

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 53 (1996)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Dionysos and the underworld in Toledo

Autor: Iles Johnston, Sarah / McNiven, Timothy J.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-41323>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Dionysos and the Underworld in Toledo

By Sarah Iles Johnston and Timothy J. McNiven, *The Ohio State University*

In memoriam Kurt Luckner

A fourth-century Apulian funerary krater, recently acquired by the Toledo Museum of Art, provides the first artistic illustration of soteriological doctrines alluded to in ancient Orphic sources¹. The Toledo volute krater is, so far, unique and even surprising among its kind, because it shows Dionysos in the Underworld, clasping the hand of Hades. Moret, who included this vase in his valuable survey of 40 other Apulian Underworld vases, suggested that it illustrates Dionysos' departure from Hades². Here we will argue, however, that the significance of the handclasp can better be interpreted as signifying the authority that Dionysos held within the realm of the dead – authority that could be used to benefit his worshippers, as described in the so-called Orphic gold tablets and other fragments of Orphic literature.

1. Description of the Scene

The scene on our vase bears superficial resemblances to those on other Apulian Underworld vases³. Hades and Persephone occupy their typical place

- * The authors would like to thank Kurt Luckner, of the Toledo Museum, for allowing us to study the vase, and Jan Bremmer, Kevin Clinton, Fritz Graf and Kathryn Morgan for discussing it with us. The suggestions of *Museum Helveticum's* anonymous referees were most helpful. The authors worked together closely in writing this article. However, interpretation of the iconography of the scene was primarily the responsibility of Timothy J. McNiven. Interpretation of the religious doctrines represented by the scene was primarily the responsibility of Sarah Iles Johnston. The following abbreviations have been used throughout this article:

ARV	J. D. Beazley, <i>Attic Red-figured Vase-painters</i> (Oxford ² 1963).
CVA	<i>Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum</i> , by museum or territory (since 1922)
LIMC	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> (Zürich 1981–)
RVAp 1 and 2	A. D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, <i>The Red-figured Vases of Apulia</i> 1 (Oxford 1978) and 2 (1983). The standard numbering system, with chapter/serial number has been followed
RVAp Suppl. 1 and 2	A. D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, <i>The Red-figured Vases of Apulia Supplement</i> 1 (<i>BICS Suppl.</i> , 42, 1983) and 2 (<i>BICS Suppl.</i> , 60, 1991 and 1992).

- 1 Toledo 1994.19: *RVAp Suppl.* 2, p. 508, 18/41a1, attributed to the Dareios Painter and dated 340–330 B.C.E.
- 2 J.-M. Moret, “Les départs des Enfers dans l'imagerie apulienne”, *Revue Archéologique* 1993, 293–351.
- 3 The basic study by M. Pensa, *Rappresentazioni dell'Oltretomba nella Ceramica Apula* (Rome 1977) has been much augmented by recent finds. See M. Schmidt, “Orfeo e orfismo nella

in the center, within their ναῖσκος. Hermes stands to the right, leaning upon one of its pillars, and a chained Kerberos is positioned below. To either side of the ναῖσκος are arranged two tiers of sitting and standing people, who fill the roles of visitors to and inhabitants of the land of the dead.

A closer look at this vase, however, shows that it is by no means typical. The familiar visitors – Orpheus with his lyre, Herakles fetching Kerberos or even the rarer Amphiaraos – are absent. The inhabitants of the Underworld seen on other vases are also missing – the judges, the Erinyes or the famous sinners such as Sisyphos, the water-carriers, Theseus and Peirithoos. The visitors and inhabitants on our vase have not been seen in Underworld scenes before. The most important of these is Dionysos himself, who balances Hermes to the left of Hades' ναῖσκος. He is identified by his short tunic, νεβρίς and ἐνδρομίδης, by the narthex staff he rests on the steps of the ναῖσκος, and most unequivocally, by the remains of his name above his head (JΝΥΣΟΣ). Accompanying the wine god are two maenads, labelled Persis and Akheta, a satyr, labelled Oinops, and a πανίσκος, who playfully teases Kerberos⁴.

The figures on the other side of the ναῖσκος present a careful antithesis to Dionysos and his company. For, although loose symmetry is common in Apulian Underworld scenes, here the individual figures on either side of the ναῖσκος almost mirror one another compositionally. Making this symmetry more striking is the absence of the busy atmosphere found on other Underworld vases, where many incidents are shown happening at once – Orpheus plays his lyre, Herakles pulls along Kerberos, an Erinyes whips her victim. The figures on our vase are shown standing or sitting, engaged in relatively little activity; the artist seems to have been content to allow them to be themselves, rather than to perform an interesting feat.

