82. THE DEATH OF HERACLES

DEIANEIRA was the title of a report written by an author who claimed to have carried the casket and witnessed the ascent into heaven of king Taharqa.[1] That testimony was made for Taharqa's cult at Nuri, c. 664 BCE, but some seven centuries later it was reused in imperial Roman to parody a Greek cult of Jesus.[2] One may restore that anti-Christian tale from the extant, fake Sophoclean play known as Women of Trachis, but I reuse that play here only to amuse myself in making a short story.

DEIANEIRA

adapted from Women Of Trachis, the play traditionally ascribed to Sophocles

"Papyrus flourishes in a river full of crocs, but how long does paper last? In a bath, even Agamemnon bleeds, and although Achilles may have outrun a flood,[3] she did not escape the torch of Priam.[4] Heracles survived robbers, snakes, ox-headed men, and horseshit in her younger days, as she herself told me,[5] but now in old age what new evil has she encountered? Medea, how long has it been since you let your son take her out?[6] Ten moons? Fifteen? Is she working for Argos? Why has she not returned?"

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[1] **Deianeira** (d-e-i-hn-e-i-re): *record of true Re by the hand and arm of the true chest.* Taharqa ("Saul") usurped the crown of Thebes at the outset of the second Trojan War, 690 BCE, and he held on until he was killed in combat at the end of the war in 664.

[2] **Parody** of Christian and Egyptian stories changed Deianeira into a second wife of Heracles, the philandering son of God and Alcmena of Thebes. Heracles having shot the centaur Nessus with a poisoned arrow, the dying creature tricked Deianeira into weaving a poisoned shirt for her husband. The shirt scalded Heracles, but God resurrected his suffering son into heaven.

[3] **Achilles** (akh-i-//[y]-e-s, *[fem] true second record of papyrus*): the copy of the great papyrus that Tiresheas made for Penelope (pne-/-wpi, *the first division is overturned*), lady of Thebes. [For Achilles in the flood, see Vol. 3, chapter 56. For the great papyrus, see Vol. 3, chapters 57-62 (ed).]

[4] **Priam** (p-r-i-am, *I burn the word*): an epithet of Antenor of Arcadia, king of Troy.

[5] **Heracles** (hr-akh-/-e-s, *[fem] first record of suppressed papyrus*): the great papyrus that Tiresheas made for the lady of Djedu ("Dido"), the queen of Babylon in exile. [See Vol. 3, chapters 54 (ed).]

[6] **Trachis** (tr-akh-is, *tomb of papyrus I suppose*): a secret location hidden from the Greeks. My bet is that the location was at Nuri, where Taharqa eventually was buried, c. 664 BCE. I speculate that Theseis died and was buried there, c. 709 BCE, and Taharqa later claimed that she was his mother, c. 690. Of course, "akh" can have alternate meanings *glory* and *akh-ibis*.

Deianeira was missing her old companion, the one who knew all ladies of the Nile since Dido and Penelope, and some going farther back, as far as Hagar and Sarah.[7] Medea had wrapped Heracles in lion skins and handed her over to her son Tcharuq, supposing that she had cured him of madness.[8] The young man took her, swearing that he would hide her in a tree on a mountain where no man would find her, and as soon as the war was over, she would return to Trachis, and the war would end in a year or so, probably. Those vows having been made, Tcharuq carried off Heracles to who-knows-where how many moons ago? How many more lonely nights would pass before Heracles returned?

"I have been here listening to you in silence," Medea said. "I have a proposal. If you agree, I will send somebody to search for our friend. Who will climb every mountain and search every tree? Why not Hyllus?[9] Yes, Hyllus my husband. He found Shaba in a snake pit on Parnassus, as you know.[10] You fear that Heracles lies in a grave? I've seen Hyllus jimmy Aeneas and Anchises, too."[11]

Deianeira made no objection, so Medea directed her husband to leave Trachis, to scour the mountains and underground, too, if necessary. Hyllus suspected that Heracles had been reused by Lydia in Omphale,[12] or maybe Hesiod in Euboia,[13] but in any case, he said he would go in the morning and not come back without Heracles. He feared his wife's obsession with her chest. He would humor her now, but when he returned there would be no more delays. She would accompany him to a therapist.

