Telete and Eros: Meanings and Sources of the Mythological Scenes in the Mosaic from Sheikh Zouede

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The figurative scenes in the mosaic floor from Sheikh Zouede Fig. 1, dated to the late 4th century or early 5th century CE, portray two mythological themes: the upper panel features the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus Fig. 2, and the middle panel that of the inebriated Herakles with the Dionysian procession Fig. 3. The lower panel contains an inscription that praises the art pieces in the hall, and invites the visitor to enjoy their beauty. Two Greek inscriptions, unrelated to the mythical context, are incorporated above and below the Phaedra and Hippolytus panel.

Three divinities are dominant in these scenes: Dionysus, who is depicted in his triumphal chariot; Aphrodite, who is represented in her absence by Eros; and Artemis, who, although not depicted, is connected thematically with Hippolytus. Both Herakles and Phaedra have lost their self-control: the hero is totally inebriated, and Phaedra is suffering the pangs of love. The didactic message regarding the consequences of immoderation seems at first glance to be the common denominator for the overall meaning of the floor. I take another approach here, however: my basic assumption is that

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there are differences between the two kinds of madness or the uncontrolled states of mind of the two humans in this mosaic – one can be considered as positive and the other as negative. These differences, which are based upon classical perspectives, as will be shown, are fundamental to the interpretation of the overall message of the mosaic.

The Dionysian Procession Panel:
The Meaning of Herakles’ Inebriation

The accepted commentary to date has interpreted the Dionysian procession in this panel as a triumphal one, during the course of which the hero Herakles is portrayed as degraded by drunkenness. This negative perception of Herakles is also dominant in the common interpretation of the banquet scene from Sepphoris as a drinking contest in which the wine god is characterized as self-controlled (sophrosyne), while Herakles is represented as uncontrolled and lacking the ability for self-restraint. According to these interpretations, it seems that the intention is to show Herakles’ intoxication as a means to contrast Dionysus’ divine nature with the character of the “fallen” human hero. The scene from Sheikh Zouede, however, portrays not a banquet but a Dionysian procession that resembles many other Dionysian processions portrayed in Roman mosaics. The interpretation to be introduced in this article is based upon several assumptions: first, there is no myth that we are aware of regarding a competition that was held between the wine god and the hero. Secondly, it is necessary to determine whether the situation depicted is taking place during the hero’s lifetime or after his death and apotheosis. If the situation occurs after the hero’s corporeal death, then his position is equal to that of the god. Furthermore, as Herakles was a highly respected divinity in late antiquity, it does not seem reasonable that he

would be depicted as humiliated. Moreover, Dionysus himself is sometimes depicted as totally inebriated and in an uncontrolled state of mind. This approach leads to another way of understanding the scene – as a sympathetic rather than a pejorative depiction. Based upon artistic and textual sources, the argument I set out to establish here is that this scene does not show Herakles inebriated after being defeated by Dionysus in a drinking contest; but, rather, that he is being initiated (mystes) into the Dionysian mysteries.

The image of Herakles in the Sheikh Zouede mosaic is similar to that in one of the panels in the mosaic from Sepphoris from the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE Fig. 4: both images portray the hero in an inebriated state, being supported by the Dionysian retinue. The Sheikh Zouede panel could also be compared with the panel from Sepphoris that was interpreted as the rape of Auge Fig. 5.

I would interpret this latter panel as Herakles being led to initiation, following a comparison with other depictions of the theme, as in the Bacchanal scene on the Naples Sarcophagus from 150-200 CE Fig. 6, in which an inebriated mystes is being led by two satyrs to his initiation. Symbols of the mystery rites, such as the thyrsus, can be found both in the Sepphoris mosaic and in Sheikh Zouede, as can the ecstatic atmosphere. This specific atmosphere (oreibasia) is created by the Dionysian retinue and is intended to free the mind in order to achieve the main goal of the initiation: the illusion of merging with the divinity (enthousiasmos). The oreibasia in the Sheikh Zouede panel is created by the dancing of the Dionysian retinue – the maenads, satyrs, Pan and the centaurs, composed with a sense of movement and varied postures; and the musical instruments such as the tambourine, the horn, Pan’s pipes, the lyre and the castanets (krotala).

