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(Eds.)



# CIAC

ACTAS  
XVIII  
Congreso Internacional  
Arqueología Clásica

PROCEEDINGS  
XVIII<sup>TH</sup>  
International Congress  
of Classical Archaeology

VOL. II

CENTRO Y PERIFERIA EN EL MUNDO CLÁSICO  
*CENTRE AND PERIPHERY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD*

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**Edita *Edited***

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Mérida, 2014

**ISBN:** 978-84-617-3697-3

**Vol. 1:** 978-84-606-7624-9

**Vol. 2:** 978-84-606-7949-3

**Depósito Legal *Legal Deposit***

BA-722-2014

**Maquetación e impresión *Layout and printing***

Artes Gráficas Rejas (Mérida)

**Diseño de la imagen e identidad gráfica del CIAC *CIAC's Design and graphic identity***

Ceferino López



Actividad subvencionada por el Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad en el marco del Subprograma Técnico de Apoyo PTA20011-5582-T a la Fundación de Estudios Romanos

Actividad subvencionada por el Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad en el marco del Subprograma de Acciones Complementarias a Proyectos de Investigación Fundamental no Orientada 2011 (HAR 2011-14642-E)

Grupo de Estudios del Mundo Antiguo (EMA), HUM-016  
Consejería de Economía, Competitividad e Innovación del Gobierno de Extremadura

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## PERSEPHONE BETWEEN HADES AND HERMES. THE PICTORIAL TEXT OF A MACEDONIAN TOMB

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### ABSTRACT

The paper concerns the painted decoration of the so-called 'Tomb of Persephone' in the Great tumulus near Vergina. The scenes on three of its walls present the Eleusinian myth: on the east is Demeter, the sorrowful mother sitting on the 'mirthless rock', on the north is the story that started as the rape of Kore by Hades and ended with her return back to her mother by Hermes, and on the south wall are the three goddesses reunited: Rhea – the grandmother, Demeter – the mother, and Persephone – the daughter. Thus the plot reveals the Homeric hymn to Demeter and the passions of Mysteries with the transition from sorrow to delight, but – was it the only source of inspiration?

The painted interior of the tomb (a chamber grave) named after Persephone in *Megali Toumba* near Vergina, though clearly identified with the Greek myth, states questions concerning pictorial text of the whole composition, as well as its explanation in the interior space.

### THE IDENTIFICATION IN MYTH

M. Andronikos explained the painted scenes on eastern and northern walls of the burial chamber as the 'Rape of Persephone' in the Eleusinian myth<sup>1</sup>. The question is about the southern wall, and the three figures there in my opinion concern the same story about Demeter and Persephone, as it is known from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter.

Starting from the eastern, short wall, we see Demeter sitting in sadness (Fig. 1), obvious in her lonely figure, wholly wrapped in *himation*, even her head is covered with it; the thick shadow above her eyes, and her fixed gaze, not focused, but concentrated inside in profound sorrow<sup>2</sup>; and especially in the gesture of her right forearm raised to support the slightly inclined head, well known for mourners on Athenian tombstones<sup>3</sup>. She is sitting on a rock, the

'mirthless rock' as K. Clinton identified it in the *temenos* of Eleusinian sanctuary<sup>4</sup>, where she waited for her daughter in sorrow, probably even in a ritual drama at the night of initiation<sup>5</sup>. On the next, northern wall, the abduction scene was presented and this could explain the sad Demeter, as well as the pose of the maiden with her stretched arms in the direction of her mother, pleading for her help (Hymn.Hom., 2: 40-43).

But the chariot scene is difficult to understand – this is the figure of Hermes who is running (or flying<sup>6</sup>) in front of the *quadriga*, holding the reins in his left hand, and on the opposite side is Hades in the chariot, seizing the reins (!) in his right hand and Persephone in his left (Fig. 2). So who is leading the horses? Hermes, clearly defined with a *petasos* on his head and the *caduceus* in right hand, was supposed to be in his role of *Psychopompos*<sup>7</sup>. My interpretation is slightly different, and it is according to the Homeric Hymn – beginning from right to left the scene simultaneously involves the *Rape* that started with the sudden appearance of Hades on a golden chariot (Hymn.Hom., 2: 17-19), and the *Return* of Kore to her mother in the same golden chariot, but the horses were guided by Hermes (2:376-379). The two

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<sup>1</sup> Andronikos, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 73, fig. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Clairmont, 1993: 111.