That was the deal Hyllus thought he had made, he with his mad wife, and at sunrise according to his promise he saddled his ass and began the long journey down to Pto, where the best Greek doctors were examining natives.[14] And blind-eyed Deianeira imagined that she soared over his

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[7] **Hagar and Sarah** were the Two Ladies of the north and south of Egypt in the time of Intef 2 (i-nt-f, *he of the true red crown*, "Intef the Great") "Abram," who established Karnak, c. 2100 BCE, but Abram's Karnak and most of its records were destroyed in the Hyksos attack of "seven against Thebes," 1534 BCE. **Dido and Penelope** were the Two Ladies of the north and south when the Hyksos were expelled from the Nile, c. 1528 BCE. [See Vol. 2, chapter 39 and Vol. 3, chapter 53 (ed).]

[8] **Tcharuq** (tcha-rw-q): *mountain lion child*. [See Vol. 4, chapters 69-70 (ed).]

[9] **Hyllus** (hy-//-ws, *[Theban] second husband*): Kadmus Gyges, the second husband of Theseis. [See Vol. 4, chapter 71 (ed).]

[10] **Shaba on Parnassus**: I have written of this elsewhere. [See Vol. 4, chapter 71 (ed.)]

[11] **Aeneas** (hn-ea-s), *[fem] great chest*, composed by Virgil (wi-r-gi-/), *first land of mummy talk*. Aeneas was the carrier of Anchises (hn-khi-se-s, *[fem] brave daughter chest*).

[12] **Lydia** (//*[y]*-d-iï[y], *two second hands*): a plagiarist who may have reused the Dido papyrus to make **Omphale** (w-m-p-aa-/-e, *first record of the ruin of someone*).

[13] **Euboia** (e-w-bw-iï[y]): *two abominations someplace.* Elsewhere, I have shown that Hesiod was a forger (hs-io-d, *hand of cold Io*). [See Vol. 4, chapter 67 (ed).]

[14] **Pto** (pt-o, *island of heaven*, aka Buto): the invader stronghold where Priam had held out in the last days of the first Trojan War.

head, high as a bird or higher, so high that she saw the distant beach, the same tireless waves beating relentlessly on the same sand, where she and the Odiïyssy had boarded the Phaeacian ship for Thebes,[15] and off shore in the distance lay that island with the great volcano that had erupted when Tiresheas was born, and farther off the huge mountain in clouds where Tiresheas disappeared.[16]

"Listen, Gyges,"[17] the bird said, "you haven't ever lost your best papyrus, have you? I mean, you haven't put heart and soul into it, your life's last and finest work, composed with all the skill acquired over a lifetime of constant practice, only to hear somebody tell you that it's missing. You look and it's not there. It's gone you don't know where. Maybe Hermes stole it, or Atreus cut it to pieces, or Niobe wrapped fish with it. Somebody must know, maybe everybody knows, but nobody will tell you. I'll be pleased if you recover my papyrus, the true one, but I will be to you as a fury if you return with somebody's translation or edition or adaptation or plagiarism or whatever. I warn you here and now: don't come back to Trachis clutching some piece of trash from a dump! Better, far better that you should return empty-handed!"

So the winged one threatened Hyllus from on high, but he did not hear her. Somebody had been approaching him on the road; he was half naked and covered in dust. What was the matter with him? Was it Samuel? He was grieving as if he would kill himself! What could cheer him up? If he disclosed his mission to the poor soul, would they have a good laugh together? What if Medea found out about it?

Samuel was bringing news to Trachis of another attack on Akhhb, including plausible information that Heracles had been there in the tower when it burned. When he heard about Heracles, Hyllus hurried on toward Akhhb to see for himself, but Samuel arrived that same day at Trachis where his message made Medea cry. She cried herself to sleep. It was well along in the morning of the following day before she felt that she could tell Samuel's news to Deianeira.

