

Zeitschrift: Cahiers d'archéologie romande
Herausgeber: Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise
Band: 17 (1979)

Artikel: Towards an interpretation of the Dionysiac frieze on the Derveni krater
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835572>

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Towards an Interpretation of the Dionysiac Frieze on the Derveni Krater

Beryl BARR-SHARRAR

The Derveni krater, the 91-centimeter high bronze vessel used as a funerary urn in the late Classical-Early Hellenistic burial found ten miles north of Salonika in 1962 has yet to be definitively published. The long awaited monograph by Eugenia Youris is now in the press¹. With a few exceptions, scholars are agreed in placing the date of the krater in the last third of the Fourth Century B.C.². However, only Dr. Martin Robertson has addressed himself at length to any aspect of the highly unconventional Dionysiac imagery on the Derveni krater³, and stylistic examination in an attempt to determine the origin of the manufacture of the vessel has so far been inconclusive⁴.

My purpose here is to make some observations on the unusual iconography of the frieze on the body of the Derveni krater, the most accessible part of what is clearly a highly complex program, and to present some evidence to suggest a provenience for the krater in a northern (Macedonian or Thessalian) workshop.

The major frieze contains ten figures executed in a low repoussé technique with some details added in bronze, silver, and copper relief, and some silver inlay. It depicts, with great eloquence of gesture, an unconventional Hieros Gamos of Dionysos and Ariadne on one face (*pl. 24, fig. 1*) and what seems at first glance to be a Dionysiac thiasos on the other (*pl. 24, fig. 2*). In contradistinction to the prototypes of Dionysos and Ariadne popular by the late Fifth Century in which the figures are shown in loving harmony, equally sharing importance, as on Attic red-figured vases and mirror covers, the traditional motif of the Sacred Marriage on the Derveni krater has been restated to give prominence to the god. The Derveni Ariadne is not only passive and conventional in appearance, but she is placed both aside and in the background, while the Dionysos vigorously usurps and dominates the scene.

Before considering the scene with the three women on the reverse side of the krater, we must look at the Silenus who confronts them (*pl. 24, fig. 2*). He stands tensely erect on the balls of his feet, lightly balancing a hunting club behind him, held between two fingers of his right hand. His left hand gesticulates through the overhanging vine towards the approaching women. It would be incorrect to describe him as dancing, for his legs are parallel and his feet are close together. Further, he has an air of imperious concentration and self-control.

Dionysiac imagery in Fifth and Fourth Century art is rich and varied. In it, we may distinguish fundamental types of Dionysiac behavior characteristic of women. Some women depicted celebrate the mysteries of the god in an orderly manner. Ceremonies shown in such representations, as on the Dinos-Painter stamnos, are clearly to be considered sanctioned by the community and can sometimes be identified as representative of specific Dionysiac festivals⁵. In other vase decorations, women revel in Dionysiac abandon which seems light-hearted and harmlessly ecstatic, sometimes accompanied by satyrs who cavort with more or less erotic behavior.

It is a third kind of attitude which is relevant here—one in which women are shown to be possessed by the influence of the god to the point of being crazed or mad. Such a representation may be found on the so-called "Lycourgos vase"⁶. On this vase, women swirl about half-nude while Lycourgos, bewitched and deluded by Dionysos, slays his own son, thinking he is cutting down a vine. In this atmosphere of high seriousness, the instruments of Dionysiac ritual are replaced by swords, suggesting the gruesome acts of violence—like the raid on the Theban cattle in Euripides' *Bacchae* (l. 748-64)—which sets these women apart

from their community. It is significant that such women are usually depicted bare-breasted or partially unclothed. This motif is attested a sign of derangement as early as the Seventh Century by the interpretation of Dr. José Dörig and others of a well-known ivory in the Metropolitan Museum of Art⁷. (The representation of actual acts of violence, such as the dismembering of Pentheus on the Euphronios psykter in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts⁸, are rare.)

Although none of the women on the Derveni krater carry weapons, the krater frieze does not lack signs of violence and chaos. To the left of Dionysos and Ariadne, two women carry a fawn between them (*pl. 25, fig. 3*) in a manner similar to their goat-carrying sisters on the Berlin maenad krater (*pl. 27, fig. 8*). Immediately to the right of Dionysos, another female carries, or rather throws, a human infant over her shoulder (*fig. 4*), a gesture which suggests the murdering of small children in some of the more primitive Dionysiac myths⁹. The most telling characterization of what this frieze of women is about, however, is to be found in the seemingly restrained and subtle scene which commands the middle of the reverse side of the krater, a scene highly original in its invention (*pl. 24, fig. 2 and pl. 26, fig. 5*).

