

# Powerful figures and images: Contribution to Personification of Polis in Hellenistic Art

Lucia Novakova, Lukas Gučik

Mgr. L. NOVÁKOVÁ, Dr.Sc. L. GÚČIK

## Abstract

Anthropomorphic symbol in the visual art was an integral part of ancient Greek culture since beginning. Personification of Hellenistic polis, understood as broad and diverse social, geographic and political phenomenon, can be approached by an analysis of archaeological and written sources. Define polis in miscellaneous Hellenistic society is a complex task, especially when socio-historical context is not directly reflected by individual archaeological finds and detailed historical data. Certain changes within political sphere appeared and status of city-states varied. An effort to restore political sovereignty did not expire entirely, therefore personification of poleis from previous period remained in some cases almost unchanged. Personification of political units in Classical art might be similar, distinct or completely different from Hellenistic depictions. Personification of polis in Classical period reflected not only patriotic stance and civil affiliation, but also the legitimacy of state independence. In this aspect, a connection with art of following period may be seen: reshaping of political propaganda was performed during Hellenistic age. Legitimacy of state power and expressive means of fine arts were closely related since Archaic period, which occurred later in various forms.

**Keywords:** City-state, Cult, Hellenistic Art, Personification, Polis.

## 1. Introduction

Key for understanding Hellenistic conspect is connection of Polis and city-state cult, or divinization of Polis itself, detectable in Athens of Late Classical period. Mergence of Polis symbols and deities, representing welfare of community, are crucial. In this sense, an attempt to identify public welfare with Eirene and similar, later replaced by ambivalent Tyche, could be seen. Unfortunately, most of the epigraphic or archaeological evidence associated with the personified political conspect is lost and known only through later literary sources. Symbols of communities, thus personifications, changed with diverse ideas of society. *Polis* – despite of previous tradition and imaging with traditional „deities“ – appeared with figures, which occurred in the past rarely and even without mythological context. *Tyche*, *Kairos*, *Nemesis* became vital and more crucial. Despite the fact, that in Classical period complemented narrative scenes and were used as an accompanying figures. *Tyche* might symbolize traditional poleis with mythological roots as well as new cities without own patrons and regional deities.

Likewise understanding of expressive means in fine arts, understanding of poleis varied. They did not represented close units of citizens as was seen before. New cities emerged in remote areas with different traditions. Still, awareness of citizenship remained important factor in the most of Greek world, as formal symbol of autonomy and independence. Individual character of ruler or state representant appeared in prominent place, standing, in iconography, between divine and human sphere, likewise personifications of communities in Classical period. Heroisation of city-state representants took place at several levels as ruler cult emerged. Especially, Eastern mediterranean poleis were irreplaceable by awarding benefactors during their life time and, although formally, legitimized state power. On the other hand, demonstrated their seeming autonomy. Early iconography of Hellenistic rulers distinguished likewise various forms of cult images of Tyche (Aleandria- oar?, Antiochia- mural crown) are expected. Idea of canonical form of particular deity connected with polis developed rather successively.

Tyche, deity of diverse nature, could be associated with individual, as Hellenistic ruler. Attributes, as mural crown (wheel of fortune, cornucopia etc.), became part of the iconography associated with the depiction of polis, city or city-state, existing as form of political organization at the same time.

Eutychides work was developed in many forms, and attributes as mural crown became component part of later royal portrait depictions. Even if Tyche of Antioch could be understood rather as complex of personified conspects and values (Fortune, Welfare, Land) of city than Polis itself,<sup>1</sup> such character corresponds to popular political or civic conspects in visual and dramatic arts. Diverse and changing, public was accustomed to similar kind of scenes and their connection with individuals. Public welfare could be related to deified conspects as Tyche or sequentially heroised representatives of state power. Analysis of personified political institutions or values, and their depiction, is based on official documents with relief decoration, votive reliefs, free standing monuments, mostly preserved as Roman copies, testified by epigraphic and literary sources, glyptics and numismatic finds, mainly from Asia Minor and Levant.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Cult of Polis: divinisation of political units and values

Diversity of depiction and meaning of political or social conspects and their overlapping into the divine sphere, is not characteristic for Hellenistic period only. Such tendencies are visible since their creating and intentional incorporating to the large amount of examples in Greek fine arts, literature or religion. Origin of personifications themselves remain obscure, while in *Illiad* or *Odyssey* are already mentioned.<sup>3</sup> Accepting traditional classification, as natural phenomena (e.g. Earth, Sky, River), places (e.g. Region, Land), time (e.g. Month, Life-time, Season), emotion (e.g. Love, Fear), political concepts (e.g. Victory, Democracy, War) etc.,<sup>4</sup> question concerning their deification and its beginning, remains a complex and difficult task. Artists created these characters similar to heroes or demigods, possibly intentionally standing between divine and human sphere. Polis could be portrayed as male or female figure, while female image was more prevailing. Depiction of *Polis* in the form of female figure was known in literary sources since the Archaic period (*Hom. Il. 16.100*, *Hom. Il. 2.117-8*). Close connection with male figure of *Demos* reflects ambivalent character of Greek art.