"I'll tell you the truth," Medea said. "As I have heard from a reliable source, there has been a robbery, another robbery of Akhhb, Akhhb in the delta, the ruined pyramid in Abrnn that Omri made Israel restore after they murdered Helen.[18] You remember Helen, the girl whose body

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[15] **Odiïyssy** (wdi-i[y]s-s[y]): *old woman pilot*. [See Vol. 3, chapters 62 (ed).]

[16] **The eruption** on Thera ("Santorini") climaxed roughly when Tiresheas was born, c. 1555. She died on Crete, c. 1509 BCE. [See Vol. 3, chapters 51 and 66 (ed).]

[17] **Gyges** (gy-ggwy-z, *he of the dazzling offering*): an epithet for Kadmus who ransomed Shaba from Parnassus, c. 710 BCE. [See Vol. 4, chapter 71 (ed).]

[18] **The omri** (wmri *overseer*) punished Israel (is-re-e-/, *first arm of old Re*) for Helen's murder and destruction of the pyramid at Hbrnn; he forced them to rebuild Ahab (aa-hb, *ibis ruin*), which they called Babel. When bog body "Helen" was found and buried in the Medea buried ka-statues of her first husband Phaethon and his first wife Ptrukhilus, and this ceremony established the Menkaure (mn-ka-w-re, abiding bodies of Re), c. 710 BCE. News of a second attack now reaches Medea near the end of the first Trojan War, c. 705.

was preserved in the marsh, then buried beside my first husband and his first wife.[19] Somehow those three were carried off by three horsemen,[20] and before they rode away the robbers set fire to the tower. As for Heracles, as I understand, she was in Akhhb visiting her children. They were sleeping at the time of the attack. Some of them, maybe all of them perished, but in truth I don't know. Hyllus will bring us a complete damage assessment, but perhaps we may learn what happened even before he returns. Shaba is coming. Shaba has been in Akhhb, and she will be here tonight or tomorrow."

There Medea paused, remembering Deianeira's anger after Achilles burned—Achilles being the Theban copy of great papyrus, the copy Tiresheas that made for her aunt Penelope, as I'll explain here, reader, in case you don't already know.[21] After the argonauts caught Phaethon in Thebes, and after they murdered him in chains, and after they burned his body to hide the crime, Medea feared for Achilles. To save her, Medea ordered a funeral for a ka to be held in Akhhb.[22] She gave Achilles to the ka which she dressed in women's clothes and labeled Icarus, meaning *lady of excellences*, and she gave that ka and Achilles to Deianeira. And after many adventures along the way, Deianeira brought them to the pyramid, and they were taken up into Samaria where they rested in peace.[23] Priam, however, had set spies to watch the pyramid, and one of them learned Deianeira's secret, so chariots were sent to take Achilles, but when the soldiers went into the tomb, they were seen by Phaethon's sister Helen, so they cut her down. To hide their crime, they burned her body on an altar, but the fire burned out of control, and much of the pyramid was destroyed, and that's how Akhhb (*ibis of papyrus*), became Akhad (*angry papyrus*) and Akham (*burnt papyrus*), then Akhab (*stopped papyrus*) or Aahb (*ibis ruin*), which barbarians call Ahab but Israel calls Babel, by which some mean ba-b-/ (first place of the ram) but others mean bh-b-/ (first place of forced labor).

Deianeira herself was blackened in that fire. She was angered whenever she was reminded of it. Nobody had been held accountable. What would she say now upon learning of this new

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[19] **My first husband and his first wife**: Phaethon and Ptrukhilus.

[20] **The three of them**: Helen, Phaethon and Ptrukhilus. They were the Menkaure in Egypt, but in Sparta they were called Helen, Menelaus and Hermione. The **three horsemen** were Spartans Polydorus, Lycurgus and Alcman. The story of the attack is plagiarized in the Odyssey where Odysseus tells the Phaeacian court about the fall of Troy.

