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A Fragmentary Wall Painting in Herod's Theatre at Herodion: The Drinking Contest between Dionysos and Herakles

A fragmentary wall painting, found among the debris in the theatre's royal box at Herodion, depicts two male figures (Fig. 1). It seems that this fragment was part of a *pinax*, similar to those *pinakes* of the wall paintings (in the form of windows), found in the royal box. According to the excavators it was painted between 15 and 10 BCE, at the time of the theatre's construction.¹

The heads of the figures are adorned with fillets and perhaps green leaves, representing ivy and vine leaves. The larger figure is reclining, presumably on a couch, leaning on his left arm (resting on a pillow), while his right hand is outstretched and raised, holding a bunch of grapes(?) and an obscure object, probably a drinking vessel.² The dark brown colour on the upper body suggests some kind of garment. Next to the figure in question is a smaller one, probably a companion, his head turned towards the larger figure. His left shoulder is quite massive and his upper arm is discernible. The facial characteristics of the figures are represented in an impressionistic manner and, despite the damage, the wall painting is in a reasonable state of preservation. Identification is enabled by means of their attributes and the posture of the larger figure, particularly the reclining mode and the outstretched, raised right hand. It can be assumed that the depiction presents a banquet or *symposium*.

¹ See Netzer *et alii* 2010: 98, colour fig. G. I thank Mr. Roi Porath, member of the archaeological expedition to Herodion, for the permission, given me orally on January 23rd, 2012, to publish the photograph of the present wall painting.

² It is difficult to identify, but it can be assumed that it is one of the following vessels: a sort of cup (see, e.g., Charbonneaux *et alii* 1971: 59 [Ill. 63]); a *kylix* (see, e.g., Folsom 1967: 187-190 [Figs. A115-A135]); a *kantharos* (see, e.g., Folsom 1967: 106 [Fig. 146], 185 [Figs. A100-A104]); a *skypchos/kotyle* (see, e.g., Folsom 1967: 105 [Fig. 145], 183-184 [Figs. A93-A99]); Charbonneaux *et alii* 1971: 56 [Ill. 57]); a *rhyton* (which has already been the instrument of Dionysos victory: Levi 1971 I: 22). Drinking vessels are called by many names and with little consistency. It appears that the word *kotyle* was a generic name for all cups; scholars, however, tend to reserve the name for the deep stemless cup with two horizontal handles.



Fig. 1. The fragmentary wall painting with Dionysos and Silenos (after Netzer *et alii* 2010: 98, colour fig. G).

The brush strokes of the colours are free, set against a creamy background. The painting features a restricted pallet of colours: light brown, dark brown, light green and dark green. Its high artistic quality indicates that the artist/s must in all probability have been trained at one of the main centres of Hellenistic art, such as Alexandria, and brought from there to create this mural, along with the other wall paintings found in the royal box.

This fragmentary and enigmatic scene raises interest and curiosity. The key to its interpretation and significance lies most probably in a mythological narrative that is to be found in later visual works of art. In this case, a comparative thematic analysis with some Greek painted vases, Roman mosaic pavements and other artistic media might solve the enigma, identify the theme and, consequently, suggest a completion of the missing part of the wall painting.

Depiction of mythological scenes bearing a moral message, such as the wretched consequences of excessive drinking, are to be found in the decoration of banqueting halls from the beginning of the Imperial period.³ The scene of Odysseus and his companions getting Polyphemus the Cyclop drunk appears in a sculptured group in the grotto of Sperlonga (apparently used as a banqueting hall),⁴ in the Golden House (*Domus Aurea*) of Nero in Rome,⁵ in the *Nymphae-*

³ The Hellenistic mosaic of Ambrosia and Lykourgos from a dining room at Delos (160-100 BCE), probably also had the same meaning (Pollitt 1986: 216 and Fig. 227).

⁴ Strong 1980: 121.

⁵ Strong 1980: 121.