Like the figures on the left, the figures on the right are conveniently labelled. A youth with antlers, seated next to the roof of the building, is Aktaion. Leaning over to speak to him is another youth, Pentheus. A woman below the two youths, leaning on a λουτήριον, is Agave. Like Dionysos and his maenads,

pittura vascolare italiota", *Atti del 14. Convegno di Studi sulla Magna Graecia* (1974, published 1978) 120; K. Schauenburg, "Unterweltsbilder aus Grossgriechenland", *RM* 91 (1984) 359–387, *id.*, "Zu zwei Unterweltskrateren des Baltimoremalers", *AA* 1990, 91–100; M. Schmidt, "Bemerkungen zu Orpheus in Unterwelts- und Thrakersdarstellungen", in P. Borgeaud (ed.), *Orphée et Orphisme. En l'honneur de Jean Rudhardt. Recherches et Rencontres* 3 (Geneva 1991) 31–42, and Moret, who includes a list of the known Apulian scenes of the Underworld to date.

- 4 All three names are previously unknown for satyrs and maenads: A. Kossatz-Deissmann, "Satyr- und Mänadennamen auf Vasenbildern des Getty-Museums und der Sammlung Cahn (Basel), mit Addenda zu Charlotte Fränkel, *Satyr- und Bakchennamen auf Vasenbildern* (Halle, 1912)", *Greek Vases in the J. Paul Getty Museum* 5 (1991) 131–199. – The little pan could almost be burlesquing Herakles, which would be a unique element in Underworld scenes. Cf. the Andokides Painter's Attic version of Herakles and Kerberos with the same gesture: Louvre F 204: *ARV* 4.11; K. F. Felten, *Attische Unterweltsdarstellungen des VI. und V. Jhs. v. Chr.* (Munich 1975) fig. 3.

these three had not previously appeared on Underworld vases⁵. As Thebans, as aunt and cousins of Dionysos, their presence can best be understood in relation to him, and their significance here as a group is internally consistent. These are three of mythology's best-known Dionysiac "sinners", mortals who failed to recognize Dionysos' power or who even defied him⁶. As section 4 will argue, their presence here is important for understanding the significance of the scene as a whole.

2. Interpretation: The Handclasp

Let us first return to Dionysos himself, however, and his handclasp with Hades. From Greek literature, we know that this gesture had a range of meanings, according to context⁷. In essence, it is a sign of unity. As such, it was used to signal a greeting, when two people came together, or a farewell, before they parted, or as sign of a special closeness, a relationship or agreement. In Attic vase painting, there are numerous examples of all three uses of this gesture, although they are not always easy to distinguish from one another⁸.

Two Attic examples of the handclasp are particularly relevant here. A calyx krater in St. Petersburg depicts Apollo at Delphi clasping the hand of Dionysos⁹. Moret adduced this scene as a parallel to the scene on the Toledo krater, and interpreted it as Apollo's return and Dionysos' departure. The gesture may be both a greeting and a farewell, but its true significance is to

5 The presence of Aktaion on the Toledo krater raises the possibility that the fragmentary name on the Karlsruhe fragment should be restored as [AKT]AIΩN. G. Zuntz rejected this emendation, first considered and rejected by Hartwig in 1884, because Aktaion's appearance is otherwise limited to scenes of his death: "Aion in Karlsruhe?", *Antike Kunst* 33 (1990) 100. His presence there, on an apparently normal Underworld vase, with Orpheus present would have many implications, since it contrasts with the specifically Dionysiac connection which Aktaion has on the Toledo krater.

6 The offenses of Pentheus and Agave against Dionysos are well known. In some early versions of Aktaion's myth, Aktaion's metamorphosis into a stag and subsequent death are punishments for his attempts to ravish Semele (Stes. fr. 236 Page; Hes. *Cat.* fr. 346 M-W, now confirmed by *PMich.* inv. 1447 verso; Akusilaos ap. Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.4). Thus Aktaion, too, could have been understood as a "Dionysiac" sinner. For further analysis of the evolution of Aktaion's myth, see L. R. Lacy, "Aktaion and a Lost 'Bath of Artemis'", *JHS* CX (1990) 26-42, and C. Schlam, "Diana and Actaeon: Metamorphoses of a Myth", *Classical Antiquity* 1984 (3.1) 82-110.

7 K. Sittl, *Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer* (Leipzig 1890) 27-31, 135-137; G. Neumann, *Gesten und Gebärden in der griechischen Kunst* (Berlin 1965) 49-58 and G. Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge 1987) 50-54.

8 So also Moret (above n. 2) 304. T. McNiven, *Gestures in Attic Vase Painting: Use and Meaning, 550-450 B.C.* (Diss., University of Michigan, 1982) (Ann Arbor 1982) 95. Continuing research has extended the series of examples to the end of Attic red figure, and expanded the analysis. Of 97 Attic examples of the handclasp known to us, 28 are greetings, 31 are farewells, and 38 express the special relationship of two figures.

