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The Eschatological Iconography of the Derveni Krater

Beryl Barr-Sharrar

- 1 As Claude Rolley pointed out in his text on the Vix krater in *La Tombe princière de Vix*, the iconography of Greek bronze kraters varies notably from that of ceramic examples and is frequently suggestive of the original purpose of the vessel. Cows encircling the neck of an Archaic krater, Rolley suggested, indicate its probable initial purpose as a sanctuary dedication¹. The elaborate eschatological iconography of the Derveni krater, produced two centuries later, suggests its original purpose was for an initiation or some related Dionysian ritual. The final use of the krater as a burial urn was, accordingly, an appropriate one.
- 2 Almost a meter high, the krater was found more than forty-five years ago in one of five undisturbed cist tombs dated by Attic pottery to the last third of the fourth century BC, near the ancient Macedonian settlement of Lete, 12 kilometers northeast of Thessaloniki. The krater is not “gilded,” as frequently described. Its color is the result of the almost 15 percent (14.88 percent) tin content of its bronze alloy.

1. Derveni krater, side A



Dionysos and Ariadne.

- 3 The iconography of the krater is devoted to Dionysos, whose youthful image—naked—is central, like an icon, and larger than any other figure in the frieze. The gesture of his right arm over his head—when used in the representation of a deity—indicates the moment of divine epiphany². But this is also a marriage. In a rare and provocative gesture, the god's right leg is slung into the lap of his bride Ariadne, a mortal woman, not a goddess (fig. 1).

2. Derveni krater, side B



Trio of maenads with a Silenos.

- 4 On the other side, maenads dance in Dionysian ecstasy (fig. 2). The woman on the right—who has thrown off her clothes—begins to collapse with fatigue into the lap of a seated maenad. The highly significant nudity indicates the altered consciousness also expressed by the gestures of the raised arms as the women touch the backs of their heads³. To the left stands a Silenos, tense and erect, his glance emphatically focused. He balances a hunting stick at the small of his back lightly between the fingers of his right hand, and gestures with his left hand towards the dancers. The image of a Silenos or satyr so intensely involved in the maenads' *mania* is highly unusual. He is both a participant, and an envoy of Dionysos, instilling the spell that moves the women to excess.

3. Derveni krater



Maenad carrying a human baby over her shoulder.

- 5 The maenad with the human baby flung over her shoulder with less than gentle care suggests potential violence to the child (fig. 3). The image recalls the myths of a royal baby's murder by his own mother and aunts driven mad by Dionysos in retribution for their refusal to join in revelry with his female followers. The daughters of King Proteus of Tiryns ate their own offspring in their Dionysos-induced madness, and the three daughters of Minyas left their looms and jointly slaughtered one of their sons by tearing him apart. An identical figure appears as early as the end of the fifth-century BC on a pyxis lid painted in the manner of the Meidias Painter⁴. In its iconographic context on the krater, the daughters of Minyas may be an appropriate identification because of the way the baby Hippias was murdered.
- 6 I know of no image narrating this horrific story of infanticide. But as early as the late Archaic period, the artistic motif of Pentheus, the mythological king of Thebes who denied the divinity of Dionysos, in the act of being torn apart by frenzied maenads had appeared in vase painting. The famous fragments of a psykter painted by Euphronios in the late sixth-century BC depict the raving Dionysian women with the torn and bleeding upper body of Pentheus—whose name is clearly inscribed⁵. Pentheus is represented as a mature man; he is bearded. In some later representations he is shown as a young man. Both age characterizations were apparently traditional⁶.

4. Derveni krater



Two Maenads carrying a deer, proceeding in opposite directions.

5. Attic red-figure pyxis once in Heidelberg



Two Maenads carrying a deer, proceeding in opposite directions.