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer 2006, 121-3.

<sup>2</sup> Martin 2013, 10-39; Meyer 2006, 295-7.

<sup>3</sup> Yagamata 2005, 21-3; Borg 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Burket 2005, 17-9.

Polis can be understood as principal unit of Greek society in whole antiquity. Uniform definition could not be appropriate as meaning and function of polis changed. Classical authors largely defined polis as community and territory (*Aristot. Pol. II.1.1261, III.1.1275*), while autonomy and independence were obligatory. Thus, a connection of people belonging to certain place, was essentially. Polis was accounted for cult organization and religious practices, while rituals were mostly performed by city-state officials. Religious sphere was rarely more dominant than political, even though strong interrelation and mutual complementing each other. Polis, as body of citizens, was responsible for cult performance and worship of deities, and, on the other hand, achieved a guarantee of divine protection. Interpretation of state religious practices or mythological stories varied, even in the case of the same worshiped deities. State cult reflected also tradition of local heroes. Thus, polis can be understood as an entity connecting religious and political authorities into a whole.

Late Classical period onwards, development of *Polis* in the sense of state cult could be recognized. It includes several important aspects. Hellenistic religion reflected new trends as well as maintained belief in Olympian gods. Also, in the case by adding several new deities to pantheon. Many of them can be seen as deified personification, eg. *Homonoia, Tyche*. Deities, which were considered as patrons and protectors of geographical, political and social units, were prominent. In Athens- and several other city-states- worship of *Athena Polias* and *Zeus Polieus* can be understood as tradition of local religious habits, not an innovation.<sup>5</sup> Another important aspect is development of ruler cult, which legitimacy was close connected with cult of Polis. Political and constitutional changes of Hellenistic polis are well attested by numerous epigraphic finds especially in western Asia minor, where honorific decrees and inscriptions obviously mentioned members of ruling dynasts and politicians, who possessed substantial power and financial resources.

### 3. Personification of Polis in Visual art

*Polis* had been more often displayed in fine arts in the form of female figure, as young and timeless woman. Usually was accompanied by a male figure symbolizing *People* (gr. *Demos*), who took a leading role in the

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<sup>5</sup> Murray 1998, 311.

iconography of official documents with relief decoration. *Demos* as symbol of *People* represents integral part of community, or even character of Polis itself. Artists used them for explanation scenes, while their extension points to a strong link between public art and political ideology. Such tendencies were clearly visible yet in the Late Classical Athens.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the Peloponnesian war numerous political personification remained in public context, naturally, in the form of civic monuments. Strong effort to associate them with deities in numerous art work could be recognized. Similar trends, reflected in later Hellenistic society, could be seen as development of religious ideas subordinated to public purposes rather than crisis of traditional religion.

Personification might be divinized if obtained cult, sacrifice, prayers, or even if emotions as hope, fear or expectation were connected (*Eirene, Tyche, Homonoia*).<sup>7</sup> Evidence of new cults are provided by written sources or archaeological finds. The main problem is identification of depictions in the case of art works. Distinguish, whether idea of political concept was in the form of human figure or represent deified object itself, is complicated. Various personifications were worshiped together with Olympian gods. Deification might be the final stage of assimilation and enhancement of personification in Greek culture. Personified political institutions or values became so common that received authority and legitimacy of independent cults.<sup>8</sup> Precise date of Polis as state cult object in Late classical Period is sometimes controversial, while various scholars prefer later association with deities, which *Tyche* could be an excellent example. Some scholars seek connection of worship of *Polis* and public *Hestia* cult.<sup>9</sup>

*Polis* could have various forms in pictorial art. Human character of *Polis*-however not deified yet- in the sense of community, is attested by initial phase of Greek comedy. While *Polis* was mostly depicted as ageless female figure, in Athens another form of display was created. Male character was used as symbol of *People (Demos)*, or legislative unites (*Boule, Phyle*), representing Athenian citizens.<sup>10</sup> Official documents provided space for depiction of political entities, conspects, citizens or deities, all in the form of human figure. Particularly beneficial is document and relief

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<sup>6</sup> Smith 2011, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro 1993, 10-2.