9 Moret (above n. 2) 305, fig. 3: St. Petersburg, Hermitage St. 1807 by the Kadmos Painter: *ARV* 1185.7; *LIMC* 2, pl. 250, Apollon 768 a.

indicate the special arrangement these two deities had reached. Although this vase shows two gods meeting in one's territory, like the new Apulian Underworld scene, there is an important difference. Because Apollo agreed to share Delphi with Dionysos, they can stand as equals iconographically. An even stronger parallel for the Toledo Underworld scene is found on an Attic bell krater in London, which shows Herakles clasping the hand of Apollo at Delphi¹⁰. Because of the conflict between these two over the tripod, this cannot be a greeting. While a farewell is possible, that meaning would be subsumed by the agreement that Herakles and Apollo reached after Zeus' intervention. Like Hades on the Toledo krater, however, Apollo is shown seated in this example, while Herakles, a visitor like Dionysos in the Underworld, stands¹¹.

As relevant as these two comparisons are, they are both Attic. In Apulian vase painting, where gestures in general play a more circumscribed role, the handclasp is much rarer than in Attic. In most examples, the gesture is executed by figures in the grave ναῖσκος, who are painted white to indicate that they are sculptures¹². The same ambiguity exists for these images as for those on actual grave stelai¹³. The handclasps may represent farewells to the departing dead, or welcomes when they arrive on the other side, or expressions of a close relationship that will never be lost.

On only two examples is it clear that the clasping hands signify either greeting or farewell. On a dinos by the Dareios Painter, the presence of Nike seems to indicate that the warrior, in local Messapian costume, has returned to clasp his father's hand, and that this is a greeting¹⁴. An early Apulian krater, on the other hand, shows the gesture as part of a traditional warrior's departure, with a woman holding the equipment for a libation¹⁵. As common as departure scenes are in Apulian vase painting, it is surprising that handclasps rarely appear in them.

10 British Museum 1924.7–16.1: *ARV* 1420.6; *LIMC* 2, pl. 272, Apollon 1040.

11 So also Amphiaraos in the Apulian scenes of his encounter with Hades discussed below.

12 A. D. Trendall, *Red Figure Vases of South Italy and Sicily* (London 1989) 266. Examples are: Karlsruhe B 5: *RVAp* 1, 15/75, by the Painter of Naples 1763, *CVA* Karlsruhe 2, pl. 60.1 (Germany 358); ex London market: *RVAp Suppl.* 1, 18/16b, pl. 9.3, near the Painter of Copenhagen 4223 and the Dareios Painter; Japan, private coll.: *RVAp* 1, 18/289, pl. 198, by the Underworld Painter; Basel S 24: *RVAp* 2, 25/6 and ex Milan market: *RVAp* 2, 25/17, both by the Ganymede Painter; Toledo 77.45: *RVAp* 2, 27/13, pl. 322 and Toledo 77.46: *RVAp* 2, 27/41, pl. 328, both by the Baltimore Painter; and Swiss private collection: *RVAp* 2, 29/1, pl. 374, by the White Saccos Painter.

13 K. F. Johansen, *Attic Grave Reliefs of the Classical Period* (Copenhagen 1951) 54–61, 139, 149–151. See also E. Pfuhl and H. Möbius, *Ostgriechische Grabreliefs* (Mainz 1977) 45.

14 Ex London market: *RVAp Suppl.* 1, 18/71d, pl. 15.2, by the Dareios Painter. A return would also explain the unusual detail of the naked boy riding the horse, if he is a groom taking the horse off to its stable.

15 London F 158: *RVAp* 1, 1/90, by a close associate of the Sisyphos Painter; D. Williams, *Greek Vases* (London 1985) 57, fig. 63. Compare the farewell handclasp on the Campanian hydria, Karlsruhe B 2400: A. D. Trendall, *Red-figured Vases of Lucania, Campania and Sicily* (Oxford 1967) 330, #765; *CVA* Karlsruhe 2, pl. 75.1.

Even more clearly than these genre scenes, Apulian mythological scenes use the handclasp as a general sign of unity or concord – as opposed to specifically a sign of arrival or departure. Perseus and Kepheus clasp hands to signal their agreement regarding Perseus' marriage to Andromeda¹⁶. Aphrodite clasps Helen's hand on her arrival at Troy¹⁷. It is hard to imagine that Aphrodite has been waiting there merely to greet her protégée; this clasp must signify support or agreement. On two vases, Pelops clasps Hippodamia's hand as he swears an oath to Oinomaos¹⁸. The handclasp in all of these examples expresses the accord felt by the two parties.