that together achieve the turmoil (pandemonium) that expresses the cultic ecstasy.\textsuperscript{11} Between the head of Dionysus and the centaur there is a very significant inscription that conveys the message of the scene: initiation or purification (telete). The word skirtos (“leaper”) inscribed on the right-hand side of the mosaic probably refers to the satyr with the castanets. It also hints at the subject of the panel being the Dionysian mystery cult.\textsuperscript{12}

Herakles, like the other mystai noted, is characterized by an uncontrolled state of mind, as if he is being driven by external divine forces that combine the human with the divine. The human thereby becomes one with the god (antheos). This longing for the divine is rooted in the Platonic outlook. In the panel under discussion, the image of Eros with an inscription appears beside Dionysus, also contributing to the concept of the yearning for a divine experience, conveyed explicitly by the word telete. Indeed, eros is one of the means by which a human being is able to concretely experience the divine. Another means is Dionysian: the madness caused by Dionysus during the mysteries provides the soul with divine inspiration. This madness is temporary and positive in nature, and purifies the soul through catharsis. The Platonic perspective was extended in neo-Platonic thought, at the core of which is the concept of the return of the soul to its divine origin. Accordingly, the origin of the soul is the divinity (En) that the soul permanently yearns for but is unable to reach except upon entering a temporary state of unconsciousness. A human is able to experience the divine only at moments of ecstasy and through a mysterious contact. The worldly medium used to bring about such ecstasy is wine.

The sanctification of Herakles through the Dionysian mysteries appears to be connected to the apotheosis he underwent after his dreadful death. During his mortal lifetime Herakles experienced many tribulations before achieving the qualities of ethos and sophrosyne. After completing his twelve labors, he was then released from his corporeality through his death, and became a god. Herakles was conceived as godlike by the ancient

165 authors,\textsuperscript{21} and was a highly venerated divinity in late Roman times, next only to Dionysus.\textsuperscript{22} His \textit{apotheosis} was portrayed in Greek vase paintings always in connection to Dionysus and his retinue, as on the 5th century BCE \textit{pelike} by the Kadmos Painter from Vulci\textsuperscript{[7]}, and other vases.\textsuperscript{23} Against that background, the scene of the drunken Herakles being led by the Dionysian retinue, depicted on many Roman sarcophagi and reliefs, such as the one from Boston\textsuperscript{[8]}, can be interpreted differently: Herakles is not drunk after being defeated by Dionysus in a drinking contest; rather, he is being sanctified as a \textit{mystes} through the Dionysian mystery cult. In accordance with the function of the sarcophagus itself, the symbols in the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{The apotheosis of Herakles, \textit{pelike} from Vulci, red figure technique. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{[7]} The apotheosis of Herakles, \textit{pelike} from Vulci, red figure technique. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.


depictions of the inebriated or ecstatic Herakles suggest that they portray a celebration of Herakles’ acceptance to Olympus through the Dionysian mysteries. From the above artistic analogies and textual sources, the scene from Sheikh Zouede appears indeed to convey the message of the sanctification of Herakles through the Dionysian mysteries and, hence, that his ecstatic loss of control can be perceived as positive.

The Phaedra and Hippolytus Panel: Love Madness and Hubris

The main scene in the Phaedra and Hippolytus panel focuses upon the meeting between Hippolytus and Phaedra’s nurse, who is to give him Phaedra’s letter. The scene is placed in the center of the panel and is set outdoors, as shown by the tree between the two characters. Phaedra is portrayed on the left, seated in an architectonic construction that may symbolize her palace, while Hyppolitus’ companions are portrayed on the right. The moment chosen is a very dramatic one and symbolizes the turning point that will lead to Hippolytus’ death: this is the moment in which the nurse gives the love-letter to Hippolytus. The figure of Eros, his name inscribed, is flying above her head. Phaedra is seated in a stereotyped “love-sick” pose with one hand placed on her knees, and the other is raised

to support her chin. Her facial expression and body language are meditative and seemingly calm; this pseudo-calmness, however, is concealing uncontrollable emotions. The passivity of Phaedra's pose actually results from mental illness or madness.\textsuperscript{25} Phaedra's “love-sick” pose hints at her fate or \textit{moira}.\textsuperscript{26} This typical pose characterizes Phaedra in her many depictions on sarcophagi and mosaics, and seems to reflect her image in the play too, where she asks her nurse to support her body, because her muscles are slack.\textsuperscript{27} Phaedra is a prototype for a personality that is controlled and destroyed by passion.\textsuperscript{28} She confesses to her nurse that she had been out of her mind, and that the madness that had attacked her was sent by a great and powerful divinity.\textsuperscript{29} Phaedra's madness is pathological and negative, in contrast to the Dionysian madness that causes the fortunate who experience it, as does Herakles, to achieve a supreme sense of merging with the divinity.