<sup>8</sup> Smith 2011, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Hansen and Nielsen 2004, 130-2.

<sup>10</sup> Smith 2011, 91.

combination. Some figure can be identified through the adjacent text and their development can be followed. Display of conspects were less popular than deities, however their image was slightly bigger than of humans. They can be understand in the same level as local heroes. Artists created also symbols of foreign poleis, mostly based on *Demos* depiction or well known mythological character.

An universal symbol of Athenian city-state, used on coinage or public documents, was Athena. Whether Athena symbolised patron of city or deified *Polis* itself remains an open question. Display of Athena along with *Demos* on official documents accustomed public with such kind of picture. No obvious need for personified symbol of polis in this case seems to be likely. Prominent role of *Athena Polias* may indicate cult of Polis. *Demos* can be understood as community of citizens, and thus symbol of justice, law, democracy and accompanied by figure of *Council* (gr. *boulē*) also sovereignty. Analysis of *Demos* display is promising for understanding of political conspects because of absence of mythological background. Usually was displayed as adult bearded man, dressed in himation and holding stick. Stick is frequently missing by standing figure, while seated had more heterogenous character: sitting on throne, kline, auditorium seat or rock, holding sceptre etc. Sitting on throne with sceptre might intentionally remind depiction of Zeus. Himation and stick, in turn, symbolized citizen of Athens.<sup>11</sup> Again, possibly intentionally standing between divine and human sphere.

#### 4. Written sources: tradition and innovation

Honorific decrees depicted *Demos* rewarding citizen with honorific crown. Strikingly, Athena is seen as bystander, while *Demos* as main protagonist of giving a reward. The oldest representation are dated to the second quarter of the 4th century B.C. Atena was potentially replaced by figure symbolized *Boule*. Such kind of documents with crowning scene are characteristic also for Hellenistic period, especially from Asia Minor region. Official documents with relief decoration belong to the most preserved finds. Ancient authors frequently mentioned many nowadays lost monuments concerning *Polis* or *People*. Work of Parrhasius (*Paus.* 1.3.2) represented Athenian *Demos* companied with *Democracy* and Theseus seen

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<sup>11</sup> Meyer 1989, 180.

as founder of political equality in Athens. In Athenian bouleterion a statue of *Demos* was erected (*Paus.* 1.3.5). Demosthenes mentioned sculptural group in Byzantion and Perinthos (*Dem.* 51.18.91), composed of statues of People of Byzantion, Perinthos and Athens. Such monuments reflected the same schemes known from official documents (posing honorific wreath etc.). Even altars, evidencing cult activity, devoted to *People*, are mentioned (*Dem.* 51.18.92). In Hellenistic period depiction of individual, instead of *Demos*, in the form of statue or statue and altar appeared.<sup>12</sup> Within Eastern Greek poleis origin of *tituli memoriales* can be seek. Tradition of rewarding people of power within polis is common namely in Asia Minor<sup>13</sup> and presumably reflects the enhancement of following ruler cult.

Epigraphic evidence testified sacrifice for *Eirene*, *Demokratia* and *Agate Tyche* during festival in Athens in 330 B.C.<sup>14</sup> While personification of *Peace* had been known from art and literature for long time, distinct concept of *Democracy* appeared in the 4th century onwards. Athenians established cult of *Eirene* on the occasion of naval victory over Spartans in 375 B.C. Four years later regular public offerings were approved and votive statue on Agora was erected. One of the earliest depiction of *Demokratia* was female figure crowning *Demos*. Eucrates decree (337/6 B.C.) suggests close connection between these two figures.<sup>15</sup> The youngest developed concept of these personifications may be seen by *Agate Tyche*, which represented public welfare and prosperity. It was no coincidence that official documents begin with references of *Agathe Tyche*.

Whether personification was created entirely or in part can be determined with the help of iconography. Ancient authors inform about establishment and definition of concept of *Nemesis* (*Paus.* 1.33.1) and *Tyche* (*Paus.* 4.30.6). Artist created divinized figure with specific features and attributes. Such distinct concept appeared seldom in comparison with less individualized characters. These were, first, ment to be mythological or divinized figures rarely, thus recognition of figure based on iconographic details is difficult. When attributes are missing, presence of inscription or mythological context is crucial. For this reason many of depictions are identified as personifications only.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Isager and Karlsson 2008, 39-52.

<sup>13</sup> McLean 2002, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Parker 1996, 234-7.

