Athens and Attica in Lycophron's *Alexandra*: Abduction, Conflict, and Cultural Exchange
Between Myth and History

The *Alexandra* of Lycophron encompasses a wide geographical and temporal span.
Cassandra's cryptic prophecies concerning the Trojan War merge mythical material with
allusions to real historical events. As fits the poem's sustained engagement with Attic tragedy
(e.g., Cusset 2002/3; Sistakou 2016), the poem features references to Athens, most notably
Xerxes' invasion of Greece during the Persian Wars and the destruction of temples on the
Acropolis (1412-1434). Hornblower (2018) observes that such references to Athens qualify as
myth or involve historical events earlier than the early second century BCE, his favored date for
this poem. He thus sees the absence of references to contemporary Athenian history as indicative
of the city's decreased political power during the second century BCE. Athens, he concludes,
had become "a place of memory" (33).

While Hornblower is correct in his assessment and rightly emphasizes the poem's overall
focus on Italy and Roman power (e.g. 1446–1450), these references to Athens, I argue, play a
significant role in Lycophron's poetic project. Specifically, Athens and Attica embody the
convergence between the mythical and historical material in the *Alexandra*. In mythical terms,
Attica and Athens are associated with Helen's abductions, both as the site of her adulterous
intercourse with Paris (108–114) and where her brothers the Dioscuri invade to recover her from
Theseus (503–505). Not only does Helen's abduction trigger the Trojan War, but the war itself
occurs as a link in the chain of conflicts between "East" and "West" (1283–1450). Included in
these conflicts are the invasions of Athens by the Amazons (1332–1340) and by Xerxes (1412–
1434). As a result, Athens represents a *locus* of conflict as well as of abduction.

At the same time, Athens and Attica in the *Alexandra* serve as *loci* for cultural exchange in mythical and historical terms. Although not stated in the poem, the Dioscuri invasion of Attica established goodwill between Sparta and Deceleans, as Herodotus records (9.73). Additionally, Lycophron depicts cultural exchange when describing how the fifth-century Athenian commander Diotimus establishes a torch race for the Siren Parthenope at Naples (732–737). Since Lycophron claims that the ritual persists among the Neapolitans (735–737), we may interpret the Athenian Diotimus as the intersection between the mythic past of deceased Sirens, the fifth century BCE, and the contemporary world of Lycophron. In this way, the Athens depicted in *Alexandra* is indeed a "place of memory" — a memory both mythical and historical.

Works Cited

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Sistakou, E. 2016. *Tragic Failures: Alexandrian Responses to Tragedy and the Tragic*. Berlin.