The closest analogue to the handclasp on the Toledo krater appears on four Underworld vases that show Hades seated in his palace clasping the hand of a warrior¹⁹. Most scholars have identified him as Amphiaraos, noting in particular that some examples display a chariot at the bottom of the scene²⁰. What does the handclasp signify in this case? On the one hand, Amphiaraos' chariot, in which he was swallowed alive into the Underworld, indicates that he is just arriving in our scenes, and so the handclasp on these vases could signify greeting²¹. However, as in the case of Aphrodite and Helen, it seems unlikely that greeting *alone* is intended by the gesture. A personal welcome by Hades hints at a special relationship, either already in place or shortly to come. Since Amphiaraos is given power, after arriving in Hades' realm, to communicate with the living through his dream oracle, the handclasp could signify Hades' confirmation of the hero's special position and abilities, or indicate an agreement reached between the hero and the king of the Underworld²². As with Dionysos on the Toledo vase, Amphiaraos stands in the presence of the seated Hades, but inside the palace, perhaps to signify that he is one of Hades' subjects.

If the handclasp demonstrates Hades' confirmation of Amphiaraos' power, that recognition is even stronger in the case of Dionysos. He is a god,

16 Malibu, Getty 85.AE.102: *RVAp Suppl.* 2, 1/90a, by the Sisyphus Painter; *CVA* Getty Museum 4, pl. 192.

17 Geneva HR 44: *RVAp Suppl.* 2, 17/77, by the De Schulthess Painter: *LIMC* 4, pl. 326 Helene 187.

18 St. Petersburg inv. 4323: *RVAp* 2, 18/18, pl. 173, by the Dareios Painter, and Naples, private collection 370: *RVAp* 2, 27/27, pl. 325.2 by the Baltimore Painter.

19 Mainz, University 185: *RVAp* 2, 18/75, by the Dareios Painter: Pensa (above n. 3) pl. 14b; English private collection: *RVAp* 2, 25/10a, by the Ganymede Painter: *Boreas* 9 (1986) pl. 10; Pulsano, Guarini collection: *RVAp Suppl.* 2, 27/22a2: *AA* 1990, 97 fig. 6, and Münster, University 817: *RVAp Suppl.* 2, 27/22a3, *Boreas* 9 (1986) pl. 12, both by the Baltimore Painter.

20 The fullest discussion is H. Lohmann, "Der Mythos von Amphiaraos auf apulischen Vasen", *Boreas* 9 (1986) 65–82. See also Schauenburg (1990: above n. 3) 96–98.

21 Moret (above n. 2) 327–335, sees the figure as Protesilaos and sees the gesture as indicating Hades' permission for his return to the land of the living as well as farewell.

22 M. Schmidt collects the sources for Amphiaraos' power in the Underworld in M. Schmidt, A. D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, *Eine Gruppe Apulischer Grabvasen in Basel* (Basel 1976) 60 and 69. Cf. Kirke's statement about Teiresias' power in the Underworld in *Od.* 10.493–495.

and is shown surrounded by those who recognized his divinity spontaneously and those who were taught to recognize it. The scene on the Toledo krater does not show Dionysos specifically arriving or departing in Hades' kingdom, but present there with his own power²³. The handclasp is Hades' physical sign of acknowledgment²⁴. Persephone looks on attentively as the clasp takes place; this, and the fact that Hades is turning towards her although he looks at Dionysos, indicates that she, too, is closely concerned with whatever it signifies.

3. Interpretation: Rewards after Death

The gold tablets, in combination with other texts, can help us to understand the significance of this accord between Dionysos and the rulers of the Underworld²⁵. These small, paper-thin leaves of gold, which were produced in Southern Italy and Greece from the fifth century B.C.E. until the second century C.E., have been found in the context of burials, sometimes atop the remains of the deceased or mixed with the ashes in cinerary vases. They seem to have been intended as mnemonics for the departed soul, as the verses inscribed upon them tell the soul where to go, what to do and what to say to certain authority figures whom it will encounter in the Underworld. They also remind the soul of various rewards that it will obtain on the strength of having completed these tasks and having been initiated into certain mystery cults while still alive.

The mystery cults in question looked to Dionysos for salvation: a tablet from Calabrian Hipponium refers to *μύσται καὶ βάκχοι*, and two from Thessalian Pelinna remind the soul to tell Persephone that *Βάκχιος* himself has released it. The Pelinna tablets are cut in the shape of ivy leaves – an allusion to Dionysos – and a statuette of a maenad was found in the same tomb as they were. These three explicitly Dionysiac tablets share phrases and themes with the 16 other tablets that we possess; Graf suggested that the texts on all of the

23 Moret (above n. 2) 305, interprets the turning pose of Hades to indicate that Dionysos is about to leave.

24 A comparison could be made with the figure of Zeus on the Dareios Painter's name vase: Naples 3253: *RVAp* 1, 18/38; *LIMC* IV, pl. 338 Hellas 5. Here Zeus, seated and watching the folly of the Persians, reaches out for the hand of Hellas standing nearby, a gesture of support and recognition.