[21] **Penelope** (pne-/-wpi, *the first division Nile is overturned*): an epithet of the lady of Thebes during the Hyksos expulsion. She ruled with her sister, the lady of Djedu ("Dido," "Arreti") and queen of Babylon in exile. They were daughters of Jacob of Kebh. [See Vol. 3, chapter 56 and 62 (ed).]

[22] **Akhhb** aka Hebrun (hb-rnn, *rejoicing ibis*) was an ancient writing center at the east edge of Shaarea (sha-ar-ea, *great reed marsh*, "Scheria"), near Djedu, where Tiresheas received clay tablets from Babylon which she transcribed on papyrus, c. 1530 BCE, and they became laws of the judges for the next thousand years. In the late period, a mudbrick pyramid at Akhhb commemorated Tiresheas and was a training place for lady scribes and scholars. **The ka** was a mummy or an image or form of a body that could be animated by impersonation.

[23] **Samaria** (sam-ar-y-h, *room of the two burnt reeds*) in the pyramid at Hbrnn contained relics from the reed hut where Tiresheas transcribed the tablets of Babylon. [See volume 3, chapter 58 (ed).]

attack? Who would she curse? Who was more blameworthy than Medea? In all probability, Heracles had been destroyed, and all because Medea had trusted her to Tcharuq, a young man crazy in love with the pretty mistress of Akhhb, Helen's daughter Jesse. Tcharuq had hoped impress the girl with the most precious thing in all the world, so he tricked his mother into giving him Heracles wrapped in the same lion skin that she had made for Phaedra. Jesse accepted that gift; she took it up into Samaria, where men were not permitted, high in the topless tower which now had burned. Medea never should have trusted her son, but she was blinded with a mother's love. Her eyes never opened, she never clearly saw Tcharuq, until Samuel told her what he knew of the fate of Heracles. He had not seen Heracles, but he had heard enough that Medea knew of Tcharuq's scheming.

"Yes, cry, Deianeira, cry," Medea sobbed. "Cry as I cried when I first heard the news from Jesse's brother, but let us not lose hope. Heracles and her children may have survived. Did I tell you of the tree in the tower, the tree in which Jesse hid Heracles? It was part of Shabaqka,[24] a statue of the golden fleece worn by a ram eating leaves from the tree. No, not papyrus leaves. The leaves are gold, and the trunk is bronze, and the ram in the tree wears a long black beard that covers the opening in that trunk where Jesse deposited Heracles, or so she told her brother. If robbers found that statue, they would steal the fleece, not the beard, but even if they took the beard, still they would not know that the trunk could be opened, and inside it they could unwrap the lion skin and find Heracles. Robbers cannot have known these things, but Hyllus now knows them. He learned them from Jesse's brother, as I did. Hyllus is on the way to Akhhb now. When he returns, he should be able to tell us for certain whether Heracles survives, but for now let's hope for the best."

Deianeira did not reply. What was she thinking? Was she too stunned to speak? Was she praying? Was she waiting to hear a clear admission of guilt?

"My son deceived us," Medea said. "Tcharuq swore that he would keep Heracles safe. You heard him. He didn't mean what he said. He took her straight to Helen's daughter, hoping that she would marry him and make him king, and then his name would be added to the king lists in Assyria and Troy! Now I fear even for the crown of Thebes. Shaba is in line for my throne at my death—she is rightful heiress of Thebes, but I fear that Tcharuq plans to steal that throne from me or from her. If he holds the three thrones, he will be emperor. I never suspected these things, Deianeira! Honestly, I never suspected didn't know!"[25]

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[24] **Shabaqka** (sha-ba-q-ka, *ka of the mountain of the appointed ram*): the statue or a copy survives. It's now known as Ram in a Tree.