- 7 Like the maenad with the baby, the image of the two maenads proceeding in opposite directions holding a young deer between them is a symbol that foreshadows the bloody revenge of a repudiated Dionysos (fig. 4). The motif appears on the late fifth-century BC pyxis lid with the woman with the baby, and on the wall of a second late fifth-century BC pyxis once in Heidelberg, lost since World War II (fig. 5). On the wall of the pyxis once in Heidelberg the maenad on the left carries a *makhaira*, a short sword used for making sacrifices.
- 8 In the first quarter of the fifth-century BC, the god Dionysos appears in Attic red-figure images rending a deer. The image of the god approaching an altar on a pelike in the British Museum suggests that in the mythological language of vase painting, the deer was considered sacrificial⁷. Such significant substitution of a wild young deer for the domesticated goat actually used in sacrifices transforms a potentially religious image into one of myth.
- 9 Somewhat later, maenads perform the same act. The blood gushing from the halves of the deer in an image on an Attic red-figure lekythos dated 470–460 BC makes clear that these are not stage props, but are to be considered parts of a living creature⁸. On the mythological level, the rending of the deer is a referent to the tearing apart of the Dionysos-defying Pentheus. The chronology of these related artistic motifs is significant.
- 10 By the end of the fifth-century BC, the act of rending Pentheus is only implied⁹, and violent tearing of the deer is merely suggested by two raving maenads heading off in different directions. The increasing softening of images conveying the same concept suggests a growing distaste for explicitly gruesome images, and a widespread knowledge of the Pentheus story. On the fourth-century BC Derveni krater the motif of the deer-carrying maenads thus adds dramatic and psychological tension to an old story.

6. Derveni krater



Pentheus dressed as an armed hunter.

- 11 The tenth figure in the Derveni krater frieze, under the handle opposite the deer-carrying maenads, is a bearded male figure dressed and armed as a hunter (fig. 6). In contrast to those of the maenads, the hunter's face is expressive. His open mouth suggests he is shouting or crying out (detail, fig. 9).

7. Thessalian grave stela of a man dressed as a hunter



8. The Stag Hunt mosaic from Pella

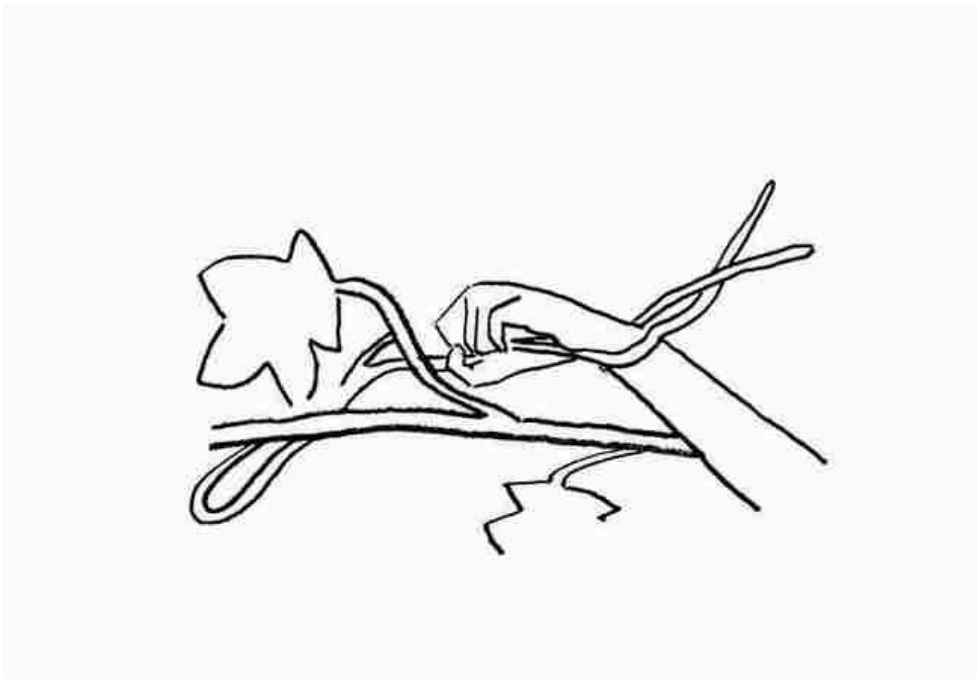


9. Derveni krater



Detail of Pentheus.

10. Drawing of Pentheus' left hand holding a rope



- 12 With the addition of a sword on a baldric, his hunter's accouterments are similar to those of the hunter on a fourth-century BC Thessalian grave stela (fig. 7). The Derveni hunter's round sun hat has been incorrectly identified as a weapon. It is the well-

known shape of a hunter's hat, a petasos. With its characteristic wide flat brim and very small crown, the same hat can also be seen over the shoulder of the hunter on the stela. A further example is the petasos of the hunter to the right in the fourth-century BC Gnosis Stag Hunt mosaic from Pella, which flies out in response to that hunter's activity in much the same way as it does on the Derveni krater (fig. 8). The laces that bind the hat on the head are clearly indicated in both mosaic and bronze relief. In his upraised left hand the Derveni hunter held a rope made of base metal added to the surface, where traces of it remain, as indicated in a detail (fig. 9) and in a drawing (fig. 10). The rope had no connection to the petasos¹⁰.