<sup>4</sup> Clinton, 1992: 14-27; 87.

<sup>5</sup> Clinton, 2003: 50-78.

<sup>6</sup> Andronikos, 1994: 51, fig. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: 106.

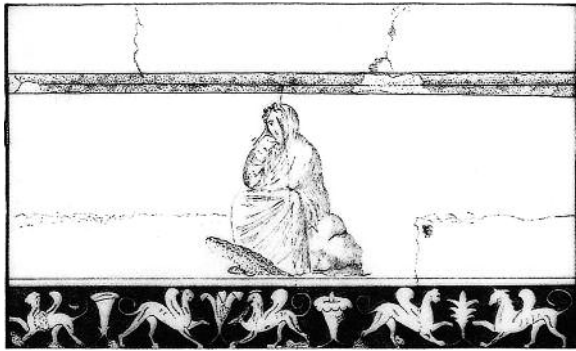


Fig. 1. Demeter on the east wall of the tomb (drawing after Andronikos, 1994: Fig. 7).

episodes were sanctioned by Zeus, here denoted in the thunderbolt in the upper left (west) corner<sup>8</sup>, and thus Hermes was the instrument of his father's will (2:334-337).

Much similar were pictures on Apulian vases since 360 BC<sup>9</sup>, but it is not the abduction scene depicted, at least not the discussed one, since Persephone is standing in the chariot next to Hades as his queen – with a *calathos* and a scepter, and again Hermes guides the horses. Thus on a *volute krater* from the British museum Hermes is next to her, helping to descend from the chariot (?), where she is close to Hades, bending the head down on her husband. And the maiden stretches hands to her mother next to the chariot on a *lutrophoros* and a *volute krater* from Basel, but the solemnity suggests her welcome, not the departure. This could be seen even in the torches Hecate holds in hands, running in front of the chariot on the *lutrophoros*, and the torch in Hermes' left hand on the *krater*, implying thus an idea about the night of the Mystery – the reunion of the mother with her daughter, since Persephone was abducted at daylight. So it is clear that in Magna Graecia the stress was on the role of Kore as the Queen of Underworld, and even on her return she is presented as such with her husband.

Three women, surely goddesses, were depicted on the southern wall of the camera in beautifully arranged composition with calmness and delight (Fig. 3). They are engaged in conversation using their arms in explicit gestures. M. Andronikos, following cult connections,

identified them as the Three Fates/*Moirai*<sup>10</sup>. But a mythical explanation is much probable, as all other scenes that fit the plot of Homeric hymn, and these women could be Rhea, Demeter and Persephone, since any relations with the Fates did not concern the Eleusian myth. Thus the scene could be explained as the reunion of mothers and daughters at the happy end as the result of Zeus' will: '*and glad were the goddesses to see each other and cheered in heart*' (2:458). The first woman to the left (east corner)<sup>11</sup> could be recognized as Rhea in her regal outlook and the authoritative gesture of her stretched left hand to grip the attention of other two and pronounce the will of Zeus. Next in the middle is her grandchild Kore<sup>12</sup>, presented leaning back as if in relax after her abduction in Beyond. Right to her back is the third woman – Demeter, sitting with dignity, slightly turned to left, addressing the other two with her right hand, and touching her lips with the left. Her pose, garments and even the face is much similar to Demeter on the eastern wall<sup>13</sup>, but her sadness has altered into gleaming delight, just like in the hymn (2.460-469). She is presented in a dialogue with Mother Rhea about her angry with Zeus, since her stretched right hand corresponds to the left one of the first figure. And what's the meaning of her fingers on the lips – perplexity or discretion, as proposed by M. Andronikos<sup>14</sup>, or close to the modern gesture for silence, a sign for the initiates to keep all that was seen and known in the Mysteries?