<sup>15</sup> Ogden 2007, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Shapiro 1993, 15.

Mythological stories were complemented by various figures and objects. Many of characters initially completed the allegory of narration. *Tyche* appeared within the sphere of heroes and gods and finally, found permanent place there. Distinct divinized figures got a new life in the art and literature. Late Classical characters depend much less on their mythological context or epic tradition than their predecessors. At first, they were associated with the main deities. Since the end of the 4th century B.C. new characters in cult had appeared. In artwork and literature new personification without particular, easily distinguishable attributes are visible. Expansion of these abstractions correspond with various political and social interest of Greek poleis.

### 5. Expressive means in the Hellenistic Art

Display of region or city-states in the form of human figure can be recognized in vase paintings as well.<sup>17</sup> Several characters were created by artists without special need for mythological background or stories. Personifications became common to such an extent, that obtained connection with Olympian gods, legitimacy and state cult status. State cult of *Demos*, one of few ongoing personification of *Polis* during 5th and 4th century B.C, was re-newed. Nevertheless, its popularity was limited in the favour of more complex deity, *Tyche*, which became symbol of Fortune and *Polis* itself. Such tendencies are reflected by increased popularity of new comedy, where *Tyche* became the main protagonist. Since the end of the 4th century B.C., *Tyche* that governed the fortune and prosperity of a city or later symbolized the Fortune of individual rulers, appeared more frequently.

*Polis* as object of state cult significantly emerged in the Hellenistic period. Political movements emerging in the 4th century B.C. enhanced, nevertheless polis remained important unit of Greek society. Cult of polis differed from Classical concept, symbolizing formal autonomy and independence of city-states which were decreasing at the same time. City states organized themselves into leagues or federations. Social divisions as phyle or phratry had decreased importance, while network of public and private koina, connected with city economy, appeared.<sup>18</sup> Seleucids and

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<sup>17</sup> Borg 2005, 193-210.

<sup>18</sup> Hansen 2000, 133.



Ptolemies established new cities based on older administrative system and modeled after Greek poleis. New poleis tried to earn limited self-governance and administrative system of previous period. Sheer size of the city in this categorization did not play any role. Establishment of Alexandria was close attempt to approach Greek city-state model in Egypt.

Because of complex character and various meaning of *Tyche*, a number of interpretations is possible. Could be identified as a Luck, Chance, Coincidence, Achievement, Wealth, Prosperity and many others. Goddess known in Homeric epics was incorporated by the needs of Hellenistic society. *Tyche* could be given various genealogies and early association with deities.<sup>19</sup> Connection with Oceanids (*HH* 2.417-20) suggests possible importance for fertility and hence agricultural prosperity. *Tyche Ferepolis* (*Pind. O.12.1*) or *Soteira* was close connected with public wealth and prosperity. Because of capricious nature, frequently mentioned by ancient authors, *Tyche* might give good or bad luck as well. On inscriptions epithet *Agathe* was usually written. After the half of the 4th century B.C. power of *Tyche* could be understood in the sense of independent Goddess.

## 6. *Tyche* and Polis: complex image of city-state?

Identification of *Tyche* and the *Fortune* of polis is characteristic for public documents of Athens. Even if cult of *Agathe Tyche* was extended, connection with Olympian gods remained. *Agathe Tyche* was worshiped with Zeus and later obtained male equivalent- *Agathos Daimon*. Again, ambiguity of Greek culture appeared. Couple of *Agathe Tyche* and *Agathos Daimon* (Good Fate and Spirit of the city) were cherished in numerous poleis, even if loosing political sovereignty. In Hellenistic period visual and symbolic concept of *Tyche* developed. *Tyche* of Antioch symbolized the wealth and prosperity of polis as city itself.<sup>20</sup> Wheel of fortune became the same important attribute of *Tyche* as cornucopia.

*Tyche*, in the sense of inexplicable and unpredictable power, enjoyed great popularity in this time. *Tycheaen* of Alexandria was one of the most magnificent of the entire Hellenistic world. (*Libanius*, 1114). Importance of this cult is illustrated by Athenian new comedy. Work of Menander provides information source for understanding of *Tyche* as ambiguous

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<sup>19</sup> Smith 2011, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Meyer 2006, 335-42.