11. Attic red-figure pyxis once in Heidelberg



Pentheus dressed as an armed hunter, holding a lasso in his raised left hand.

- 13 An analogous figure on the wall of the late fifth-century BC Attic red-figure pyxis with the deer-carrying maenads was derived from the same prototype as the Pentheus on the Derveni krater (fig. 11). Ludwig Curtius published the lost pyxis in 1929 and identified the figure as Pentheus¹¹. In both the Derveni and painted figure, the length of short-garmented stride forward and the gesture of the raised left arm indicate purpose.
- 14 The painted hunter holds two spears in his right hand and so, originally, did the Derveni figure; traces remain of the second one (fig. 6). In his left hand the hunter painted on the painted pyxis holds a long length of rope—a lasso—a catching and binding implement. It was painted in red, and loops of its length can be seen hanging over his right wrist¹². In both depictions, the hunter's weapons, his vigorous stride, and his rope—abbreviated on the Derveni krater—suggest the aggressive intention of Pentheus as it must have been traditional. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, first performed in Athens after the author's death in 406 BC, before his bewitchment by the god Dionysos, Pentheus sets out to capture and imprison the Theban women as they revel in Dionysian ecstasy. He has already attempted, in vain, to fetter the god himself.

12. Lycurgus on a clay vessel in the Villa Giulia, Rome

- 15 A very particular detail of Pentheus on the Derveni krater frieze is his one-booted foot. While his right foot is bare, on his left foot he wears a high-laced boot (fig. 6). A single boot can be found on a clay image of the mythological Lycurgus, another royal victim of Dionysos (fig. 12). For his refusal to acknowledge the god's divinity, Lycurgus was induced by the god to murder his own son Dryas. He is consistently depicted with an axe held with both hands above his head. In the clay image, he lifts his axe to strike his son—whom he perceives as a vine, represented here as a cluster of grapes. Like Pentheus on the Derveni krater, Lycurgus's left foot is booted and his right foot is bare.

13. Attic red-figure hydria in the Villa Giulia



The Lycurgus vase.

- 16 On the famous Attic red-figure “Lycurgus” hydria, dated to the last quarter of the fifth-century BC, Lycurgus can be seen in his consistent pose, wielding an axe (fig. 13). The decapitated body of his son Dryas kneels in front of him, while to the left a maenad with a sword brandishes the head. Directly above, on the shoulder of the hydria, sit an embracing Dionysos and Ariadne, a fluttering Eros nearby. This unique juxtaposition of Dionysos’ marriage together with a highly graphic scene of the god’s murderous retribution for impiety, surrounded by maenads in postures of extreme ecstatic possession, is useful for our understanding of the related and equally sober message of the Derveni krater. The message of the krater is conveyed with much greater nuance.

14. Derveni krater



The young deer under the booted foot of Pentheus.

- 17 Like every image on the Derveni krater, the fawn under the booted foot of the hunter is highly significant (fig. 14). In the visual language of Greek myth, the fawn is the animal that the raving Dionysos (*mainemenos*) and the maenads in their frenzy (*enthusiasmos*) tear apart in a symbolic enactment signifying the dismemberment of Pentheus. The solitary young deer is a metaphor for Pentheus and identifies this figure.
- 18 Given the similarly radical persecution by Dionysos of the two mythological kings who defied him, the single boot in the image of Pentheus on the Derveni krater and in the clay figure of Lycurgus must have the same significance. A ritual meaning is suggested by ancient pagan as well as Christian references: Thucydides' story of the Plataeans wearing a single boot to escape has been interpreted as an indication that the single boot was a talisman against danger¹³. Byzantine paintings of military saints with one boot suggest this also¹⁴. In antiquity, the single boot or sandal (*monocrepis/monosandalos*) is found in both imagery and literature in connection with the supplication, invocation, or commitment to a god. On a symbolic level, the destiny of both Pentheus and Lycurgus suggests their consecration, or even dedication, to the god Dionysos, however reluctant the ultimate submission. There is some suggestion in ancient literature that the left foot was dedicated to subterranean deities.

