PLAY, FATE AND EMOTIONS IN
ACHILLES AND AJAX:
FOR A PSYCHO-ANTHROPOLOGY OF IMAGE

by Filippo Sciacca
Through the analysis of vase images is possible to reconstruct some aspects of anthropology of the ancient Greece, that is the significant elements of its mentality and culture. From the great black-figured Attic amphora in the Vatican Museums, produced by Exekias around 540 B.C., we can understand the ideas of play, fate and emotion in ancient Greece. In it the great Athenian pottery-painter has used a pictorial language full of emotions and deep meanings. The famous scene, painted on the A side, shows Achilles and Ajax that are playing, while the B side is depicted the return home of the Dioscuri from Olympus.
In particular, I will focus on the analysis of the first scene. Achilles, on the left, and Ajax, on the right, are intent to play dice, they are bent over a table on which, as well-defined by an engraved thin horizontal line, a game table leans. Both are in profile and armed, sitting symmetrically on simple stools, the names are entered on the side of their nape (ACHILLEOS; AIENTOS); with own left hand they huddle a long spear, while the fingers of their right hand, it seems, move something, but is not shown. The eyes are portrayed frontally, according to the traditional style archaic, and they fix closely the game board. The Achilles’ eye, who is sitting on a highest stool, is at a slightly higher level than Ajax’s. Besides, he holds lifted on his head the Corinthian helmet adorned by a thick mane of horse. Behind his shoulders, deposited down, sideways leaning against the wall, his Boeotian shield, with indentations in the middle for not covering the view during the fighting.
Even the Ajax’s shield is symmetrically located in the same position, but on it the hero puts his Corinthian crested helmet, at course of hand, with the nose-guard turned toward the wall. The Achilles’ shield has an emblem represented by the in relief profile of a satyr’s head between a snake and a leopard; while the Ajax’s shield has the head of Medusa. The heroes are intensely focused on the game, moving something on the table with their at clamp closed forefinger and thumb. The swords painted near their mouth, like a comic strip, are numbers that are saying: Achilles says "four" (tesara), Ajax says "three" (tria).
The elegance and perfection of design underline the aristocratic status of the two personages. The Achilles’ figure, however, is more richly detailed: the showing of the fine hair, the larger bandage and the lion's head placed on the deltoid.
The scene probably takes place during the siege of Troy, even though the episode is not explicitly narrated by the Homer’s texts.
During the interval between the battles the two Achaeans kings have already placed their shields inside a tent, and Ajax have there positioned his helmet. The artist, rather than focusing on a war-episode, has wanted to catch the legendary heroes in a moment of great humanity: resting and playing that distracts them from the worries of war. There is however a tension suppressed, as if the two heroes were not able to lower completely the guard, being already armed and ready for a possible new battle. Both are brandishing the double spears, the shields are ready to be grasped and the Ajax’s helmet is at course of hand to be worn. The image gives to the viewer a sense of waiting both for the imminence of another combat and for the awareness of the tragic fate that the Trojan epic assigns to them.

F. Sciacca; Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.7
The entire scene is readable from left to right, according to order of importance. With compositional skill Achilles appears as the dominant figure: he is seated on a higher stool and the lifted helmet makes him more imposing than Ajax, who instead is bareheaded and vulnerable. And it is as if the Corinthian helmet were a second head that, so doubled, looks at the game course with big empty sockets. Also, his armor is richer in detail and his feet are firmly planted on the ground, on the contrary the Ajax's feet are painted with the plantar arch more curved and raised from the ground, showing his anxiety.
The highest score - "four" - reached by Achilles, makes us suppose that scorekeeper objects have been launched (astragals or dice), which have determined a winner and a loser. The resulting feelings of the two heroes of joy for the win and grief for the defeat, are considerably amplified by the emblems in relief placed on their shields: their heads and their eyes, in fact, converge on the game played: on Achilles’ shield, the Satyr is smiling for the win, while the Medusa’s head in the shield of Ajax has a somewhat afflicted and disgusted expression because of the defeat. Also the Ajax’s helmet, rotated and in a precarious equilibrium, does not watch the game, its empty sockets are directed toward the right, outside the scene.
Undoubtedly the ancient Greeks would understood the scene easily, by means of their "semantic encyclopedia". They knew how recognize, for example, what kind of game the two heroes were playing and what objects were needed for the conduct of the game. For us, instead, some stylizations of forms appear pure signifiers without meaning or ambiguous signs: we don’t succeed in identifying, for example, the shape and type of the game board, as it is depicted in an essential way and devoid of details, nor therefore we can see what the two heroes are playing.
We perceive with our eyes and our mind, the Greeks perceived with their eyes and their minds. We can only say that the leisure activities or the idea of entertainment, as employment of leisure time, were extraneous to the ancient Greek thinking. For the Greeks the game postpones especially to the idea of competition, struggle (Agon), where the adversary had to be overcame, for ability or for fortune; besides, it was connected to religious values and contents.

