

Lemnian Chryse in Myth and Reality

Constantine Lagos

Ancient literary sources record a number of small islands with the name *Chryse* in the Greek world. The most famous of these was located off the coast of Lemnos. The *Lemnian Chryse* first appears in mythology in the context of the Argonautic Expedition, when Jason erected there an altar in honour of Athena, or a local nymph. Ancient vase paintings depict the altar as a mound, something that literary sources also seem to allude to. Chryse's altar was protected by a tutelary snake which became notorious for biting the hero Philoctetes. This event occurred when the Achaeans stopped at Chryse on their way to attack Troy. However, the *Lemnian Chryse* is not just a myth. Appian confirms that the island did exist in 73 BC, when a battle took place there between the Romans and an army of Mithridates 6th of Pontus. According to Pausanias, Chryse sunk in the sea not long before his time. This paper will present all evidence relating to Chryse and argue that its "catastrophe" was not total and that part of the island may still be above the Aegean Sea.

Lemnian Chryse in Literature and Art

Philoctetes, son of Poeas, has an important place in Greek mythology. In his youth he was one of Herakles' followers, and accompanied the great hero during his final exploits. When Herakles was poisoned by Deianeira's robe that had been dipped in the blood of the centaur Nessos, he suffered from excruciating pain. In despair he laid upon his funeral-pile at Mt. Oeta and begged to be burnt alive. No one dared fulfill his last wish, until Philoctetes came up with the courage to kindle the pile. As the flames were about to engulf Herakles, he thanked Philoctetes for this deed by bequeathing to him his famous bow and arrows. Later in life, Philoctetes ruled over Malis, his homeland in central Greece, and joined the Achaean Expedition against Troy. Homer records, that at the launch of the expedition, Philoctetes had under his command seven ships. However he did not sail beyond Lemnos with his ships, since he was wounded by snake-bite and abandoned on that island (Homer, *Iliad*, 2:721–725). There Philoctetes languished for ten years, until Odysseus and Neoptolemus went to Lemnos and took him with them to Troy. During the final year of the city's

siege, Philoctetes distinguished himself as the best archer in the Achaean army. He fought and killed Paris in single combat, thus gaining even greater fame. Philoctetes was among the Achaeans who captured Troy and one of the few who returned home safely.¹

Homer does not name the place where Philoctetes had his accident while sailing against Troy. However, from the 5th century BC onwards, all ancient sources record it as *Chryse* (*Χρύση*).² It is during this century that Philoctetes' sufferings became a popular theme for tragedy, and it is no coincidence that details of his myth emerged then. All three great tragedians of the Classical period wrote a tragedy each bearing the name of Philoctetes and sharing the same theme, his recall to Troy from Lemnos after ten years of solitary exile (Jebb, 1907:xiii–xiv). Even though Philoctetes' accident was not the main theme of these tragedies, it was the cause of his abandonment and therefore an important component in the story of his reinstatement. Chryse is mentioned once in the few known lines from Euripides' *Philoctetes* (Dio Chrysostom:59,9), and three times in Sophocles' play (*Philoctetes*:191, 261, 1326).³ The latter has survived intact since it became one of the standard reference works of classical literature. As such, it was widely copied, studied and commented upon in antiquity and Byzantine times. The scholiasts of the Sophoclean *Philoctetes* and of the *Iliad* (2:721–725) have added plenty of details about Chryse in their scholia of the relevant passages concerning Philoctetes' accident.⁴

Chryse is also associated with vase representations dating to the Classical period, and therefore contemporary of the original production of the *Philoctetes* plays (Hooker, 1950:35–41). Some details of the storyline that these representations display are not known from the extant play of Sophocles, but may have been referred to in the lost plays by Euripides and Aeschylus. The vase representations also agree well with references by scholiasts of Sophocles' play, suggesting that most components of the myth were already in place by the early 4th century BC, when the latest of these vases are dated. The link between the vase representations and the scholiasts also show that the latter followed old traditions and did not make up arbitrary details in their scholia.

Sophocles, (*Philoctetes*:261) describes Chryse as *of the sea* (*ποντία*), a reference to it being surrounded by sea. Ancient authors and scholiasts of Sophocles agree with this, since most refer to it as an islet close to Lemnos, and some as a region on this island's coast.⁵

¹ For a good account of the myth of Philoctetes, with all ancient literary references, see Jebb, 1907: vii–xii.