entity. Impact of philosophical thoughts and schools is more or less obvious. Cult of *Tyche* did not contest other cults and flexibility of Greek religion should be seen rather than decline. Metaphor and attributes of conspects were symbols of artist education and excellence without requiring religious importance. Pausanias mentioned Bupalos, artist who created statue of *Tyche* with cornucopia in Smyrna (*Paus.* 1.43.6). Dating of his work is complicated by *Pliny* reference of the same name artist (*HN* 36.11-13). However, cult of *Tyche* seems to be of older character. Cult statues are mentioned in Sikyon (*Paus.* 2.7.5), Titania (*Paus.* 2.11.8), Elis (*Paus.* 6.25.4), Argos (*Paus.* 2.20.3), Ferai (*Paus.* 4.30.3), Megalopolis (*Paus.* 8.30.7), Athens (*Ael. Vh.* 9.39), Thebes (*Paus.* 9.16.2). Cicero referred to archaic *Tychaion* in Syracuse (*Cic. Ver.* 2.4.58). Temple of *Tyche* in Megara sheltered cult statue made by Praxiteles (*Paus.* 1.43.6).

Despite of numerous older representation of *Tyche*, Eutychides work became canonical. Huge measurements of statue, resembling establishment of polis, were intended for open space. A large number of bronze or marble copies, as well as depictions on coins, help to reconstruct how the original looked like. Female figure, personification of *Polis*, was sitting on the rock, symbolizing Silpius mountain and reflecting the geographical position of city. Right feet was resting on the shoulder of local river Orontes, depicted as male figure. Mural crown, symbol of walls of the city, was the most essential decorative element. Motion of female figure was in contrast to the position of Orontes. Copies and imitation of statue on two-dimensional medium (coins, glyptics) differed.<sup>21</sup> The Esquiline Treasure hoard provide examples of city symbols. Personification of Alexandria bears mural crown, holding bundle of grain and sitting on the bow.<sup>22</sup>

Worship of *Tyche* as city goddess developed since the 4th century B.C. onwards. The earliest depiction of *Tyche* as symbol of city are attested by Cilician coinage.<sup>23</sup> Cult of *Tyche* gained popularity after naval victory of Pergamon and Rome against Antiochos III. Cities and city-states obtained autonomous status and *Tyche* frequently appeared in coinage depiction. Antiochos IV. granted privileges to Cilician cities on strategically important territory. Tarsus, Soloi, Mallos, Kellenderis continued minting coins, while

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<sup>21</sup> Meyer 2006, 182-6.

<sup>22</sup> Jentel 1981, 332-5.

<sup>23</sup> Levante 1993, 52-180.

Adana, Zephyrion, Mopsuestia, Aegae, Hierapolis or Epiphaneia minted coins for the first time. City goddess *Tyche*, symbol of city and its fortune or autonomy, was frequent motive. At the end of 2nd century B.C. new attribute, veil, appeared.<sup>24</sup> *Tyche* bearing veil and mural crown was popular motive in especially in Cilicia and Syria. However, mural crown remained one of the most common motives on the coins until the late antiquity.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Depiction of *Tyche* in the form of sitting or standing female figure was common in the early Hellenistic art. Whereas cornucopia and wheel of fortune was missing by *Tyche* of Antioch,<sup>26</sup> another early model can be supposed. Alexandria, as a city known for *Tycheion* and correlation with cult of Isis, is expected place for such creation. *Tyche* of individual, as representative of community, is possible, mainly in the areas, where development of ruler cult also took a place. Ptolemaic queens e.g. were repeatedly displayed with mural crown. Origin and emergence of ruler cult is specific issue depends on region and chronological frame. If understood as partial contribution of Greek city-states, served as legitimacy of official authority. Particularly Eastern Greek poleis played a certain role, awarding public honors to their benefactors and people of power.<sup>27</sup> Ruler cult was presumably such important to use individual as representative of hellenistic Poleis. Even if close connected with *Tyche*, Seleucid legacy differed from Ptolemaic rule.<sup>28</sup>

Personification of social units or communities performed an important role in various forms of Greek art since the Archaic period at least. *Polis* could be displayed in multiple forms and figures, depending on term or social-historical context. Display in the form of female figure endured until the Roman period.<sup>29</sup> Since the end of the 4th century B.C. close association with deities had appeared. *Tyche* represented Fortune of community and individual as well. Renewed deity and symbol associated with state welfare

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<sup>24</sup> Jones 1986, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Martin 2013, 129-32.

<sup>26</sup> Meyer 2006, 91-120.

<sup>27</sup> Cartledge 2004, 217-218.

<sup>28</sup> Shipley 2000, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Martin 2013, 245-9.

and individual prosperity was obviously an appropriate choice. Even if original monuments are missing, numerous copies of later period help to understand such tendencies. Personification of social unit remained important part of Roman propaganda in visual art. It shows importance of these symbol and the scope of their applicability in diverse spheres.

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