15. Derveni krater



A woolly ram above Pentheus in the zone of animals on the neck.

16. Derveni krater



A young deer above Pentheus in the zone of animals on the neck.

- 19 Above Pentheus, partially hidden by the handle, is a wooly ram (fig. 15). Rams were animals actually used for sacrifices¹⁵. Near the ram is another image of a young deer (fig. 16). Together with the solitary deer under the foot of Pentheus in the lowest zone of the krater wall are two significant animal-combat motifs. Centered below the triad of women, a lion and a female panther devour a felled bull (fig. 2). The indication of gender in the depiction of animals in Greek art is rare. The female panther can be seen as a metaphor for the maenads above. Below Dionysos with Ariadne, two eagle-headed griffins begin to rip the flesh of a young deer (fig. 1). The motif is found on fifth-century BC wooden sarcophagi and has been interpreted as a sign of eternal life for the heroized dead in the Dionysiac sphere¹⁶.
- 20 The bronze repoussé animals on the upper zone of the neck are equally significant; they represent predators and prey. Centered above the maenads is a female panther (fig. 2). The indication of gender is, again, significant. Above Dionysos is a unique image of a lion, proud with his prey, a deer slung over his back, its head in his mouth (fig. 1). The lion's presence above the icon-like image of Dionysos is a metaphoric reference to the power and murderous cruelty of the god.
- 21 The repoussé masks placed in the handle volutes expand a reading of the iconography of the krater as one suggesting death and potential rebirth. Over the marriage of Dionysos and Ariadne are Acheloös and Herakles (fig. 1). The river god Acheloös, with his traditional bull's ears and horns, is associated with the Underworld as the father of the sirens, minions of Persephone. Herakles was a hero who defied death and was deified, becoming an Olympian. Like Dionysos, he descended alive into Hades and returned to earth. The volute masks above the three maenads are Hades and a bearded Dionysos in his role as an Underworld god (fig. 2). Hades has a confrontational, obdurate face with curls of hair and beard like flames of fire. Dionysos descended into the Underworld to retrieve his mortal mother Semele and according to Orphic hymns is intimately related to Persephone, who is sometimes called his mother. At Eleusis, the cult of Dionysos was related to that of Demeter, and their link is reflected by their juxtaposition on the Parthenon frieze where Dionysos' knees embrace those of Demeter.
- 22 The snakes that wind their bodies around the handle volutes and raise their heads on the mouth of the krater can be identified as venomous vipers, lethal to human and animal life (figs. 1, 2). Snakes are complex symbols frequently found on Greek bronze vessels used for cremation burials. As an ancient symbol for the indestructible life, they can signify rebirth.
- 23 The fully modeled figures that sit on the shoulder, cast in solid bronze, exist in a somewhat different realm. Above the marriage scene on the frieze and between the masks of Acheloös and Herakles are a gesturing Dionysos and a maenad who, now exhausted from her dance, begins to fall asleep (fig. 1). Above the ecstatic maenads and between Hades and the chthonic Dionysos are a half-reclining Silenos, uneasily at rest, and a maenad whose left hand originally held a silver snake (fig. 2). The snake handling here and elsewhere on the krater signifies the maenads' inviolability to danger in the throes of deep Dionysian possession.
- 24 The Derveni krater is the purveyor of visual imagery replete with meaningful gestures demonstrating states of mind and alluding to symbolic mythological events. The collective imagery suggests a purposeful link with the Underworld and some belief in

an afterlife. Part of a creation story ascribed to the mythological Orpheus describes Dionysos Zagreus' dismemberment by the Titans, notably followed by his restoration to life. This myth is believed to have been associated with mystic initiations that existed in some form by the fifth-century BC if not before.