² This Chryse should not be confused with a namesake city located on the coast of the Troad and mentioned by Homer (*Iliad*, 1:44).

³ It is likely that Chryse was also mentioned in the earlier and lost *Philoctetes* by Aeschylus.

⁴ Scholia. Homer, (*Iliad*, 2:722); Scholia, Sophocles (*Philoctetes*:194); Tzetzes (*ad Lycophron*:911); Eustathius (*Scholia in Homeri*:330.1).

⁵ Chryse as an island: Pausanias, (8:33.4); Appian, (12:77). As part of Lemnos: Scholia Sophocles (*Philoctetes*:270). Both theories are recorded by Eustathius (*Scholia in Homeri*:330.1).

Philoctetes, wounded, is abandoned by the Greek expedition en route to Troy, detail of an Attic red-figure stamnos, ca. 460 BC

The earliest extant reference to Chryse as the place of Philoctetes' accident appears in Euripides' play (Dio Chrysostom:59,9). An omen delivered to the Achaean fleet on its way to Troy, stated that the city would fall to the Achaeans only if they made a stop and sacrificed at the altar (*βωμόν*) of Chryse. Philoctetes led them there and was bitten by the snake. The altar will become a standard feature in all later references to Chryse's myth, both in literary and artistic sources. There is general agreement that the altar was dedicated to Chryse, a local nymph residing on the namesake islet. Sophocles (*Philoctetes*:191), calls Chryse *cruel* (*ωμόφρονα*), and most scholiasts consider this as a reference to the nymph, not the place. In the vase representations, her cult statue appears on top of the altar, or on a pedestal next to it. She is shown dressed in a doric peplos, with both hands lifted in front of her, and wearing a kalathos or a corona on her head (Jebb, 1907:xxxix–xl; Hooker, 1950:35). Her name, Chryse, is clearly seen in some of these representations.⁶ A few scholiasts claimed that the altar was erected in honour of Athena and that Chryse may have been an epithet of the goddess.⁷ This may not be entirely wrong, since in one of the vase representations, Athena can be seen beside the altar and behind the cult statue of Chryse. There appears to have been an association of Chryse with Athena for which however we possess no further evidence.

As for the form of the altar, Sophocles (*Philoctetes*:1326) simply records it as a *roofless sanctuary* (*σηκός*). The Byzantine scholar Tzetzes refers to it as *κεχωσμένον*, and the metrical argument to the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles as *επικεχωσμένον*.⁸ These

⁶ An Attic red-figure stamnos, Louvre G413 (CVA III. Pl. 18. 1–4) and an Attic red-figure bell-krater, Vienna Inv. 1144 (Jebb, 1907:xxxviii–xxxix).

⁷ Arg. I, Sophocles, *Philoctetes*; Tzetzes (*ad Lycophron*:911). Chryse in Sophocles is certainly not identified with Athena (Jebb, 1907:4).

⁸ Arg. I, Sophocles, *Philoctetes*; Tzetzes (*ad Lycophron*:911).

epithets translate as “*heaped up*” and “*on top of the heaped up*” respectively, and Jebb was puzzled by their meaning in relation to the altar. He considered that they may refer to it as “*encumbered with earth or debris*” (Jebb, 1907:4). However, most of the representations of the altar in the vase paintings show it as a mound of stones and on this evidence, Hooker suggested that the epithets should apply to the altar itself and the way it was constructed. Her theory is that these post-classical references are traces of a literary tradition ascribing to Chryse a rough altar made as a stone mound (Hooker, 1950:41).⁹

Both literary and artistic sources concentrate on two mythological events linked with Chryse and her altar. Philoctetes’ accident, of course, but also an earlier visit and sacrifice at the altar by Heracles and Philoctetes.¹⁰ The latter event shows that it was no coincidence that Philoctetes led the Achaeans to Chryse, since he was the only one in the Achaean army who knew where it was located. As a youth, years earlier, he had accompanied Herakles on a visit to Chryse, where he assisted him in a sacrifice. In all references to this visit by Heracles and Philoctetes, the altar was already in existence and therefore Heracles is not accredited with building it then. Philostratus the Younger (*Imagines*:17) claims that the founder of the altar was Jason and that he erected it during the Argonautic Expedition.¹¹ Since Heracles was one of the Argonauts, he would have co-founded the altar with Jason and this would explain his later visit and sacrifice at Chryse.