25 See Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, *Le lamine d'oro "Orfiche". Edizione e commento* (Milan 1993) (*non vidimus*); F. Graf, "Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Evidence and Old Questions", in T. Carpenter and C. Faraone, *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca 1993) 239–258; and *id.* "Textes orphiques et rituel bacchique. A propos des lamelles de Pélinna", in Ph. Borgeaud (above n. 3) 87–102; C. Segal, "Dionysos and the Gold Tablets from Pelinna", *GRBS* 31 (1990) 411–419. Both Graf and Segal cite earlier works on the tablets in their notes. See also H. Lloyd-Jones, "Pindar and the Afterlife", in *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique* 31 (1984) 245–283; rpt., with addenda, in *Greek Epic, Lyric and Tragedy* (Oxford 1990) 80–109. See also n. 31 below, on the newest tablet from Pherai.

gold tablets were drawn from Orphic poems associated with Dionysiac mysteries²⁶. That Dionysos could win release for the soul is also mentioned in a fragment of Orpheus' poetry quoted by Olympiodoros:

Dionysos is responsible for deliverance (λύσις) and for this very reason the god is [called] "Deliverer" (Λυσεύς). And Orpheus says: 'Men send perfect hecatombs in all hours during the whole year, and they perform rites, striving after deliverance from unlawful ancestors. But having power over them, you will deliver whomever you wish from difficult suffering and limitless frenzy?' (Orph. frag. 232 Kern = Olympiod. in *Plat. Phaedon*. pg. 87, 13 Norv., trans. Graf).

Dionysos is not the only deity involved in the soul's salvation according to the gold tablets, however; several of them give Persephone an important role as well. Four of the five "A" type tablets instruct the soul to declare its purity to the "Queen of the chthonian ones". In A1.7, the soul further declares that it has "sunk beneath the breast of the chthonian Queen"; in A2.6 and A3.6, that it has "come as a suppliant to holy Persephone"; and in A4.5–6, that it will journey along a road by Persephone's holy meadows and groves²⁷. We have already mentioned that, in one of the Pelinna tablets, the soul is to tell Persephone herself that Dionysos has released it. According to a fragment of Orphic poetry quoted by Proklos, those initiated in the mysteries of Dionysos and Kore will "escape from the wheel and find release from evil" (in *Plat. Tim.* 42 c–d [3.297.3 Diehl] = Orph. fr. 229; cf. fr. 230).

The Gurôb papyrus (dated to the late third century B.C.E.) may also give evidence for a mystery cult in which Persephone and Dionysos cooperated in aiding the soul. It reads as follows (M.L. West's reconstruction and translation [= Orph. fr. 31])²⁸:

26 Graf (1991 and 1992: above n. 25). See also Segal (above n. 25) and J. Bremmer, *Greek Religion. Greece and Rome, New Surveys in the Classics* 24 (Oxford 1994) 86–89. Graf (1991) notes, however, that the tablets exhibit somewhat different eschatological and ritual concepts among themselves and reminds us that a variety of practices and theologies were united under the terms "Orphic" and "Bacchic" in antiquity.

27 Pindar fr. 133 S–M connects Persephone with a different sort of postmortem benefit: "Those from whom Persephone will accept payment for her ancient grief, their souls she sends upwards into the Sun of this world again in the ninth year, and from them are sprung noble kings and men who are strong in speed and great in wisdom. They are called holy heroes by men for the rest of time." Here, Persephone is concerned not so much with the soul's pleasure and protection in the Underworld as with its fate in the next life, but the general idea – that the soul can win better treatment from Persephone by making a payment – is the same as that we see in other sources.

28 See discussion in M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1985) 169–172 and, more briefly, in L. Brisson, "Orphée et l'Orphisme à l'Époque Impériale", *ANRW* 2.36.4 (1990) 2928–2929 (with French translation). For the Greek text, R. A. Pack, *The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (Ann Arbor 1965) no. 2464.

“[Accep]t ye my great [offering] as the payment [for my lawless] fath[ers].
 Save me, gr[eat] Brimo [
 And Demeter (and?) Rhea [
 And the armed Kouretes; let us [
]and we will make fine sacrifices.
] a ram and a he-goat
]boundless gifts.”
 ... and pasture by the river / ... [ta]king of the goat / ... Let him eat
 the rest of the meat / ... let x not watch / ... consecrating it upon the
 burnt-up / ... Prayer of the []:
 “Let [us] invoke [] and Eubouleus.
 And let [us] call upon [the Queen] of the broad [Earth],
 And the dear []s. Thou, having withered the [
 [Grant the blessings] of Demeter and Pallas unto us.
 O Euboul] leus, Erikepaioi,
 Save me [Hurler of Light]ning!
 THERE IS ONE DIONYSOS.
 Tokens / ... GOD THROUGH BOSOM / ... I have drunk. Donkey.
 Oxherd / ... password: UP AND DOWN to the / ... and what has been
 given to you, consume it / ... put it into the basket / ... [c]one, bull
 roarer, knucklebones / ... mirror.