Fig. 2. The drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles on a mosaic floor from the *House of the Atrium* at Antioch. Worcester (MA) Art Museum (after Levi 1971 II: Pl. Ia).

um in Baiae,⁶ and later in the Imperial villa at Piazza Armerina (4th century CE).⁷ A similar moral is implied in the two Roman mosaic pavements found at Antioch (one – in the *House of the Atrium*, nowadays in the Worcester [MA] Art Museum [Fig. 2], and the other – in the *House of the Drinking Contest*, currently in the Princeton [NJ] Museum of Historic Art [Fig. 3]),⁸ which depict the same drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles as that of the Sapphoris/Zippori Dionysiac mosaic (Fig. 4). This representation is clearly depicted on the central medallion of the Roman gold *patera* from Rennes in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, in which Dionysos is lifting in a triumphant gesture the large *rhyton*, which has already been the instrument of his victory.⁹ It seems that this theme is also suggested in a Roman altar with Dionysiac scenes and on the Uvarow sarcophagus in the Hermitage Museum.¹⁰ The drunken Herakles (supported by a satyr) also appears on a mosaic from Vienne (now in the Lyon Museum), showing the abasement that he brings upon himself, following the drinking contest with Dionysos (Fig. 5).¹¹ Another representation of the drunken Herakles with lion-skin and club, leaning on a young satyr, probably follow-

⁶ Andreae 1982: 91-102.

⁷ Dorigo 1971: 158, 164.

⁸ See Levi 1971 I: 15, Fig. 2; II: Pls. Ia, XXX; Ovadia and Turnheim 1997: Figs. 12-13.

⁹ Levi 1971 I: 22.

¹⁰ Levi 1971 I: 22.

¹¹ See Levi 1971 I: 22 (n. 38bis), 45; Ovadia and Turnheim 1997: Fig. 14.



Fig. 3. The drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles on a mosaic floor from the *House of the Drinking Contest* at Antioch. Princeton (NJ) Museum of Historic Art (after Levi 1971 II: Pl. XXXb).

ing the drinking contest with Dionysos, appears in the Late Antique mosaic pavement of Sheikh Zouède in Northern Sinai (now in the Ismailiya Museum, Egypt).¹² D. Levi rightly claimed that the fusion of the two themes, Herakles lying at a banquet with Dionysos or merrily taking part in the Bacchic thiasos, could easily give rise to a genre episode, in which the two gods challenge each other to one of the contests that could not be rare in banquets.¹³ These depictions present drunkenness in a new context: Herakles, who was not known for his self-control, is represented as a drunkard, while beside him is Dionysos, depict-

¹² Ovadiah *et alii* 1991: 183-185, Pls. 22, 23d, 24b. A Roman mosaic pavement from Cartama near Malaga depicts the drunken Herakles leans over the shoulders of a satyr, in the position which is also used for Dionysos on other mosaics (Levi 1971 I: 22, n. 35).

¹³ See Levi 1971 I: 21; see also Aristides, *Oratio* XL.19 (ed. Keil 1958: 329).



Fig. 4. The drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles on a mosaic floor from Sepphoris/Zippori (after Talgam and Weiss 2004: colour Pl. IB).

ed as a symbol of restraint, temperance and sense of proportion – the epitome of the Stoic ideal.

Such an ideal representation of Dionysos is far removed from the character as he is known in Greek mythology¹⁴ and art,¹⁵ in which he is depicted drunk, from time to time with a satyr or maenad,¹⁶ or accompanied by an equally drunk-

¹⁴ See Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* XL.366-393, 411-422, 574-578. Nonnos mentions only the hospitality extended to Herakles by Dionysos and his invitation to a banquet (*symposium*), but not to a drinking contest(!), as was erroneously noted by Bowersock (1990: 48-49).

¹⁵ Levi states that Herakles lying at a banquet with Dionysos appears in Greek art as early as the 6th century BCE; he remains indeed down to around the middle of the 5th century BCE the only god to appear with Dionysos in this attitude. He also claims that “among the numerous monuments which represent the two gods gaily enjoying themselves and getting tipsy, those which unquestionably illustrate the contest itself are extremely rare. Most represent the procession of the thiasos, in which Herakles is an object of fun to those present” (Levi 1971 I: 21-22 and n. 33); see, e.g., *LIMC* IV/2: Nos. 1490, 1497, 1502-1504, 1506, 1508, 1511, 1521; see also an Athenian Archaic red figure *kylix* by the Clinic Painter from Nola (now in the British Museum, London), in which Herakles is reclining at a banquet beside Dionysos, surrounded by satyrs (Boardman 1975: Fig. 376).

¹⁶ See, e.g., a wall painting from Pompeii (Bragantini and Sampaolo 2010: 432-433), a Roman mosaic pavement from the *House of the Drunken Dionysos* at Antioch (Levi 1971 I: 41, Fig. 13; II: Pl. VIIb) and a central medallion in a mosaic at Koroni in Greece (surrounded by masks, gladiators and beasts), dated to the 3rd century CE (Roussin 1995: 41, Fig. 15).