Achilles and Ajax play petteia

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax*©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.11
Agon (\textit{agòn}) generally means fight, combat, game, race. The Greek civilization was based on agon and the agon setting or action have pervaded the education of individuals and the political life of cities. Moreover the competitive spirit, a fundamental component of Greek man, was characterized by intense emotion. Passion for the competition appeared, at wide-range, in the military struggle, in the athletic ambit, until the true game (\textit{agòn}). The table games was also a mutual competitive race between opponents, in winning the game.
The Greeks were passionate in different types of games with or without table; they can be distinguished in: **ability games**, where skill and intelligence had a determinant role. The ability expressed what the player was able to know how to do in terms of reasoning and astuteness. Homer (*Od. I, 107*) has described the suitors of Penelope while they played with pieces, without dice or astragals, sitting on beef hides.
chance games in which case (*Tyche*), the fate prevails over intelligence and skill. The throwing astragals, for example, was a simple game of chance in which the table was not necessary, the players won through the highest score obtained that was marked on the face of some animals bones.
This fundamental distinction in the Greek games can be compared with two major categories described by R. Caillois (2004) in his important work on analysis and classification of games:

- **Agôn** or ability games: for example in the strategy of chess nothing is left to chance, and equal probability of success is created by rules, so players can actively prove their skill, intelligence, training and will to win;
- **Gambling** or games of chance: here the case is the unique creator of victory, as in roulette or the dice game, the players are passive and they have to wait with trepidation the verdict of fate, here skills, application and reasoning are not necessary.
This fundamental distinction in the Greek games can be compared with two major categories described by R. Caillois (2004) in his important work on analysis and classification of games:

- **Agòn** or ability games: for example in the strategy of chess nothing is left to chance, and equal probability of success is created by rules, so players can actively prove their skill, intelligence, training and will to win;
-**Gambling** or games of chance: here the case is the unique creator of victory, as in roulette or the dice game, the players are passive and they have to wait with trepidation the verdict of fate, here skills, application and reasoning are not necessary.
It seems essential, therefore, that we try to identify the type of game that Achilles and Ajax are playing because one has the impression that it refers to another scene, that it represents rather the fate or the destiny of the two heroes tied to fortune (*tyche*). It is as if, in their apparent concentration on the phases of the game, emerged, latently, their emotions and their impulses related to the outcome of the game, that becomes a metaphor for the relationship with luck and destiny.
Achilles has won, getting the score "four" compared to "three" of the loser Ajax, but the scene seems to be an ironic premonition of events that will determine their lives.
In the Trojan *epos*, in fact, the two warriors will die before the departure of the Achaeans from Troy: Achilles will be banally killed by an arrow that will hit his vulnerable heel and it will be precisely Ajax to carry his lifeless body off the battlefield, but successively Ajax, tragically, will commit suicide on a beach, pushing his sword into own belly.

Apollo directs the hand of Paris Attic figure 460 B.C.

Ajax prepares to commit suicide; Ezekias 40 B.C.

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax*©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.21
All Greeks who knew the epics poems could therefore consider this scene with the awareness of what would happen to Achilles and Ajax, confirming their belief that no mortal could escape own destiny. Precisely fate of the two heroes was portrayed by Exekias in other two splendid vases: the amphora in which Ajax carries on its shoulders the inert body of Achilles and the amphora with the suicide of Ajax.
The essential Exekias’ drawing doesn’t give us legible elements, but it is possible that the numbers "four" and "three" exclaimed by Achilles and Ajax can be connected to the game of astragals, especially because the launch of astragals not foresee the use of game board with pawns. We can assume, rather, that the two heroes was playing dice.
Dices (*kyboi*) could be used alone, especially for betting and gambling, or else to accompany various types of games. The ancient Greeks used two or more dice, in relation to the type of game, and throwing them on a table, as we still today do, and they read the gotten result by adding the numbers marked aloft. The fact that the two heroes are moving some pieces, means simply that they are using dice, but they are playing a more complex game.
The talus is a small bone of the legs articulation, located in the posterior tarsus of quadrupeds as sheep, goat, etc.. He has four faces of different shape: one more flat, one concave, one convex and one very irregular. Among the oldest games of chance near the Greeks the throwing of astragals was among the most widespread, being also a gambling. The cuboidal shape of an astragal allowed the Greeks to assign a numerical value to each side: namely 1, 3, 4 and 6, without the figures were marked by dots, or differently; 2 and 5 were absent.
Very probably it is the popular *pente grammai* or at least one type of game with lines (*grammai*), pawns and dices. The doubt arises because on the game board is not painted the number of pawns, but undoubtedly the game that they fight is a real agon. We can also suppose that the heroes are using at the most two dice. In fact, only with the launch of two dice, Achilles can get the combination "four", while Ajax "three".