[25] **Steal the throne**: Helen was heiress to Assyria and Troy, and her daughter Jesse ("Jezibel") claimed the same title after Helen's death. Through marriage to Jesse, Tcharuq could have become king, but she recognized the flaw in Tcharuq's title and/or character. In any case, she did not marry him, and consequently he did not recognize her titles. He instead partnered with Pheidon in a second Argive invasion of the Nile, and they killed Shaba and severely wounded Jesse in battles, c. 690 BCE. Samuel then had custody of Bakare, the orphaned infant of Shaba, but Tcharuq took the child claiming to be lord protector, and then he named himself king, king Saul (sa-u-/, *first of sons*) and he attacked both Egypt and Assyria in order to make himself emperor. The second Trojan War was not resolved until Saul was killed in battle in 664 BCE. A Saite record of Tcharuq

It was Samuel, Helen's son, who awakened fears in Medea about her son. He could barely speak of the burning of Akhhb, and theft of the bog body from his mother's tomb, but as he gained composure to speak clearly to Medea, he told her all that he had learned from his sister about Tcharuq. A head injury suffered during military training left that young man prone to attacks of madness. He told Jesse that together they would rule the world, but when she declined his proposal of marriage, he threw a spear at her! Medea of course had been aware of her son's condition, but she had treated him with medicines that she supposed had cured him. He had been living with his step-father apart from her up in Napata.[26] Medea had rarely seen them since she began living in Trachis.

Their discussions of Tcharuq and the crowns of empire were filled with so much emotion that Samuel almost forgot to tell Medea that the war was over, the first war that is. It had ended suddenly, as nobody expected, and Shaba was on her way to Trachis in triumph. She was bringing prizes of war.[27] She had visited Akhhb after the war, and now she was marching to Trachis. Maybe she was bringing Heracles. Maybe Tcharuq had been as good as his word. Maybe he had given Heracles to Shaba to return to Trachis now that the war was over.

Having heard all these things from Medea, Deianeira urgently needed to speak to Samuel. Medea summoned him, and he came from prayer and stood before them in grief. He was covered in ashes and naked to the waist, wearing an ephod made of sackcloth. The disappearance of the bog woman, which the marsh itself had preserved so beautifully, was as Helen's second death to him. He was sure that never would he see his mother again, and never again would she speak to him.[28] He and Jesse were twins, and always close, so he knew her suitors, including Tcharuq. He knew that Tcharuq had given Heracles to Jesse, and he knew where she had hidden her. After the attack of the horsemen and the fire, Samuel and Jesse together had climbed into the burnt tower, and up in the highest room they had Shabaqka, the long-bearded ram climbing into ram. The golden fleece was gone, but they lifted the beard and opened the tree trunk, but they did not reach inside the trunk to feel for the paper, as it might be frail, if indeed it was as old as Tcharuq claimed. The papyrus could have been inside, where Jesse said

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("Taharqa," tch-ar-ka, *ka of the rejected child*) underlies the narrative of Saul in the book of Samuel. [This subject is treated somewhat differently in Vol.1, chapter 19, a chapter written early in Djarew's career (ed).]

[26] **Step-father**: Kadmus Gyges. [See Vol. 4, chapter 71 (ed).]

[27] **Shaba**: Medea's first child, elder twin of Tcharuq. The text of Women of Trachis calls this character Lichas (/-i-tcha-s, *[fem] my first child*).

[28] **Helen's death**: Helen was murdered in the pyramid of the Amazons, as she was attending to remains of her brother and lady Ptrukhilus c. 719 BCE. Helen's body then was thrown into the marsh, but discovered more than seven later in a naturally mummified condition. It was taken into the Amazon pyramid which Omri had been reconstructing, but then came the second attack, and the mummy was taken when the argonauts fled from the Nile in 705. Spartans said that Helen was alive and she returned with her husband Menelaus and their daughter Hermione after the war, but these lies the royal house of Athena who claimed descent from Helen, and this dispute was the nominal cause of the Peloponnesian Wars, as Thucydides surely knew but could not tell.

she left it, and she had figured out some way to return it to Trachis, and maybe Saba was bringing it among her prizes from the war, but Samuel did not know.