There are different versions of why Philoctetes was attacked by the snake. According to Sophocles (*Philoctetes*:1326) this was because he violated the sacred ground of Chryse’s sanctuary. Some scholiasts claim that this was the work of Hera who wanted to extract revenge upon Philoctetes for his friendship to Heracles, her hated enemy. A later theory expressed by Tzetzes (*ad Lycophron*:911) is that the snake bit Philoctetes because he rejected the erotic advances of the nymph residing on Chryse. Eustathios (*Scholia in Homeri*:330.1) has a down to earth explanation: Philoctetes was bitten by the snake simply because it happened to be hiding at the exact spot of the altar from which he was cleaning away the earth. Tzetzes (*ad Lycophron*:911) also claims that the snake at the altar of Chryse bit a big tortoise that once lived there and kept the altar clean — presumably by eating the vegetation growing there. According to Tzetzes the people of Lemnos showed visitors the shell of this unfortunate creature that eventually washed up on their coast from Chryse.

⁹ Hooker states that the verb *χόω* would suggest a mound of earth, but that it may also apply for a mound of stones.

¹⁰ For Philoctetes’ visit to Chryse together with Herakles: Philostratus the Younger (*Imagines*:17); Scholia Sophocles (*Philoctetes*:194).

¹¹ Philostratus hailed from Lemnos (Moschidis, 1910:129) and would have had first hand knowledge of the traditions linked to Chryse.

Historical Lemnian Chryse

Lemnian Chryse has indeed its fair share of mythology and bears great interest to the classical scholar. However, this place was no fantasy, since scholiasts referred to it in the present tense, as if it existed. Furthermore, two ancient authors, Appian and Pausanias, link Chryse with known historical events. The first records a battle that took place there during Roman times, and the second a natural disaster that hit the place (see below).

In 73 BC, during the start of the 3rd Mithridatic War between the king of Pontus Mithridates VI and Rome, Mithridates sent a fleet of thirteen war ships to the Aegean to harass the allies of the Romans (Harrison, 1990:175). According to Appian, the Roman fleet under the command of Lucius Lucullus:

caught up with these ships at a barren island next to Lemnos where there is to be seen an altar dedicated to Philoctetes, his suit of armour and bow a reminder of his sufferings (Appian, 12:77).

Appian records that the crews of the pontic ships disembarked on the islet and that Lucullus sent his ships to entice them to leave it and join him in battle in the sea, but to no avail. The enemy threw spears and fired arrows at the Roman ships. Finally, Lucullus succeeded in landing some troops unseen from the enemy soldiers and forced them to flee to their ships. During the ensuing naval battle he overtook all the enemy ships and killed or captured its crews. The battle is also recorded by Plutarch (*Lucullus*, 12:3–5), who however puts the action on the coast of Lemnos and makes no mention of an islet.

Pausanias's reference to Chryse appears in one of the most famous and quoted passages from his work:

The following incident proves the might of fortune to be greater and more marvellous than is shown by the disasters and prosperity of cities. No long sail from Lemnos was once an island Chryse, where, it is said, Philoctetes met with his accident from the water-snake. But the waves utterly overwhelmed it, and Chryse sank and disappeared in the depths. Another island called Hiera (Sacred) ... was not during this time. So temporary and utterly weak are the fortunes of men (Pausanias, 8:33–4).

The islet Hiera was formed near the island of Thera as result of volcanic activity and the date of this event is firmly fixed in the early 2nd century BC (Jebb, 1907:245; Moschidis, 1910:39). Most scholars agree that this is also when Chryse sunk into the sea (Moschidis, 1910). However, as we saw, a battle took place at this very same place in 73 BC, more than a century later! Obviously, Pausanias' statement about Chryse's catastrophe should be examined very carefully, bearing in mind that his work is not devoid of errors and discrepancies.

The search for chryse

Since the 18th century, Lemnos has been visited by scholars and archaeologists in search of its classical sites. These include two cities, Myrina and Hephæstia, the cave of Philoctetes and close to it the sanctuary of the Kabiroi, second in importance only to these deities' sanctuary at neighbouring Samothrace (Moschidis, 1910:20–36). By the late 20th century, all of these sites were located and mostly excavated by Greek and Italian archaeologists (Archontidou, 1994:50–55). However, Chryse always eluded the archaeologists since it was not included in their itinerary.