In Euripides’ play, Aphrodite admits that she had cursed Phaedra with an uncontrollable passion for her stepson, the hunter Hippolytus, who has abstained from women and sex and is an admirer of the virgin goddess Artemis. By his celibate mode of life, Hippolytus is denying normal human needs, and is thus dishonoring Aphrodite. Phaedra is used by the goddess as a means by which to take her revenge on Hippolytus. Now insane, Phaedra orders her nurse to let down her hair and talks emotionally about her sexual fantasies, while her nurse begs her to stop.\textsuperscript{30} In mural paintings, mosaics and sarcophagi, Phaedra appears in the same introverted pose,\textsuperscript{31} which was meant both to hide her feelings and concomitantly to express


her mental illness. Such a state of mind is a kind of madness. That type of
madness, however, is not the Dionysian one, which is positive and brings
about a sublime experience, but is negative and destructive, a consequence
of unrequited love. The madness of love was discussed profoundly in
the Platonic philosophy, and was the theme of many Greek and Roman
literary works.\(^\text{32}\) Love, however, has a dual meaning, as either a positive or
a negative madness.\(^\text{33}\) This duality is caused by Aphrodite, the goddess of
passion.\(^\text{34}\)

The power of Aphrodite is cosmic, as Phaedra’s nurse states: “Cypris,
you are no God. You are something stronger than God if that can be”.\(^\text{35}\) In
the Symposium dialogue, the influence of Aphrodite and Eros is described
as double. One influence derives from Aphrodite Ourania. This aspect of
the goddess causes an experience of exultation. The other influence derives
from Aphrodite Pandemos, who causes mortals to become attracted to
physical pleasures.\(^\text{36}\) This kind of madness is a negative obsession that leads
to mental disorder and to disaster.\(^\text{37}\) In the Laws, this sickness is one of the
corporeal desires and endless pleasures that never satisfy.\(^\text{38}\) Eros’ influence is
violent, as described by Sappho.\(^\text{39}\) Eros is identified with fire by his epithet
Thermos Eros, because, like fire, he too can be very dangerous and out
of control.\(^\text{40}\) Much strife, conflict, sorrow and death happen because of
er\(\text{o}\)s, so Socrates asserts.\(^\text{41}\) The love madness theme is dominant in Roman
poetry too.\(^\text{42}\) The destructive influence of er\(\text{o}\)s is also described, as Thornton

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Pompeii, IX.1.22, Croisille, Poésie et art figuré, Fig. 26.2; a mosaic from Nea Paphos, in
Christine Kondoleon, Domestic and Divine: Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysus
(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), [Fig. 17]; the St. Clement sarcophagus, Rome,
in Marion Lawrence, “The Phaedra Sarcophagus in San Clemente”, in In Memoriam
Otto J. Brendel: Essays in Archaeology and the Humanities, ed. Larissa Bonfante
and Helga Von Heintze (Mainz: von Zabern, 1976), Fig. 4a. See also Salvatore Settis,
“Images of Meditation, Uncertainty and Repentance in Ancient Art”, History and
Anthropology I (1984): 203-204. 32 Plato, Phaedrus 231-233, 239-241. 33 Ibid., 250-
252. 34 Thornton emphasizes Aphrodite’s role as the goddess of sex and passion,
but not ‘love’. See Thornton, Eros, 50. 35 Euripides, Hippolytus, II. 350-361, 1280-
1282. 36 Plato, Symposium, 55-56. Thornton, Eros 180-181. 37 Thornton, Eros, 17, 26;
Plato, Phaedrus 243, 255; Symposium 207. 38 Plato, Laws 714a. 39 See Archilochos,
Sappho, Alkman: Three Lyric Poets of the Late Greek Bronze Age, trans. Guy
Davenport (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 130. 40 Thornton, Eros,
31: Sappho, 31.10. 41 Plato, Phaedo, 66. 42 Theocritus, Idyll II, 48-51, in The Poems
of Theocritus, trans. Anna Rist (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978);
has noted, in a metaphor of melting that characterizes the way passion melts rationality and self-control. Phaedra’s love-sick pose thus seems to reflect her “melted” state of mind. In light of the above, Phaedra’s madness depicted in the Sheikh Zouede mosaic can be explained as a result of Eros’ attack, and as an uncontrollable state inflicted upon her by the goddess Aphrodite.