Strangely now, Deianeira was giddy with joy, suddenly feeling as if she were flying, the whole house flying, spinning, whirling, dancing as she had not danced since she was young, when hopeful princes had taken her out dancing, one after the next, sometimes in quick succession, and now she danced high in the clouds, and never stopped until Shaba arrived late in the day, and then she came down. Shaba paraded her trophies of war, but no papyrus was among them. Shaba said that Shabaqka appeared to be in good condition when she saw it in Kenaion, but that's a different story.[29] I will tell you about all of Shaba's prizes on another occasion, but for now I will mention only two of them, two young women, girls really, girls who kept silent for they had been taken with Iphitus.[30] Deianeira pitied them, as did Medea, but they were too terrified to respond to any questions.

Medea asked Shaba who they were, those girls, whether they were of royal birth, for royals should never be abused, especially children, but Shaba said that she knew neither their names nor their parentage, for the young women had not said a word to anyone since the time of their capture. Shaba knew nothing about them, she said, except that her brother had taken from Wrtos.[31] Having said these things, she proceeded with her train and prizes, and they disappeared into an inner chamber where a feast had been prepared. Medea was proud of her daughter at that moment, until Samuel took her aside, out of the hearing of Deianeira as he thought, and he told her that Shaba had lied.

Shaba must have known very well who those young women were. She and Tcharuq had taken them on second Pto, the small cemetery island that the Greeks called Pharos. The girls had fled from the argonauts when their father was killed, the younger girl hiding among bulrushes of the island, the elder swimming far out into the sea. They were the last surviving children Priam and Hecuba. An unknown soldier had warned them to run as the Greeks led Priam to the altar where he would be slaughtered. Their mother was praying in her sister's tomb on that island, and Samuel had managed to reunite her daughters with her. The younger would run away from Shaba's household during a slave revolt in the second Trojan War, and she would die of plague. The elder would grow up in Shaba's household, marry Esarhaddon and give birth Ashurbanipal, he who would settle the Trojan Wars, banishing the Argives and Tcharuq's people from the Nile. Only Deianeira knew the things to come. She pitied the girls, and Medea also was overwhelmed. They put in mind of all she had suffered.

"O, Medea," Samuel said, "These girls are princesses, daughters of our kinswoman Hecuba as well as Priam, but Tcharuq wants to sacrifice one if not both of them on the altar of Re. Shaba

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[29] **Kenaion** (kniw-n): *a water taxi*?

[30] **Iphitus** (ip-hi-tws, *something counted as husband*): the mistreated young women are not named in Women of Trachis, but I take them to have referred to the surviving daughters of Hecuba. [See Vol. 4, chapter 72 (ed).]

[31] **Wrtus** (wr-tw-s, *a woman, someone great*): Hecuba.

knows of her brother's plan, but why did she not tell you of it? Why did she tell you that the girls are slaves. Shaba knows who they are. Does she favor a punishment of them that is contrary to our law?"[32]

Medea heard what Samuel was saying, but she was thinking of Tcharuq, how he had been a slave on Delphi, living for years among lawless barbarians. After all she had taught him, did he still not understand right from wrong? What would she say to him when she saw him again? What should she say to Shaba? Would she confront them together or separately? The war was over, but its effects would be unending.

Some days later, Hyllus returned to Trachis and reported to his wife. He had changed course in the first hours after he had set out on the road, for had met Samuel coming up from the ruined pyramid of the ibis, and Samuel had told him what he saw down there, when he and Jesse had gone up into the burnt tower: how they saw a statue in which an old papyrus had been hidden, but the papyrus was too delicate to be touched, so Hyllus decided to go and search the statue for himself. And when he arrived, Jesse had gone to Assyria, so he went up into the tower alone, and there he found Tcharuq busily piling wood for a sacrifice, and aside from fat on the altar lay Heracles in a shirt of Nessus,[33] and Tcharuq lit the fire, and smoke clouded over the mountain.

[32] **Our law**: the great law protected from execution all members of the royal family, and perhaps other free born persons. Hecuba and her daughters were free born and of royal blood.

[33] **Nessus** (nss-ws): *[Theban] damage*.