Although the mysteries reflected here seem to have borrowed elements from several cults, it is clear that Dionysos stood at their center. That Persephone was also important is suggested by the initiates' prayer for salvation to Brimo – another name for Persephone²⁹ – and, perhaps, by the line “And let [us] call upon [the Queen] of the broad [Earth]”, if the reconstruction is correct. The whole fragment, mentioning as it does the Kouretes, the hurling of lightning, a cone, bullroarer, knucklebones and mirror, suggests the Orphic myth of Dionysos' birth from Persephone and death at the hands of the Titans, which many scholars have connected with Dionysiac mysteries, including those of the gold tablets³⁰. A connection between Persephone-Brimo and Dionysos in the con-

29 For Brimo as a name of Persephone see *Et. Mag.* 213, 49; schol. Lyk. 1176 and 698; cf. Prop. 2.2.12. “Brimo” can also be a name for Demeter, Rhea and Hekate. As Demeter and Rhea are mentioned in the line following the one in which Brimo is called on, however, it seems unlikely that “Brimo” would be used to refer to either of them. We know of no connection between Hekate and Dionysiac mysteries. – A final, although puzzling, bit of information that links Dionysos and Persephone in the context of mystery rites attributed to Orpheus is Plut. *Caes.* 9.3. Describing the nocturnal rites of the Bona Dea that Clodius profaned, Plutarch mentions that this goddess is the same as that mother of Dionysos “whose name is not to be mentioned” (ἄρρητον). A few sentences later, Plutarch describes the rites as “Orphic”. The fact that these rites were restricted to women makes it difficult to understand them as being the same as the eschatological ones attested in other sources, which were open to both genders.

30 For more on the details of this myth and its connection to Dionysiac mysteries and Orphic writings, see now the important analysis of Luc Brisson, “Le corps ‘dionysiaque’. L’anthropogonie décrite dans le *Commentaire sur le Phédon* de Platon (1, par. 3–6) attribué à Olympiodore: est-elle orphique?” in *ΣΟΦΙΗΣ ΜΑΙΗΤΟΠΕΣ “Chercheurs de sagesse”. Hommage à Jean Pépin*, eds. M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, G. Madec, D. O’Brien (Paris 1992) 481–500. Important



Plate 1

Volute Krater Toledo 1994.19

Reproduced with permission of The Toledo Museum of Art

Leere Seite
Blank page
Page vide

text of mystery salvation also seems to lie behind the newest of the gold tablets, from Pherai:

Passwords: “male-child-thyrsus (?), male-child-thyrsus(?); Brimo, Brimo”. Enter the holy meadow. For the initiate is redeemed³¹.

The mention of “holy meadows” and the initiate’s redemption (as well as the size and material of this tablet) suggest that the Pherai tablet draws on the same body of “Orphic” doctrines as the other gold tablets and some of the other evidence we have examined.

Cooperation between Dionysos and Persephone in the salvation of the soul seems to have been a hallmark of “Orphic” beliefs. Any more specific theory regarding the ways in which they cooperated must remain hypothetical, but the fact that the Pelinna tablets tell the soul to declare *to* Persephone that Dionysos *has* released it would support the idea that, by being initiated into mysteries of Dionysos while alive, the individual guaranteed that Persephone would look kindly upon his or her soul once it had descended to the Underworld. By this paradigm, Dionysos does not himself allot rewards to his μύσται once they are in Hades; rather, through his rites on earth, the μύσται are prepared to receive rewards in Hades later. The central scene of the Toledo vase, illustrating as it does the special concord between Dionysos and the rulers of the Underworld, would serve as an excellent pictorial representation of these Orphic doctrines; if so, it is our first pictorial representation of Orphic eschatology. It is important to note that Dionysos, unlike Amphiaraos on the vases cited above, stands outside the palace of Hades and Persephone on our vase. As we have just argued, Dionysos is not to be imagined as awaiting his initiates in the Underworld itself, but as aiding them by means of the rites conducted before their deaths.