#### THE IDENTIFICATION IN CULT

The three goddesses lack any definite attribute, but the same is true of all other personages, except for Hermes. So this very Hermes is mentioned by Herodotus in a curious story about his *ithyphallic* statues, done by the Athenians in a way that the *Pelasgoi* taught them, revealing his erection with a *hieros logos* in the mysteries on Samothrace (Hdt. 2:51). May be a paraphrase of this was Callimachus' iambus with the answer of an *ithyphallic herma* that he was Tyrsenian on his father's side, and he got erection in accordance with the mystic tale (fr. 199). Cicero, some centuries later, mentioned Mercury as a

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: 49, fig. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Lindner, Dahlinger, Yalouris, 1988: Nos. 84, 85, 86, 88, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Andronikos, 1994: 90-92. Demeter's angry with Poseidon was the legend for her sanctuary in Phigalia, and the *Moirai* were a mere instrument of Zeus' will in it (Paus. 8.42.1-4); while the temples of the Fates, of Demeter and the Maid were mentioned together in Corinth only for their images that were not exposed to view (2.4.7); and next to the images of Demeter, the Maid and Pluto on the altar

of Amyclaeon Apollo were those of the Fates, but among many others (3.19.3-5).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: fig. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.: figs. 34, 36. According to M. Andronikos the second (middle) figure is not as youthful as the first (east), and not as mature as the third (west) (Ibid.: 85), but the painting is much damaged for an explicit statement.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 89-90, figs. 37, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: 89.

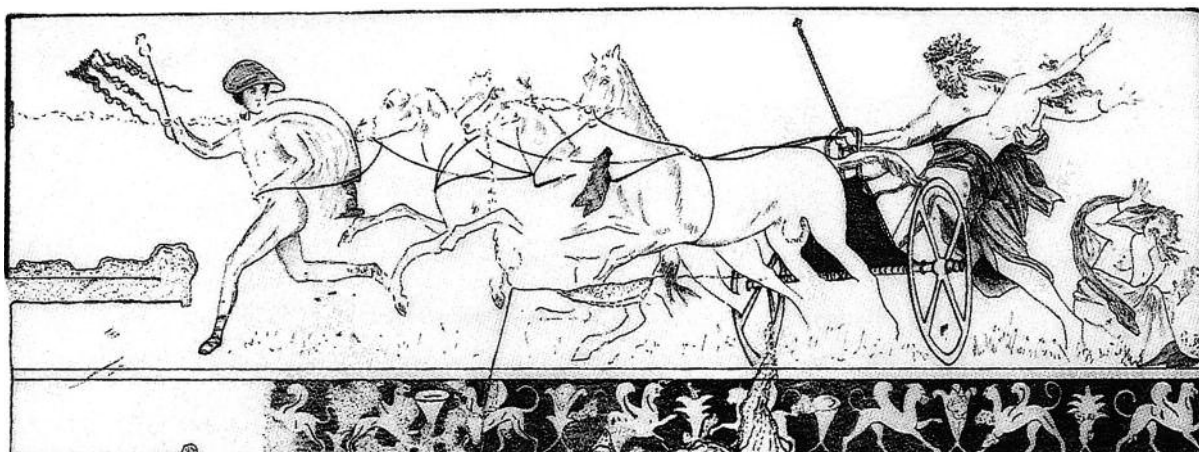


Fig. 2. The 'Rape' and the 'Return' of Persephone on the north wall of the tomb (drawing after Andronikos, 1994: Fig. 8).



Fig. 3. The 'Reunion' of Rhea, Demeter and Persephone on the south wall of the tomb (drawing after Andronikos, 1994: Fig. 6).

son of Heaven (*Caelo patre*) and the Day (*Die matre*), the first of five known hypostases, in which he was presented in a state of sexual excitation, traditionally explained with the passion inspired by the sight of Proserpine (De nat. deor. 3.56). And on account of M. T. Varo *Caelum et Terra* were the powerful gods (*divi potes* / θεοὶ δυνατοί) of Samothracian mysteries (De Lingua Latina 5.58).