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.26
The analogous game scenes, painted on other Attic black and red figured ceramics, give us some confirmations. Over two hundred Greek vases (amphorae, craters, bowls, etc.) show, in fact, variants with Achilles and Ajax who are sat or crouched one in front of the other and at the center a game board on which, frequently, are painted clearly the pawns in varying numbers.
There is a variant, spread from 520 B.C., on various types of vases with black figures and then on those with red figures, in which at the center Athena stands with the feet turned toward the right of the vase, placed in first plan behind or in front of the table, with the tunic, the helmet, the aegis, the spear in her right hand, the left arm raised in a sign of alarm and with her face in profile turned toward the left of the vase, where it is usually portrayed Achilles.

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.28
The presence of Athena reinforces the meaning of warning the players, especially the person protected by her, against the risk of an imminent attack by the Trojan army. It should be noted that the two heroes, completely immersed in the game, aren’t yet aware of the presence of the goddess and they do not show to listen to her warning, as if time was suspended, even if both - sitting or squatting, armed or half-naked represented - are instantly ready to stand up for leading a new battle.

Euphiletos, 520 B.C.

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.29
The game in itself aroused near the Greeks, starting from the competitive spirit, even deep meanings linked to religion and human destiny, often based on beliefs and visions about the human condition. The table games (already in Mesopotamia and Egypt) were a combination of amusement and divination practices, to try to reveal the deepest secrets of the world and of individuals. They were good tools for doing some existential analogies not only with the social order - when they were ability and strategy games - but especially with the fate, when they were chance games. Usually, only the heroes were considered capable, in playing, of competing with the fortune and their own destiny.
The Greeks believed that the fortune and the gods could influence the obtained causal outcome. But if the case and destiny are inextricably linked to fate of every individual, it is necessary to do, however, some clarification. First, according to the Greeks each man is subjected to destiny, in the sense of life events and also of type of death; it implacably drove their existences leading them to the fulfillment of what had already been prescribed.

Tyche and Pluto, 2nd c. A.D.

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.31
The decision on the fate or destiny of mortals belonged to the logic of the Moirae, who held the thread of life. Not even the mighty Zeus could do something to change it. All the other gods were bound to obedience to the Moirae, because they safeguarded and guaranteed the world order (*kosmos*), earlier than that Olympic.
From Homer we know that Achilles knew already, somehow, his destiny (Il IX, 410-416):

*About me my mother, the silver-footed goddess Thetis, says that two different fates lead me toward death.*

*If, remaining here, I continue the siege of Troy, for me the return is lost, but immortal will be my glory; whereas if I go home, in my native land, lost is for me the wonderful glory, but long will be my life, no, not soon, the final moment of death would take.*

---

The death of Achilles, Valery Kramarenko, 1963

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.33
That is why Thetis, having learned from Calchas that her son would die during the fall of Troy and that without him the city would not have been captured, she hid him, disguised as a woman, near the court of Lycomedes on the island of Skyros.
As it regards the chance or the fortune, the Greeks had a different conception. Also sharing with the destiny the irrational element, the case was seen as an arbitrary and unforeseeable accidental event, often absurd and inexplicable, but which with indifference determined the existence and, above all, without the predetermined purpose by the Moirae.

The Triumph of Death, or The 3 Fates. Flemish tapestry, ca. 1510
F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.35
Tyche, the goddess of the case - the fortunate or adverse fate that touches to everyone - was intent on following the unexpected leaps of a ball, symbol of the play of fortuitous, unexpected and contradictory events.
It seems clear therefore that the Achaean principles in the Exekias' amphora, in playing dice, are produced by case rather than by fate. Achilles wins and Ajax loses, even if the double fate of the first has already been announced by the Moirae: he will win in battle and will die in Troy.
Achilles, in fact, trivially will be killed by an arrow that hit his vulnerable heel, and precisely Ajax will carry his lifeless body off the battlefield.
Successively Ajax, tragically, will commit suicide on the beach pushing his sword into own belly.