On this side of the Derveni krater, two women are linked by grasping a snake at the precise center of the tableau. (The snake was added in silver and is now partially missing; it may be seen at the left edge of *pl. 26, fig. 5*.) The women's hands almost touch. Ecstatic, drunk with *enthusiasmos*, the figure to the left moves toward the beckoning Silenus. Holding on to the snake, she draws the woman behind her out of the lap of the third figure¹⁰. The rising figure is conspicuously nude; only the faintest piece of drapery clings to her thighs and pelvis. This, together with the restraint indicated by the encircling arm of the seated figure who holds her, very graphically suggests that the women are compelled by a power stronger than their will, and indeed against their will, to participate in this orgiastic dance.

The iconography examined so far suggests the following observations: 1) The Hieros Gamos group is dominated to such an extent by the figure of Dionysos that the observer is not primarily impressed with a statement of blissful union, but with the powerful presence of the god alone. To the extent that Ariadne fades from our attention, the figure of Dionysos is actually close to the reclining Dionysos on the Lysikrates frieze, where the god is seen inspiring a fearful vengeance on the pirates for the injuries he has suffered at their hands.

2) In keeping with this parallel, the Silenus gesticulating towards the women must be seen as the instrument of the god's will. The women's frenzy corresponds to the pirates' fate. In both instances, a divine judgement is pronounced and executed, and a transformation enacted.

3) The woman—perhaps a servant—forcefully yet unsuccessfully attempting to restrain her mistress, and the prominent display of nudity, as well as the more traditional signs of socially unbecoming behavior, clearly tell a tragic story. Disbelievers, such as the daughters of Proetus, were punished in this manner.

Now we may turn to the remaining figure in the frieze, so far not discussed, reproduced here with the kind permission of Dr. Katerina Rhomioupoulo of the Thessalonika Museum (*pl. 26, fig. 6*).

Behind the Silenus, under the handle of the vessel, and relatively close to the divine couple—separated from them by the woman with the child—is a male figure. This figure faces left and moves in a dancing stride down sloping, rocky ground. He is bearded and of noble bearing. He wears a sword on a baldric, carries two short hunting spears in his right, lowered hand, and brandishes or swings a thong over his head with his left hand (*pl. 26, fig. 6 and 6a*). A *petasos*, with its fastening strings, can be seen behind his right shoulder. The figure is shown without his right boot, a most unusual feature with which any interpretation must contend. From his attire he must be called a hunter. On the basis of his gestures, he too must be considered to be in a state of bewitchment or possession.

Martin Robertson has suggested that the dancing male figure is Lycourgos¹¹. This seems unlikely in view of the serious problems that follow upon this interpretation, problems which Dr. Robertson himself acknowledges. First, in all known representations—in vase paintings, mosaics, and on sarcophagi—Lycourgos wields an axe, his traditional weapon¹². Second, in none of these representations does Lycourgos wear only one boot¹³. Third, it is difficult to agree with Dr. Robertson that the infant slung over the shoulder of the woman next to the male figure is Dryas, rather than a young victim of kidnapping. In vase painting the murder of Dryas is presented in a very different way¹⁴.

There is no particular evidence that the figure is Pentheus. Pentheus does dance in the *Bacchae*, but when he does so he is dressed as a maenad (l. 928-43). He is said to be booted in the play (l. 1136), but nowhere is there any mention of his wearing only one boot. Obvious explanations—for example that it is a sign of derangement like the woman's nudity—

cannot pertain because it is simply too unusual a feature, inexplicable in any way deriving directly from a state of frenzy.

Without going into the specific details of each story, I wish to state my definite impression that none of the known applicable legends adequately describes a character whose dress and behavior match the man depicted on the Derveni krater. Whether the anomalies we find in the appearance of this figure can be ascribed to the fact that some version of a well-known story is lost to us, or they spring from the poetic license of the metalsmith responsible for the krater, or are the result of something in the nature of the commission, they are such as to preclude his certain identification.

With spear and thong—possibly like Pentheus in the latter respect¹⁵—this hunter perhaps set out in pursuit of the women or Dionysos himself. Bewitched by the god's agent he may have lost sight of his goal, or simply joined the women as another victim. This one is led to infer from the dancing step and the gaze turned to the ground. In this context, what are we to make of the single boot?