Hippolytus, situated almost in the center of the panel, reflects the role of the goddess Artemis in the entire event. He appears in his characteristic image as a clean-shaven youth, as in many other works that portray him. As opposed to his usual appearance as a nude athlete, in the Sheikh Zouede panel he wears a majestic mantle, holds a spear in his right hand and extends his left hand to the nurse to accept Phaedra’s letter. The dog leaping toward Hippolytus may symbolize him as a hunter and a devotee of Artemis, who does not appear in the panel. Eros, who is hovering at the left upper side and pointing toward Hippolytus, is the only divinity depicted in this panel. His presence emphasizes the superiority of Aphrodite over Artemis.

While Phaedra is the embodiment of loss of control and submission to desire, Hippolytus seemingly embodies self-control and resistance to corporeal lust. But such self-control too is an exaggerated response, since the denial of a basic human need is not considered as moderation, but as hubris, a sin: Hippolytus is a chaste youth who aspires to be pure and superior to his human needs. As a devotee of Artemis, he is in a state of eternal youth, although he should have already matured through an initiation rite and left the realm of Artemis. Hippolytus retains his youthfulness by elevating and consecrating his chastity and avoiding women, instead of fulfilling his civil duties. He is very proud of his chastity and feels superior to others, while speaking about sexual intercourse as something dirty that would stain

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his purity. His Hipolytus’ rejection is not of Phaedra only, but of women in general, and is a consequence of his pride in his virginity. He has removed Aphrodite entirely from his life, and thereby sinned against her and is condemned for his hubris. Hence, the immoderation of Hipolytus is no less than that of Phaedra. Hipolytus declares: “She claimed us three as victims then, did Cypris?” The superior goddess is thus Aphrodite, who has destroyed Phaedra, Hipolytus and, so it seems, Artemis herself. Hipolytus considers Artemis a partner and a friend; she is the most beloved by him of all the gods, and therefore she too becomes a victim of Aphrodite, who is indeed an enemy to them both.

**The Symbolism of the Divinities in the Sheikh Zouede Mosaic**

While Dionysus is himself depicted in the mosaic, Aphrodite is symbolized by Eros, and Artemis by the leaping dog. The common denominator of Aphrodite and Artemis is that they are both connected with animalism: Artemis is the “Queen of the Beasts” (Potnia Theron), while the passion that is symbolized by Aphrodite is savage in its nature. Likewise, the arrow is an attribute common to both of them: Artemis’ arrows were intended for the hunt, and Aphrodite has Eros’ arrows that subdue souls by passion. The hunting of animals might be conceived as symbolizing human rationalism overcoming the animalistic impulsive forces, whereas Eros’ soul-hunting could be conceived as symbolizing the superiority of the divine over the human soul. This approach corresponds to the neo-Platonic hierarchy of being: the divine or the One (En), which is the source of all; the mind (noos); and the soul (psyche) that connects between the divine-spiritual being.

and the corporeal world. The soul is full of yearning to return to the real beauty of the divine, the source of all that is non-materialistic in nature. According to Porphyry, the neo-Platonist who was influential between the 3rd and the 5th centuries, the soul can gain redemption only through its union with the divine.

The Phaedra and Hippolytus panel could therefore be conceived as an allegory of the lower level of the hierarchy and the control of the divinities over mortals. The Dionysus and Herakles panel manifests the higher level, in which the mortal merges with the sublime, or the ‘One’. Mystical unity with the divinity was familiar and widespread in Late Antiquity, and is the supreme goal and the climax in Plotinus’ last Ennead. As god of the mysteries, Dionysus can elevate mortals to the divine sphere, whereas the influence of Aphrodite or of Artemis can lead to disaster. During the Roman period and in late antiquity, Dionysus was the most important divinity, and embodied the mind of the universe and all the other gods. According to Macrobius, the universe itself was created by Zeus, while the mind was Dionysus, who is Dios Noos, the universal and the redeemer god. The sublimity of Dionysus as depicted in the discussed mosaic is thus in accordance with the increasing tendency toward monotheism in late antiquity.