self-moving mechanisms, such as the golden handmaids mentioned later (XVIII 417-20; see van Leeuwen [above, note 7], p. 665 on *Il.* XVIII 376). Or, possibly, these lines

The wider context tends to support this interpretation. The purpose of this passage is to show Hephaestus engaged in a typical activity when he is approached by Thetis. Thus, he is depicted at his forge making things for the use of the gods —here, tripods for their ἀγῶνα. The ἀγῶνα, in turn, will be an assembly of the gods engaged in some typical activity. The gods are the model of a blessed and happy people; viewing contests is an activity eminently suitable to their way of life. The Phaeacians, also a blessed people¹⁸, are depicted in *Odyssey* VIII as taking part in after-dinner contests. Further, it has been observed that in Homer the life of the gods is a reflection of the life of the aristocratic nobles of Mycenaean times¹⁹. These nobles, as *Iliad* XXIII shows, delighted in contests of all kinds. The meaning of ἀγών most common in epic, 'assembly-with-contests', is, therefore, consistent with the wider context of this occurrence.

HES., *Th.* 91-92

ἐρχόμενον δ' ἄν' ἀγῶνα²⁰ θεὸν ὥς ἱλάσκοντα
αἰδοῖ μιλίχρη μετὰ δὲ πρέπει ἀγρομένοισιν.

Thus Hesiod describes the king who is the special favorite of the Muses. Recent scholars have generally assigned ἀγῶνα in line 91 the meaning 'assembly'; e. g., M. L. West: «ἀγών here has the sense of ἀγορά»²¹. H. J. Mette, however, gives ἀγῶνα the meaning 'Wettkampf', adding that it may still have a «lokal» sense, 'Versammlungsplatz der Wettkämpfer'²².

reflect a period in which tripods had an actual purpose at the games; cf., however, L. Doederlein, *Homerisches Glossarium*, Erlangen 1850, I, p. 39: «Dem Dichter sind die Dreifüsse hier nur Kunstwerke, nicht Werkzeuge».

¹⁸ See M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, rev. ed., New York 1965, pp. 105-07.

¹⁹ Cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods*, Beacon Press, Boston 1950, pp. 118-22.

²⁰ I follow here the text of F. Solmsen, R. Merkelbach, and M. L. West, *Hesiodi Theogonia, Opera et Dies, Scutum, fragmenta selecta*, Oxford 1970, p. 8. ἄν' ἀγῶνα does not occur in the manuscripts of the *Theogony* (except once as a correction), which read ἄνδ' ἄστυ, although it does appear in a papyrus fragment and late quotations of the line in the scholia to Hesiod and Homer (see Solmsen's *app. crit.*). Recent editors of the *Theogony* read ἄν' ἀγῶνα. A. Rzach, *Hesiodi carmina*, Leipzig 1913, p. 7; P. Mazon, *Hésiode: Théogonie, Les Travaux et Les Jours, Le Bouclier*, Paris 1928, p. 35; F. Jacoby, *Hesiodi carmina, Pars I: Theogonia*, Berlin 1930, p. 144; M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony*, Oxford 1966, p. 114.

²¹ West (above, note 20), p. 185; this opinion is also held by Mazon (above, note 20), p. 35; cf. Rzach, *WS* 19, 1897, p. 17.

²² Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἀγών B 3 (136.10-19).

The different meanings assigned to this occurrence result from the lack of an extended description of the ἀγῶνα; one has only the information that the people address the king ἐρχόμενον ἀν' ἀγῶνα as they address a god, i. e., they honor him verbally in some way; thus, these lines express almost the same idea as *Il.* VII 298. The Greeks of the epic period, as remarked above, considered the organized games an especially apt occasion to honor a person; hence, there is no need to give ἀγῶνα any meaning other than the usual 'assembly-with-contests'.

HES., Sc. 201-06

Ἐν δ' ἦν ἀθανάτων ἱερὸς χορὸς· ἐν δ' ἄρα μέσσω
 ἱμερόεν κιθάριζε Διὸς καὶ Λητοῦς υἱὸς
 χρυσεῖη φόρμιγγι· [θεῶν δ' ἔδος ἀγνὸς Ὀλυμπος·
 ἐν δ' ἀγορῇ, περὶ δ' ὄλβος ἀπείριτος ἐστεφάνωτο
 ἀθανάτων ἐν ἀγῶνι·] θεῶν δ' ἐξήρχον ἀοιδῆς
 Μοῦσαι Περσίδες, λιγὺ μελπομένης ἑικυῖαι.²³

This scene from the life of the gods is pictured on the shield of Heracles. Recent scholars give ἀγῶνι in line 205 the meaning 'assembly'²⁴. Baumeister, who first considered lines 203 a - 205 b spurious, gave as one reason for this the proximity of ἀγορῇ and ἀγῶνι, which he thought synonymous²⁵. Before Baumeister, scholars had given ἀγῶνι the meaning 'games, contest'²⁶. Again, a deficiency in context —no identification or description of the ἀγῶνι— has produced varying interpretations.

The immediate context of ἀγῶνι mentions boundless wealth spread about ἐν ἀγῶνι. Riches and wealth might be found at any assembly of the gods, no doubt, but they are especially appropriate to an 'assembly-with-contests'. There is a lavish display of wealth in the form of prizes at the funeral ἀγῶν of Patroclus (*Il.* XXIII); and many valuable presents are given to Odysseus at the ἀγῶν of the Phaeacians (*Od.* VIII 385-448).

²³ I follow the text of Solmsen (above, note 20), p. 96. Lines 203 b - 205 a are rejected by most editors: Rzach (above, note 20), p. 117; Mazon (above, note 20), p. 140; C. G. Russo, *Hesiodi Scutum*, Bibl. di Studi Sup. 9, Florence 1965, pp. 126-27. They are defended by M. G. A. L. H. van der Valk in *Mnemosyne* 4th Ser., 6, 1953, p. 275.

²⁴ Mette (above, note 2) s. u. ἀγῶν B 1 a (135.52-53); Mazon (above, note 20), p. 140, n. 1; Russo (above, note 23), p. 201.

²⁵ I. P. Baumeister, *Observationum in Hesiodi carmina*, Spec. I, Göttingen 1815, p. 18.

²⁶ Thus J. G. Graevius, *Hesiodi Ascræi quae exstant*, Amsterdam 1701, p. 169, and Guyetis, quoted by Graevius, p. 168.

The lines containing the interpolated passage —if indeed it is interpolated— speak of an ἀθανάτων ἑρὸς χορός, with Apollo playing the lyre in its midst, and the Muses accompanying him in song, activities also appropriate to a festal assembly with contests of some sort.

Finally, as was pointed out above in connection with ἀγῶνα at *Il.* XVIII 376, the conception of the gods gathered together to celebrate contests is a suitable typical scene from their lives.

Conclusion. The above four occurrences of ἀγών have been shown to have a deficiency in context, thus disqualifying them as evidence for any meaning whatsoever. Various interpretations have been offered in the past, but recent scholarship has tended to assign them the vague and inclusive meaning 'assembly'. Upon examination, however, the well-attested 'assembly-with-contests' is adequate for each one, and must be preferred for this reason. In epic diction, therefore, ἀγών means 'assembly-with-contests' or 'contests', and never designates any other kind of assembly, an unspecified assembly, or assemblies in general.

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