As I have said, it carries little conviction to claim that the loss of a boot is a device of the artist to indicate the effect of a spell. A more material and more pertinent explanation may be found in references in Macrobius, Thucydides, and Vergil¹⁶, which indicate that in certain situations it was of tactical advantage to go with one foot unshod. Other evidence suggests that such a practice functioned as a talismanic precaution observed by soldiers in great danger¹⁷. The custom seems obscure and slightly improbable, yet some such practical explanation would be the simplest solution to our problem. It is strange that such a custom as this one should have survived in only one example among the representations of hunters that we can document, however.

In recognizing the extent to which the iconography hitherto discussed is dedicated to the awesome presence and revelation of divine power, the question arises as to whether the missing boot might not be a feature of related inspiration. According to recent discussions concerning the identity of the Barbarini supplicant—discussions to which Dr. Evelyn Harrison has drawn my attention—one bare foot may be associated with the consecration or supplication of an individual to a divinity¹⁸.

Jane Harrison in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) quotes Hesychius for the custom in ancient cults in which the vow of the initiate was taken with one foot placed upon the skin or fleece of the sacrificial animal¹⁹. J.G. Frazer, in the *Golden Bough*, refers to a sacred boot made out of the skin of a sacrificed animal²⁰. It is beyond my expertise to pursue this direction any further, but I may point out in this connection that the animal frieze in the bottom zone of the krater may not be unrelated to the principle relief.

Most of this zone is taken up with animal imagery believed to have connotations both Dionysiac and funerary.²¹ Under Dionysos, two griffins tear apart a fawn; below the women being enchanted, two lions attack a bull. The only other figure in this frieze is a fawn situated precisely under the one booted foot of the hunter (*pl. 27, fig. 7*). The appearance of this standard victim in Dionysiac sacrifices²² here, in this notable spot, in a zone where imagery may suggest the belief in an afterlife²³, must have significance relating it to the meaning of the major frieze and to the male figure in particular. One begins to wonder if more than one identity might not be intended for the Derveni hunter.

On one level, the scene is narrative and straightforward legend. On another level, the shod foot with the sacrificial animal below it may be understood as an indication of religious practices for which legend serves as explanation and background. In this second context, the hunter would be someone who has undergone initiation, and who acts here as *mystes* in a thiasos-like atmosphere.

In pressing this point, one might argue that traits of a portrait can be recognized in the aging hero's face. It has been demonstrated in a dissertation by Karin Braun that the line separating idealized age from true portraiture in the Fourth Century is not easily drawn²⁴. I would neither deny nor affirm a reading of this face as a portrait, but merely wish to suggest that such a possibility exists.

Of all the evidence recovered from the Derveni tombs, the material perhaps most pertinent to the suggestion which I have entertained is the scroll with orphic texts²⁵. Again, its relevance must be left to others to argue.

As for the origin of the Derveni krater, after the publication of Joseph Coleman Carter's study of the relief sculptures from Taranto²⁶, it seems apparent that the Derveni krater cannot be Tarentine. Affinities of style, both decorative and figural, between the Derveni krater and the Pella mosaics, allow one to consider a Macedonian "court style" which may have developed under taste-setting Athenian influences during the latter half of the Fourth Century. Equally pertinent similarities, particularly in the low relief and the rather decorative elaboration in folds

of garments, exist between the Derveni krater and the Berlin maenad krater (*pl. 27, fig. 8*), to which I have also drawn some iconographic parallels. Wolfgang Züchner dated the Berlin maenad krater to about 400 B.C.²⁷ Züchner rightly distinguished the reliefs of the maenad krater from South Italian toreutic works and, at the same time, clearly demonstrated their differences from Attic style. His conclusion was to assign the Berlin maenad krater to Kyzikos or some other northern workshop. This may in some measure be taken as confirmation of a stylistic history leading up to a Macedonian "court art."

I am aware that my remarks on the iconography of the krater cannot be sufficiently substantiated throughout, at least not by an art historian. The implications pertain to the field of history and, specifically, to the history of religion, and it is from scholars in that field that a verdict concerning the allegorical interpretation which I have proposed must be expected. It seems clear to me, however, that the elaborate design—which includes the enigmatic statuettes seated on the shoulder of the vessel—points to a complex idea, a veritable program, surely a design more deliberately planned and composed than would be the case with an ordinary vase painting.