- 25 In some complicated (and not necessarily logical) relationship, or homology, between the representation of myth and actual religious practice, the motif of the single boot on the Derveni krater may portray the mythological Pentheus as a metaphorical counterpart of an actual, voluntary initiate in Dionysian mysteries. Such initiates may have worn a single shoe in initiatory ritual representing a symbolic "death" promising rebirth. That such a ritual practice actually existed in northern Greece is suggested by burials from the fifth-century BC uncovered in the cemetery at Vitsa, in Epirus (northwest Greece), in which male remains were found with a single shoe¹⁷.
- 26 In the tomb in which the Derveni krater was found there were twenty-three vessels and implements of bronze and twenty of silver, all for symposium use. This rich burial context confirms the probability that the family of the dead man understood an expanded reading of its Dionysiac imagery to include the expression of belief in an afterlife. A mid-fourth-century BC cremation burial in Pharsala, Thessaly, in a bronze hydria similar in its date of production to the Derveni krater, contained a small gold tablet with an engraved Greek inscription introducing the soul of its occupant by name (Asterios) to the gods of the Underworld. On the repoussé handle plaque of the hydria the god of the north wind, Boreas, abducts the Athenian princess Oreithyia, daughter of Erechtheus (from the banks of the Ilissus). The motif, like other abductions, is believed to have Underworld connotations.
- 27 Precious and valuable objects for use by the dead in a presumed afterlife are characteristically found in northern Greece in burials from the late fifth and throughout the fourth-century BC. Religious attitudes in Thessaly and Macedonia remain obscure, and were probably eclectic and somewhat unstructured. But there was clearly consumer demand in northern Greece by the second quarter of the fourth century BC for a reflection of these religious concerns in the iconography of bronze vessels employed for cremation burials and very likely initially produced for initiation ritual.

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ANNEXES

Diaporama des illustrations

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/73632227@N02/sets/72157630221387322/show/>

NOTES

1. ROLLEY 2003, p. 117.
2. SCHRÖDER 1989, p. 32; HIMMELMANN 1998, p. 112.
3. NEUMANN 1965, p. 151-52.
4. BARR-SHARRAR 2008, p. 125, fig. 110. Attic red-figure pyxis lid from Eretria, 410-400 BC. British Museum inv. E 775.
5. *Euphronios* 1990, p. 160-63, n° 32; MARCH 1989, pl. 4. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. 10.221 a-f. Dated 520-510 BC.
6. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, first performed after the author's death in 406 BC, Pentheus is described as a young man, but the play was anticipated, possibly by as much as a century (525/4-456/5 BC), by a lost play called *Pentheus* by Aeschylus, and four others, of which we have only fragments, that dealt with the Theban legends of Dionysos. The mythological king as presented by Aeschylus could well have been a mature man.
7. Pelike: Dionysos with torn deer approaching an altar, British Museum inv. E362, 480-470 BC. *Dionysos* 1997, p. 9; CARPENTER, FARONE 1993, p. 192-93, fig. 10 a-d. Stamnos: Dionysos with torn deer, British Museum inv. E439, 480-470 BC, first quarter of the fifth-century BC, CARPENTER, FARONE 1993, p. 191, fig. 9. *Pace* Carpenter this cannot be a goat; it has the spots of a fallow deer.
8. Attic red-figure lekythos from Gela. Syracuse inv. 24554, 470-460 BC. MORAW 1998, n° 346, pl. 15, fig. 41.

9. As on a lekanis lid in the Louvre, G445, from Etruria, c. 430 BC. MORAW 1998, p. 20, n° 434, fig. 50 a-c; LIMC VII 1981, p. 310, n° 24, s.v. Pentheus.
10. There is no oblique line connecting the petasos to the rope in Pentheus' left hand. The rope forms a narrow loop over his head and terminates in two ends that fly out over his wrist. The petasos ties emanate from the interior of the small crown of the petasos. For what must be a misreading of the stem of the vine leaf below, E. Simon, „Die Lykurgie des Aischylos und der Krater von Derveni“, *EFNATIA* 11 (2007): fig. 10. The leaf and its stem are not indicated in Simon's drawing. For clarification, see the color image in BARR-SHARRAR 2008, p. 151, pl. 10, and fig. 141-142.
11. CURTIUS 1929.
12. The color of the rope is described in CURTIUS 1929.
13. EDMUNDS 1984, p. 71-75.
14. UNDERWOOD 1959, p. 196.
15. There may be some allusion also to the significance of the fleece of a sacrificed animal as it was used for the purification of an initiate who placed his foot upon it.
16. LULLIES 1962, p. 75.
17. Ioulia Vokotopoulou (personal communication), cited by EDMONDS 1984, p. 72m, n° 13.