Fig. 5. A mosaic pavement from Vienne showing the drunkenness of Herakles. Museum of Lyon (after Ovadiah and Turnheim 1997: Fig. 14).

en Herakles.¹⁷ Interestingly, the drinking contest ending in Dionysos' victory is absent from Greek mythology and literature¹⁸ and is rarely depicted in art. The portrayal of Dionysos triumphing over Herakles' inferiority and ignominy in the manner presented in the above-mentioned works of art is outstanding. One may perhaps understand this competition between Dionysos and Herakles as the first sign of the psychomachy – the struggle between good and evil, virtue and vice, in the soul of man.¹⁹

¹⁷ See, e.g., a panel with the Greek inscription ΜΕΘΗ (drunkenness), in the Dionysiac mosaic pavement at Sapphoris/Zippori, in which the drunken Dionysos and Herakles are depicted (Mucznik *et alii* 2004: 170, Fig. 1; Talgam and Weiss 2004: 53, Fig. 38, and colour Pl. II, B).

¹⁸ See above, n. 14.

¹⁹ In this context, one may recall the parable of Prodicus in Xenophon (II.i.21-30): two women come before the young Herakles, the one "was fair to see and high bearing and her limbs were adorned with purity, her eyes with modesty"; the second "was plump and soft, with high feeding, and was made up to heighten its natural white and pink". The latter, symbolizing ad-

Following the above-mentioned comparative examples, we can conclude that the characteristics of the figures and their attributes enable us to identify them. The larger reclining figure is Dionysos, most probably in a drinking contest (and not at a banquet) with Herakles, who unfortunately is missing. Dionysos' upper body is slightly turned. His left shoulder and part of his chest are covered by an animal skin of dark brown colour, possibly a leopard skin or *nebris* (NEBΡΙΣ - fawnskin),²⁰ which, draped from this shoulder, descends at an oblique angle to below the right armpit. Dionysos' companion is a drunken(?), bearded, Silenos, similar to that depicted on the Roman mosaic pavement from the *House of the Atrium* at Antioch.²¹

It can be assumed that Greek painted vases,²² murals displaying the subject in question but which have not survived and pattern books, were used as a source of inspiration for the depiction of the drinking contest in other artistic media in later periods. Despite the gap of *ca.* 200 years between the theme in the wall painting from Herod's reign and that of the Roman artistic media, we may presume that there was an artistic tradition of depicting the subject in question. At any rate, the representation of the drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles is rare. However, if the suggested reconstruction of the scene is correct, despite the part with the drunken Herakles being missing, it can be said that this particular depiction of the drinking contest is the earliest known visual artistic example to date. The image of Dionysos as the victor in the wall painting from Herodion would also seem to recall "Dionysos the Saviour" in the Roman mosaic pavement in the *House of Aion* at Nea Paphos.²³

This representation, together with other figural wall paintings (*pinakes*) found in the Herodion theatre, seems to indicate Herod's desire to preserve discreetly his pagan origins and secretly practice the pagan rituals that he could

diction to the pleasures of life, attempts to persuade Herakles to choose her and her way of life, but the young man prefers the former, choosing the good and righteous path. See also Prudentius: 274-343.

²⁰ Cf. the *protome* of Dionysos/Bacchos, either with the leopard skin or the *nebris*, depicted in Block No. 7 in the Roman theatre at Beth Shean/Scythopolis (Ovadia and Turnheim 1994: 37-38, Ills. 50-51, 53, Pl. II[1]).

²¹ See Ovadia and Turnheim 1997: Fig. 12.

²² See, e.g., that mentioned above (n. 15) featuring the banquet of Dionysos and Herakles.

²³ See Ovadia and Turnheim 1997: Fig. 16. Looking at all these representations one recalls the words of Macrobius (*Les saturnales* I.18.15), who wrote that Jupiter (Zeus) embodied the other gods in himself. Thus, he is Helios and Apollo and the intelligence of the world which is called Dionysos.

not do formally and publicly.²⁴ Presumably, this act enabled him to ignore and consciously reject the Jewishness that had been forced on his ancestors and thus on himself.

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²⁴ For a similar case, appearing in the middle terrace of the Northern Palace at Masada, cf. Ovadiah and Peleg 2006: 321-336.

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