Notes

¹ Scheduled to appear in the 1978 series of publications of the Archaologiki Etairia. Initial publications, excavation reports and photographs: *AR* 1961-62, 15f., fig. 15 (before cleaning and restoration); E. Vanderpool, *AJA* 66, 1962, 389f.; G. Daux, *BCH* 86, 1962, 792f., fig. 1-3, and *BCH* 87, 1963, 802, pl. 16-20 (good black and white photographs after restoration); C. Makaronas, *AD* 18, 1963, 193-6; C. Picard, *RA* 1963, 179-94; and G. Bakalakis, *AA* 1966, 532-4. To the subsequent bibliography supplied by P. Petsas in *Makedonika* 9, 1960, 142-3, add *EAA* 7 (1966) 936; T.B.L. Webster, *The Age of Hellenism* (1966) 20f., pl. 1; C.M. Havelock, *Hellenistic Art* (1968) 237, pl. 3; and J. Charbonneaux *et al.*, *Hellenistic Art* (1973) 224, fig. 236. Also for good color plates, the *Salonika Museum* volume of *The Greek Museums* (1975) 274 and 278-9.

² Two dissenters are C.M. Havelock, *op. c.*, who thinks it is late Hellenistic, and K. Schefold, *Die Griechen und ihre Nachbarn* (1967) 207 (fig. 156-7), who suggests a *terminus ante quem* of 330 B.C.

³ In *GRBS* 13, 1972, 39-48.

⁴ G. Bakalakis believed the krater to be Tarentine; K. Schefold suggested it is Alexandrian. There are affinities in ornament between the Derveni krater and finds from the Balkans, South Russia, and South Italy.

⁵ The Dinos-Painter stamnos, Naples 2419; Beazley, *ARV*² 1151, 2 (2) by the Dinos-Painter. Much published. For photographs, A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (1953) fig. 16a-b; L.R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* 5 (1909) pl. 33; A. Frickenhaus, *Lenäenvasen* (1912) 14-15; etc.

⁶ The "Lycourgos vase", a hydria in the Villa Giulia; Beazley, *ARV*² 1343, 6a, by the Painter of Louvre G433. For photographs, G. Cultrera, *Hydria a figure rosse nel Museo di Villa Giulia* (1938) pl. 1-3; and *AA* 1940, 495.

⁷ An archaic ivory group of two half undressed women (inv. nr. 17.190.73.) It has been convincingly identified by Dörig, as well as Dr. Andreas Rumpf and Dr. Marjorie Milne, as Lysippe and Iphianassa, two of the daughters of Proetus who were driven mad by Dionysos. J. Dörig, *MDAI(A)* 77, 1962, 72, Beil. 16-23; A. Rumpf, *Archäologie 2: Die Archäologensprache, Die Antike Reproduktionen* (1956) 50; and Milne in a review of Rumpf in *AJA* 60, 1956, 302. For photographs, also G.M.A. Richter, *A Handbook of Greek Art* (1953) 31f., 180, and fig. 20a-b.

⁸ Boston 10.221; Beazley, *ARV*² 16, 14 (a5), from Orvieto. For photographs, H. Philippart, *Iconographie des Bacchantes* (1930) pl. 12; and L.D. Caskey - J.D. Beazley, *Attic Vase Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 2 (1954) pl. 31. For the same subject, see a stamnos published in *JHS* 31, 1911, pl. 17.

⁹ I follow Ludwig Curtius (*Pentheus*, 88. *Winckelmannsprogramm* [1929]) and E.R. Dodds (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, Boston [1957] 275) in identifying a similar infant held by a maenad on an Attic red-figured pyxis lid in the British Museum also as a doomed, or at least stolen child. (BM E775, Beazley, *ARV*² 833,14; dated to c. 400 B.C.). For the myths: the daughters of Proetus: Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*; Diodorus Siculus iv, 68; Apollodorus ii, 4, 1; Servius on Vergil's *Eclogues*, vi, 48. The daughters of Minyas: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* iv, 1-40, 390-415; Plutarch, *Greek Questions*, 38; Antoninus Liberalis, 10; Aelian, *Varia Historia* iii, 142. Euripides in the *Bacchae* (l. 754) and Nonnus (45,294f.) speak of children kidnapped by Dionysiac women.

¹⁰ A figure with some superficial resemblance to this one may be found on a red-figured squat lekythos in Berlin (F2471) by the Eretria Painter. On the lekythos, a seated female figure supports a Bacchante as she seems to begin to fall from exhaustion. For an illustration, R.M. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery* (1966) pl. 47. The lekythos is Beazley, *ARV*² 1247,1(1).