No one has ever disputed Pausanias and the question has always been, not where Chryse might be, but where it might have sunk. Since the early 19th century, some scholars have identified Chryse with “*Kharos Bank*”, a 10 square mile underwater area near eastern Lemnos, listed on British naval charts and located about 40 feet below the surface.¹² In 1960, Nicola Gargallo, an Italian count and amateur underwater archaeologist, claimed to have rediscovered the island of Chryse at this very same spot. However, he failed to produce any evidence, besides rumours about blocks of marble at the bottom of Kharos Bank (“Philoctetes was here”, 1960:23–28).

A number of expeditions by Greek and Italian underwater archaeologists during the 1960's also appear to have been unsuccessful in locating the remains of Chryse. They only recovered fragments of pottery from this area, which most likely belonged to shipwrecks. No buildings or marble blocks were ever found, but even if the claim that there are marble blocks on the Kharos Bank proved true, these could simply have been the cargo of a sunken ship, since marble blocks were transferred in antiquity by sea.¹³

I will now attempt the “unthinkable” and consider that Pausanias might have been wrong after all, and that either Chryse never sunk, or only did so partly. In the latter case, part of the islet would have been left above the sea and this would be where the pontic troops landed in 73 BC. My “heretic” view suggests that Chryse may still be dry land today! In such a case the easiest way to locate it would be to search the entire coast line of Lemnos. Fortunately we do not even need to undertake such a task since our ancient literary sources offer us hints as to where Chryse could possibly be in relation to Lemnos and its distance from the island's coast.

Philostratus claims that Jason erected the altar during the Argonautic Expedition. Jason sailed to Chryse after leaving the city of Myrina, in the west of Lemnos, and his next stop was the island of Samothrace, north of Lemnos. This logically would put

¹² Moschidis, discusses all references to identifying Kharos Bank with Chryse (Moschidis, 1910:37–42). This identification was first proposed in the early 19th century by the famous scholar and traveler Choiseul-Gouffier (Jebb, 1907:245).

¹³ Not one of the investigations of Kharos Bank has been published. Kapsidelis and Komninos record details of a 1969 scientific expedition to locate Chryse in this area. They also state that an earlier expedition at Kharos produced ceramic finds, without giving a reference (Kapsidelis and Komninos, 1982: 231–232).

Chryse somewhere in northwestern Lemnos, in the route between Myrina and Samothrace. This also happens to be an important shipping route linking the two cities of Lemnos, Myrina in the west and Hephaestia in the north, with Thrace and the Black Sea. A location of Chryse in northwestern Lemnos is also implied by the story of Philoctetes. The place where he was abandoned has been ascribed since antiquity to a cave close to the sanctuary of the Kabiroi in northeastern Lemnos. Philoctetes was abandoned there after having sailed from Chryse and since the Achaeans were sailing on their way to Troy via Imbros and Tenedos, in other words from West to East, Chryse would be to the west of his cave, e.g. northwestern Lemnos.

The literary sources refer to Chryse as being close or next to Lemnos, but do not give us the distance. In his account of Lucullus' battle, Plutarch (*Lucullus*, 12:3) specifically states that his ships could not circumnavigate the area where the pontic troops were defending themselves. This would presume that Chryse was very close indeed to the coast of Lemnos, that an enemy ship being attacked upon by arrows and spears could not sail round it. The maximum range an ancient missile thrown by a soldier could do serious damage is no more than 150 meters the utmost. This very short distance would have been the maximum between Chryse and Lemnos. An islet so close to Lemnos would explain why some sources recorded it as part of the Lemnian coastline. This would also offer the most logical explanation on how Lucullus' army took by complete surprise the Pontic soldiers stationed at Chryse. The general may have landed his troops not on Chryse, but an area of Lemnos out of view of the enemy soldiers on the former. The Romans would then have marched all the way to Chryse and attacked the enemy from the rear. Finally, no "barren island" could provide a harbour, or a coast, big enough for the pontic fleet of thirteen war ships to anchor. Presumably this would be possible only if the ships could have used the beaches on the coast of Lemnos facing Chryse.