Ajax prepares to commit suicide, by Ezekias, 540 B.C
The game of chance near the Greeks, was generally conceived as a substitute for the randomness of the individual existence and of the relationship with the will of the gods. Symbolically represents the relationship among humans, gods and the fate of soul. With the help of the game they could believe or have the illusion of being able to interact with fate and partly to placate the fear of death and of the divine judgment.
The Exekias’ scene, therefore, is a metaphor of the time of the person who plunges into the competitive race based on the case. Both are absorbed, almost immobilized on the development of the game. The tension and the desire to win is evident, highlighted by diagonal lines of the lances that converge on game table.
Indeed, the itself agon suspends the time of everyday life, and in this case the game of chance suspends the time of the battle by immersing - almost making disappear them - the two heroes in an other time: the time of subjectivity. There is a disappearance (*aphànisis*) of the subject of the agonistic action, although in the game with dice - unlike the game of pure strategy and of intelligence in which nothing is left to chance - the subject passively suffers the risk and the casualness of fortune; the outcome of a game can not be planned, but fate prevails.
In the game the two heroes experience the sheer arbitrariness of the case and the strong emotions that derive from it, Achilles expresses his passional soul \((\text{thymòs})\), but Ajax is not less impulsive. We know from Homer that the emotions sprung from the gaming - impulsiveness or fun - were not controlled and managed by reason \((\text{nous})\), but from \text{thymos}. Some significant examples are extremely explicit.
Patroclus, in a dream, remembers to Achilles (Il XXIII, 87 ff.) that it was a homicidal *raptus*, owing to matters of game, to have forced him to live home: "The day I killed the son of Amphidamas, stupid, unintentionally, from playing astragals angry .... ".

Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus, Gavin Hamilton, 1765.
The drama *Astragalistae* (The astragal players), written by the Hellenistic poet Alexander Aetolus, of Pleuron in Anatolia, had as its theme the murder committed by Patroclus in the fury of the game.

Menelaus removing Patroclus' body from the battlefield,
L.D. Master ca. 1550
F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax*©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.45
In the first part of the Odyssey (Od. I, 106 ff.), instead, they are described the suitors of Penelope that delight in their soul (*thymòs*), playing checkers: Athena, reaching Ithaca to induce Telemachus to get news of his father, "she found the proud Proci: they were so intent on having fun at the door with the little stones, sitting on oxen-hides ...". 

*Penelope and Suitors, J. W. Waterhouse, 1912.*

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p. 46
Certainly the case operates on Achilles and Ajax in an unconscious and irrational way: they ignore, in fact, what result will have the throwing of dice. They are not using rationality, will, strategy or calculation, that is to say the *nous*, according to the archaic mental life traced by Homer. The two heroes, instead, suffer passively the accidental case. It is plausible therefore that the vital principle involved is the *thymos*. The case makes to vibrate their emotions and their impulsiveness, namely the part of their life that is not controlled by reason, and to which the Greeks assigned a significant role. The case acts on *thymos*, the emotional part of the individual, in a state of irrationality and ignorance. And which personality better than Achilles can exemplify the uncontrollable reactions of a *thymos* loaded of ardent emotions like anger, love, courage, pride, indignation or revenge?

The Wrath of Achilles; P Leon Benouville, 1847.

F. Sciacca; *Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax* ©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.47
Exekias vividly, in analogic way, illustrates the mythical heroes who participate and feel with intensity the competitive race; the emotions are exteriorized through their expressive look. Besides, he uses the metaphor of the game to represent two levels experienced by the heroes:

1) agon that distracts them from the war appointment, that namely suspends the time of the daily life, taking away from their minds the worries about what is to happen in the battlefield;

2) the introspective immersion in the time of subjectivity, an other time that makes to transit them- absorbed and almost immobilized - in the casual game of existence.
Exekias, in an extraordinary way, succeeds in illustrating the conception of the mental life of his time. The Achilles’ and Ajax’s attitude and looks are the manifest expression of that part of the spirit, the *thymos*, responsible for emotions and passions …
Treatise presented in Italian language during the 9th Itinerant Seminar
“L’IMMAGINARIO SIMBOLICO”©
Year 2009
Workshop
“Cultural Matrixes and Group Models: Experiential, Applicative, Psycho-anthropological”
Marsala October 22-25, 2009

Copyright©2009 Società Cooperativa FENORABIA GROUP EUROPE
F. Sciacca; Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.50
Filippo Sciacca is a psychologist, specialist in Communication, Mind and Culture

Editorial showing by Alfredo Anania
Società Cooperativa FENORABIA GROUP EUROPE

F. Sciacca; Play, Fate and Emotions in Achilles and Ajax©February 2010 www.dynamic-psychology.eu; p.51