It might be objected that Dionysos clasps Hades’ hand, not Persephone’s,

earlier discussions include Graf 1991 and 1992, above n. 25; West, above n. 28 chps. 3 and 5; Lloyd-Jones, above n. 25; L. Alderink, *Creation and Salvation in Ancient Orphism*. American Classical Studies 1 (Atlanta 1981) 65–74; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford 1985) 296–301 = *id.*, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (Berlin 1977) 440–447; W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (1952; rpt. Princeton 1993) 108–130 and 171–187; I. Linforth, *The Arts of Orpheus* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1941) 345–350; H. J. Rose, “A Study of Pindar, Fragment 133 Bergk, 127 Bowra”, in C. Bailey, E. A. Barber, C. W. Bowra, J. D. Denniston and D. L. Page, eds., *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays Presented to Gilbert Murray* (Oxford 1936) 79–96; M. P. Nilsson, “Early Orphism and Kindred Religious Movements”, *HTHR* 28 (1935) 181–230 = *Opuscula Selecta* 2 (Lund 1952) 628–683. For a somewhat different view, see R. Seaford, “Immortality, Salvation and the Elements”, *HSCP* 90 (1986) 1–26, esp. 5–9.

- 31 Σύμβολα· Ἀν<δ>ρικεπαιδόθυρσον – Ἀνδρικεπαιδόθυρσον. Βριμώ-Βριμώ. Εἴσιτι ἱερὸν λειμῶνα· ἄποινος γὰρ ὁ μύστης (scratchings). It is possible that the first two passwords should be further broken up, perhaps between Ἀν<δ>ρικε and παιδόθυρσον, although this scarcely makes the translation any easier. The text has been published by P. Chrysostomou, *Ἡ θεσσαλικὴ θεὰ Ἐν(ν)οδία ἢ Φεραία θεά*, Diss. Thesssaloniki 1991, 372 (*non vidimus*).

as we would perhaps expect from the references to the goddess throughout the Orphic texts. This, however, can be explained by the formality of the gesture. According to Orphic belief, Persephone is Dionysos' mother; it is hard to imagine that their cooperation, which is implicit in their relationship, would be signified by so ceremonious a gesture. It is Hades, rather, who must be shown to ratify Dionysos' power in his realm through an official gesture.

The entourage that accompanies Dionysos on the vase also has its analogues in the texts of the gold tablets. The thyrsos-bearing maenads, one of whom dances and shakes a *τύμπανον*, and the playful *πανίσκος*, who teases Kerberos, remind us that some of the tablets produced in Southern Italy during the fourth century promised that the initiate would be "happy and blessed (*ὄλβιος καὶ μακαριστός*), a god instead of a mortal". Another Italian tablet, as mentioned, indicated that Persephone would send the initiate to her holy meadows or groves; the Pherai tablet suggests this as well. One of the Pelinna tablets, produced near the end of the fourth century, calls the initiate "thrice-happy" (*τρισόλβιε*) and promises that "there are ready for you below the earth the same rites as for the other happy ones"³². The figure of Oinops, with his drinking horn and *αὐλοί*, broadly represents the festive life that awaits the initiate as well, but perhaps he finds a still more exact textual parallel in the sixth line of the Pelinna tablets, which promise that the soul will have "wine as its fortunate honor". The subsidiary figures on the left side of the Toledo vase, then, could represent the rewards that await the mortals whom Dionysos has released.

4. Interpretation: Pentheus, Aktaion and Agave

If the left side of our vase reminded the deceased of the rewards that awaited him as an initiate, the right side reminded him that those who were uninitiated, or worse still, those who had rejected and defied Dionysos, as had his cousins and aunt, would be cut off forever from the postmortem party. Hades, Persephone and Hermes turn away from Aktaion, Pentheus and Agave. Although two of Kerberos' heads are distracted by the teasing *πανίσκος*, the third looks back at the group on the right as if to keep them in their place.

It is interesting that the three Kadmidis are not being actively punished, as are the "famous sinners" found frequently on Apulian Underworld vases.

32 We also remember Plutarch's remark that *τελευταί* and *καθαρμοί* were believed to insure an afterlife of playing, dancing, and singing (*Non posse* 1105b); unfortunately, he does not specify to which cult these *τελευταί* and *καθαρμοί* belonged. The afterlife of Eleusinian initiates was described in these general terms as well (e.g., *Ar. Ran.* 448–459). There are also references to feasting, drinking and general merry-making in the afterlife that suggest that virtue – instead of or in addition to initiation – was required (e.g., *Pi. O. II.* 56–77; cf. *Pl. Rep.* 363c–d; see analysis by Lloyd-Jones, above n. 25); this idea, too, may have been credited to Orpheus. Generally on these issues see also F. Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, RGVV 33 (Berlin 1974) 79–139.