Proposed site of chryse

An islet very close to Lemnos bears many features that we have associated with Chryse, and presents us with an attractive candidate for being identified with this long forgotten site. It is approximately 700 meters long and located about 70–80 meters off the northwestern coastline of Lemnos. Some maps show it as a promontory of Lemnos, so close is it to this island. There are no villages on the opposite coast, and the closest, *Katalakko*, is more than 4km away inland. To the inhabitants of this village, the islet is simply known as "the little island of Varvara" ("Νησούδι της Βαρβάρας"). *Varvara* is the name of the coast just opposite this islet, a sandy beach over two kms long.

The islet forms with the coast of Varvara a natural harbour that was used during antiquity, but abandoned in the late Byzantine period when the accumulation of sand in it rendered it unusable. This harbour would have been quite important in Classical times, since it was located mid way on the ancient sea route between Myrina and Hephaestia. This as we saw, was also an important shipping route between the Black

Sea, Thrace, Asia Minor, and mainland Greece. Varvara harbour would have seen quite a lot of shipping during antiquity.¹⁴

A fertile plain named *Gomati* lies inland from the coast. This region was inhabited during antiquity, as attested by ancient coins found there by locals and donated to the Archaeological Museum of Lemnos (Myrina). More importantly, an inscription has also been found referring to an Athenian colonist that appears to have resided there during the Classical period.¹⁵

The islet of Varvara is covered with thick bushes preventing people from walking on its surface. This is a natural deterrent to treasure seekers and the islet has never been excavated, or used in agriculture. In 2007 I visited it with a group of local Greek archaeologists who conducted a preliminary investigation. The few clear spots on the islet show heavy concentration of ancient foundations and fragments of pottery. The most impressive feature however is its highest point, comprising a great human made mound of earth, round in shape. This structure has a circumference of over 10 metres and is supported by at least three rows of well built walls. It clearly was not created as the result of the collapse of a building, e.g. a tower or a light house, since the walls were erected in such a way to hold the structure together and the mound contains small stones, pebbles, and very hard soil. The shape of this structure appears very similar to that of Chryse's altar in the vase representations. Some pottery collected in situ by the archaeologists dates to the Classical period.

Conclusion

The islet of Varvara bears too many features in common with Chryse to be dismissed as a coincidence. However, only an archaeological excavation would definitely prove or disprove this proposed identification. The visit of the first archaeologists to the islet in 2007 is only the first step in many years of investigation yet to come that may culminate eventually in an excavation. In the meantime we can only speculate. If the structure at the highest peak of the islet proves to be Chryse's altar and dates to the Classical period, then it would not be surprising if it was built by the Athenian colonists living on the coast opposite. This in its turn may explain the appearance of the Chryse myth in plays written by Athenian tragedians — an instrument of propaganda of Athens' hold on Lemnos.

¹⁴ The evidence on the use of this harbour consists of unpublished fragments of ancient pottery recovered on the coast by archaeologists. The only item found on the islet of Varvara that has so far been published is an ancient coin of Eresos, Lesbos, in the Athens Numismatic Museum (Ralli and Lagos, 2001:59).

¹⁵ Archontidou records that Gomati was inhabited during the Classical period (Archontidou, 1994:54). Lemnos was occupied by Athens in 510 BC, and was ruled by them for most of the 5th and 4th centuries BC. During this period, many Athenians settled there as colonists (Moschidis, 1910:73–78; Harrison, 1990:175). The inscription referred to was found in 2007, inserted in a wall at Katalakko, but originates from Gomati. It is now in the Archaeological Museum of Lemnos (Myrina), awaiting publication. For similar inscriptions of Athenian colonists on Lemnos, see Acheilara, 1994:44–49.

Varvara offers a fine site to place the battle of Chryse, in view of her islet's proximity to the coast of Lemnos and the existence of a natural harbour. Finally, even Pausanias may not have been entirely wrong. It appears that large parts of the islet have indeed sunk in the sea by a series of earthquakes, creating a long reef. The northern coast of Lemnos lies dangerously close to an earthquake fault which frequently gives big earthquakes.¹⁶ Thankfully, the top structure of the Varvara islet appears to have held out reasonably well, despite these earthquakes and the passage of time.

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¹⁶ The epicenter of a powerful earthquake measuring seven on the Richter scale, which occurred on 6 August 1983 (*Kathimerini*) was only a few nautical miles in the sea north of Varvara.

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