Hermes on the northern wall is in profile view but he turns his head back with eyes on the chariot, thus presenting a clear proof about his look on the maiden as mentioned by Cicero. And who was he – the messenger of Zeus and promoter of his will, or a royal progenitor and mediator between Life and Death, the one who could cross the boundaries and return to life as an intriguing plot in the Mysteries? Was this Hermes from the hymn identical to the one in Samothracian cult since its early history is unclear, but Mnaseas, the learned Hellenistic historian from Patrae, named the Great gods as *Axieros*/ Demeter, *Axiokersal*

Persephone and *Axiokersos*/ Hades, and the fourth *Casmilos* was related with Hermes by Dionysodorus (Schol. Apoll. Rhod. 1.917). But numerous different identifications/ translations of the Great Gods could be a sign for their alien origin and interpreted as a Hellenization of the cult (?)<sup>15</sup>, since at the reign of Philip II, the Macedonian king, a new architectural monumentality of the sanctuary on the island was began, and such was the policy of later *diadochi*, as well<sup>16</sup>, which could suggest even earlier relations of the Argead kings with the Mysteries through the *Pelasgoi* mentioned there<sup>17</sup>? This *ithyphallic* Hermes is witnessed in the statues from the *Anaktoron* or in

<sup>15</sup> Рабаджиев, 2002: 36.

<sup>16</sup> Witt, 1977: 67-80; Cole 1984: 16-25; Burkert, 1993: 185.

<sup>17</sup> The so-called *Pelasgic Argos* was moved to the north to include the valley of Axios since Homer, the river with the same name (perhaps 'dark') as the suffix in the names of the Great gods was, and could be one of the possible interpretations on the provenance of Argead dynasty, at least its name (Рабаджиев 2002: 29-31).

front of its entrance, as well as the herms currently excavated in the sanctuary<sup>18</sup>. And in Athens we could find a link between the *hermae* and Eleusis in the prosecution of Alcibiades in 415 for the profanation of Mysteries and the sacrilegious mutilation of herms just before his Sicilian expedition (Thuc. 6.27.1; 6.28.1; 6.61.1; Xen.Hell., 1.4.14).

So the proposed proximity of the two mystery cults could be in the time of Philip and we know about an Athenian – *Isodoros Nicostratou*, who had been initiated at Eleusis and Samothrace, as it was written on his tombstone at Amphipolis<sup>19</sup>. M. Andronikos suggested Nikomachos to be the painter of the murals about the third quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> century, and a copy of his work was taken to Rome where it was popular for long time after<sup>20</sup>. But in neither of the known copies, we could find the whole composition with the sorrowful mother and the reunion of the three goddesses. It seems that a known work was adapted for the burial chamber and this we could perceive in the lack of proportions for the distribution of figures and their activities on the three planes.

### THE HISTORICAL IDENTIFICATION

And who was buried in the chamber tomb? Although it was robbed, bones of inhumated bodies of an adult male, a young woman, and a neonate were discovered. One of the proposed identifications is about the burial of Philip II together with his wife Cleopatra-Eurydice and her infant son Caranus/daughter Europa<sup>21</sup>. Its date is close to the time of Philip, and we know that he was initiated in the mysteries of Great gods together with Olympias, his future wife and mother of Alexander (Plut. Alex., 2.2). We are told also about the accusation of Alexander when his father spent much of his time on Samothrace instead he could conquer Asia (!) (Curt.

Ruf. 8.1.26). And were all these notions merely an intriguing speculation, or a religious belief which we could trace in the Argead royal tomb?

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<sup>18</sup> Hemberg, 1950: 56, 93; Burkert, 1987: 284.

<sup>19</sup> Cole, 1984: 25, note 206.

<sup>20</sup> Andronikos, 1994: 126-130; Lindner, 1988: Nos. 6-41.

<sup>21</sup> Borza, 1987: 118-119.