Their lot seems to be one simply of exclusion from the good life-after-death. This stands in contrast to the Orphic passage from Olympiodoros quoted above, which suggests that pain and punishments await those for whom Dionysos has not won “λύσις”. Similar, general statements about punishments for the uninitiated are made by other ancient authors, although it is not always easy to discern to which mystery cult they refer (e.g., Pl. *Rep.* 364e–365a).

Portrayal of such punishments, however, may have proven difficult for our artist for several reasons. Mythology had not prescribed any specific post-mortem punishments for Agave, Pentheus and Aktaion, as it had for Ixion, Tantalos and Sisypheus, who appear on other Apulian Underworld vases. And, judging at least from our extant sources, there were no detailed descriptions of the “difficult suffering and endless frenzy” that awaited those who had failed to be initiated into the Dionysiac mysteries. Our artist might have had to invent punishments for Aktaion, Pentheus and Agave himself, had he wished to portray them³³.

It should also be noted that, as mentioned above, many Apulian Underworld scenes offer a number of subjects to the viewer, unlike the scene on the Toledo krater which focuses solely on one subject. On our vase, the artist had a message to convey that could best be expressed by a simple composition of contrast: there are those who follow the god and profit from his blessings in the afterlife, and those who do not. Given the constraints of visual iconography, especially within the comparatively small visual field provided on a vase, it is hard to imagine a better way of representing the non-believers than by their most famous mythological representatives.

5. Conclusions

As we have interpreted it, the Toledo vase provides the first artistic illustration of eschatological doctrines referred to by the gold tablets, by fragments

33 One bit of evidence concerning postmortem punishments might be relevant here. The famous phrase “many are the narthex-bearers but few are βάκχοι” (Pl. *Phaed.* 69c8–d1) immediately follows upon a description of the uninitiated lying in mud and carrying water in a sieve (69c5–6), which suggests a connection. The mud and sieve motifs were connected both with the Eleusinian mysteries and “Orphic-pythagorean” beliefs (see Graf 1974, above n. 32, 103–121); the connection between Dionysiac mysteries and Orphic teachings could mean that these motifs would be at home in Dionysiac mysteries, too. At *Gorg.* 493c, it is said that a “clever man from Italy or Sicily” teaches that the uninitiated will carry water in a sieve, which associates the sieve-motif with the same general geographic area as our vase. – Arguments based on such tenuous bits of evidence are risky. Moreover, there are artistic reasons that the mud and sieve motifs might not have shown up on our vase. Showing Pentheus, Aktaion and Agave wallowing in mud would have been representationally difficult and compositionally displeasing for the painter, striving as he did for symmetry between the right and left sides of the scene. And, although the sieve-motif is connected *doctrinally* with uninitiated females or males (Graf, *ibid.*, esp. 112), Apulian *artistic* conventions of the latter fourth century connected it exclusively with female figures, usually referred to by scholars as Danaids.

of Orphic poetry quoted by Olympiodoros and Proklos and perhaps by the Gurôb papyrus. This new evidence should aid in further evaluation of the tablets, of Dionysiac mysteries and of Orphic doctrines. The scene on this vase has other implications, too. For, in sending a clear message about Dionysos' power to help his μύσται after death, the Toledo vase differs from the more familiar Apulian Underworld scenes in which Orpheus is present, but only as one of several famous visitors, such as Herakles, Theseus and Pirithoos. This difference supports the now standard assumption that Orpheus' presence on Apulian vases has nothing to do with his reputation as a teacher of eschatological doctrines; he is there because he once visited the land of the dead³⁴.

We look forward to further scholarly discussion of this vase and its relevance to ancient mystery religions in Southern Italy and elsewhere. We need no longer say, as did Zuntz more than 20 years ago, that "There is no trace of Dionysos, the main deity of Orphic theology, on any [Apulian underworld] vases"³⁵.

34 As expressed, for example, by Schmidt 1991 (above n. 3) 32–33; G. Zuntz, *Persephone* (Oxford 1971) 411–412, and E. Rohde, *Psyche* (Freiburg ²1898) 1.318 n. 4 = Engl. trans. by W. B. Hillis (1928; rpt. Chicago 1987) 250, n. 27. Arguing for a religious significance behind Orpheus' presence were, among others, A. Dieterich, *Nekyia* (Leipzig/Berlin ²1913) 128, and E. Kuhnert, *Jahrb. des Öst. Arch. Inst.* 8 (1893) 104ff. and *Philologus* 56 (1895) 193ff. J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge ²1903) 600–606, seems to have stood somewhere in between these two views; she stressed that Orpheus has no advantage over Herakles, Theseus and the other famous visitors on these vases (she calls the group an "*omnium gatherum* of conventional orthodox dwellers in Hades") yet she assumed that he was put there because "the vase-painter's wealthy clients ... would have been ill-pleased had the founder of popular mysteries not had his fitting place" (p. 604).

35 Zuntz, *ibid.* 411.