REMARKS ON μίτρην λύειν
IN CALLIMACHUS AND HESIOD

Abstract: Both the formula μίτρην λύειν ‘to loose a girdle’ and the equation μίτρη = ζώνη are analyzed, especially on the basis of the poems by Callimachus and Hesiod.

The formula μίτρην (άνα)λύειν ‘to loose a girdle’ is a paraphrase of Homeric ζώνην λύειν, e.g. Odyssey 11.245: λύσε δὲ παρθενίην ζώνην “(Zeus) loosed the maiden-girdle”, H.Hom. 5.164: (Anchises) λύσε δὲ οἱ ζώνην.

Callimachus in his fourth hymn repeats the Homeric construction: λύσατο δὲ ζώνην “(Hera) loosed her girdle” (Η. 4.209), however in the subsequent report, he prefers a similar phrase: Λητώ τοι μίτρην αναλύεται (Η. 4.222). In both these cases the use of the middle voice is natural when the woman herself undertakes the operation. The active voice, as used by Homer, indicates that the girdle is loosened by someone other than the wearer1.

In his Hymn to Zeus (Η. 1.21) Callimachus says that „Rhea loosed her girdle” (‘Ρέη δὴ λύσατο μίτρην). Although the loosening of the girdle refers here not to a virgin’s primus coitus, as e.g. in Homer, but to giving birth2, it seems indisputable that the famous poet from Cyrene equates μίτρη with ζώνη regularly (for the third time, cf. Fr. 75.45).

According to H. Brandenburg’s opinion3, the above equation becomes common beginning in third century (save Callimachus, see

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1 A notable exception to this rule is Apollonius Rhodius’ phrase: (Alcimede) μίτρην ... Ἐλυσσα (1.288), which follows „the use of the active of the wearer in lyric and tragedy” (so G. R. McLennan, Callimachus. Hymn to Zeus. Introduction and Commentary, Roma 1977, p. 52).

2 According to G. W. Mooney, „loosening the girdle” is a common euphemism for either copulation (e.g. Od. 11.245; AP 7.324.2) or childbirth (e.g. Pindar, O. 6.39; Hyperides, Fr. 67; Apollonius 1.288). See The Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius, edited with Introduction and Commentary by G. W. Mooney, Dublin 1912, p. 88 (note to Apoll. 1.288).

Apollonius 1.288, 3.1013, 4.1024; Moschus 2.73, 164, etc.; Ps.-Theocritus 27.54; Musaeus 272 and so on). G. R. McLennan, a conscientious commentator of Callimachus’ first hymn, follows Brandenburg, agreeing with him that the use of μίτρη for ζώνη is Hellenistic [sic!] and adding: „In Homer μίτρη always refers to the armour of warriors”4. D. W. Tandy conjectures that „Callimachus may have initiated this new meaning”, admitting carefully that „If Callimachus is in fact responsible for this new meaning his motivation is difficult to determine”5.

It cannot be denied that Homer’s μίτρη determinates always a male’s protective device, apparently a metal guard worn round the waist (e.g. II. 4.137.187.216; 5.857)6. Later the meaning has changed considerably7. By the time of Alcman it may designate a ‘female’s headband’ (Parth. 67; cf. Eurypides, Hec. 924, Ba. 833.929.1115; Aristophanes, Th. 257). Pindar uses the term in question to denote the winner’s garland (O. 9.84, I. 5.62; cf. Bacchylides 13.196; Eurypides, El. 1628). The Hellenistic poets attest not only the sense ‘maiden’s girdle’, but also a similar one, namely ‘brassiere’ (Callimachus Ep. 38.39; Apollonius 3.867).

Who is responsible for the common equation ζώνη = μίτρη? The answer was accessible to all the above-mentioned commentators of Callimachus’ hymns, but remained unnoticed. R. Merkelbach and M. L. West10 cite the beginning of the prooimion to Hesiod’s

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4 McLennan, op. cit., p. 53.
5 D. W. Tandy, Callimachus, Hymn to Zeus. Introduction and Commentary. Diss. Yale University, New Haven 1979, p. 84.
6 See Aristarchus to II. 5.857.
9 The traditional interpretation of ep. 38 (Pfeiffer) is, however, far from being certain. Alternatively, the Callimachean formula έθηκε την τε Μίτρην / ... τόν τε Πάνα / (if both these words begin with initial large letters) may be comprehended as follows: „[Simon] dedicated [to Aphrodite] one image of Aphrodite-Mitra and one of (the god) Pan”.
10 Fragmenta Hesiodea, ediderunt R. Merkelbach et M. L. West, Oxonii 1967, p. 3. The 1968 Supplement to A Greek-English Lexicon (p.101) adds: „μίτρα 1.2, after ‘girdle’, insert ‘Hes. in POxy. 2354.4”’ . This reference was omitted by both McLennan and Tandy.
The partially preserved verses 4–5 read that the Boeotian poet was going to describe such women who "loosed girdles" (μίτρας τ’ ἀλλύσαντο13) to "be in love with the gods" (μισγόμεναι θεοίς[ιν]). It is clear now that the postulated "Hellenistic" or "Callimachean" construction has much earlier occurred in common use. Thus the meaning 'maiden’s girdle' for μίτρη had to have appeared as early as Hesiod is dated (i.e. 7th century B.C.). The visible difference between the Homeric and Hesiodic meaning of μίτρη cannot astonish us, moreover, it should appear as natural. What wonder that Hesiod, a Boeotian farmer, for whom all war-struggles are quite strange, knows and uses this word only with a non-military sense?

Undoubtedly, the Hesiodic words μίτρας τ’ ἀλλύσαντο belong to these poetical phrases of the archaic Greek verse, which were abundantly imitated and anew used by Callimachus and other Hellenistic poets14.

I would like to finish my remarks with the following conclusion: If some scholars were more cautious in their premature decla-

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12 Verses 1–2 are securely restored, because they create a final sequence in many MSS of Hesiod’s Theogony, see Merkelbach-West ad loc. Verses 3–5 are tentatively supplemented after A. Colonna, cf. Esiodo, Opere. Teogonia – Catalogo delle donne – Opere e giorni – Poemati pseudo-esiodei, a cura di A. Colonna, Milano 1993, p. 124.

13 For the compound ἀλλύσαντο (from ἀνα-λύω), see Callimachus H. 4.222 (μίτρην ἀναλύεται). See Lobel’s comments on μίτρας τ’ ἀλλύσαντο: "here in allusion to wedlock, as appears from μισγόμεναι [...] Otherwise it might be taken as in allusion to childbearing" (Lobel, op. cit., p. 3).

rations, there would be no need to correct their obvious mistakes, which, unfortunately, are continuously repeated.