¹¹ *Supra* n. 3.

¹² For the mosaics, P. Bruneau - C. Vatin, *BCH* 90, 1966, 391-427. For the vase paintings, F. Brommer, *Vasenlisten zur griech. Heldensage*² (1960) 355; and L. Séchan, *Etudes sur la tragédie grecque* (1926) 70-4; as well as my n. 14 *infra*.

¹³ The description of a bronze statue of Lycourgos as *monocrepis* in the epigram to which Martin Robertson refers suggests that there could have been one. The epigram is quoted in full by Bruneau-Vatin *op. c.* 406f., *Greek Anthology* 16,127.

¹⁴ Dryas is shown as a youth, not an infant: Cracow 1225, Beazley, *ARV*² 1121 (J.D. Beazley, *Greek Vases in Poland* [1928] 44); the Villa Giulia hydria (see n. 6 *supra*); and two vases in Naples: Naples 3237, a volute krater by the Brooklyn-Budapest Painter; and Naples 2874, a bell krater, both described in A.D. Trendall, *Red-Figured Vases of Lucania, Campania, and Sicily* (1967) 114 and 128. Naples 3237 is illustrated, pl. 59, 7.

¹⁵ In the *Bacchae* Pentheus is dressed as a hunter, with spear (l. 90) and boots (l. 1136). There are references to his attempts to bind with cords not only Dionysos but the Bacchic women as well, (l. 226-31; 616-21).

¹⁶ Macrobius, *Saturnali* 5, 18, 2; Thucydides III, 22; Vergil, *Aeneid* vii, 689f.

¹⁷ In one version of the Perseus and the Gorgon story, the hero wears only one shoe during the adventure: Artemidorus, *Onirocritica*, iv, 63, quoted by J.G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough* 2 (1936) 311f. In Christian art, military saints are represented with one shoe on and one shoe off, possibly also as an attribute of the hero engaged in a dangerous enterprise. See P.A. Underwood, *The Frescoes in the Kariye Camii*, *DOP* 13, 1959, 196, a reference for which I thank Dr. Hugo Buchthal.

¹⁸ W. Amelung, *Die Skulpturen des Vaticanischen Museums* 2 (1908) 585 nr. 393, pl. 57. J. Dörig, *JDAI* 80, 1965, 143-66; P. Mingazzini, *AK* 11, 1968, 53; and Semni Karusu, *AK* 13, 1970, 34. In the *Aeneid*, iv, 517f., Dido's dress is loosened and one foot is bare when she invokes the gods after Aeneas deserts her.

¹⁹ *Prolegomena*, 23-7. For the representation of that initiation practice, see *Prolegomena*, 547, and also J. Harrison, "Mystica Vannus Iacchi", *JHS* 23, 1903, 313-4.

²⁰ And worn on the left foot, as on the Derveni figure. See Frazer *op. c.* (*supra* n. 17) 312, and Frazer's commentary on Pausanias, II, Chapter 31, 31, 8, (1).

²¹ In discussing identical scenes among late Fourth Century gilded terracotta appliques in *Vergoldete Terrakotta-Appliken aus Tarent* (1962), Reinhard Lullies says the following: "So verstanden, nämlich als Wahrzeichen des Lebens, fügen sich die Tarentiner Tierbilder nicht nur dem Ewigkeitsbereich der heroisierten Toten in der dionysischen Sphäre durchaus ein — sie geben sich damit auch als Teile derselben östlichen Vorstellungswelt zu erkennen, in welcher, "Der Grosse Gott", das männliche Gegenstück zur "Rankengottin", regiert und den Gläubigen ein seliges Leben nach dem Tode, den Traum der Menschheit, verspricht." (p. 75).

²² On vase representations as early as the Amasis-Painter, women votaries of Dionysos carry fawns. Such women traditionally wear the skin of that animal, the *nebris*, and are sometimes tattooed with its image. (See a white-ground kylix by the Pistoxenos-Painter in the Athens National Museum, 15190.) In the *Bacchae* (l. 865-77 and 699-702) the Bacchic women liken themselves to fawns or cradle the holy animal in their arms and suckle it at breasts. At other moments the fawn is brutally dismembered by the maenads. On a red-figured stamnos by the Makron-Painter, Dionysos himself tears a fawn in two (*CVA, G.B.* 4, pl. 184 = BM III, I, c, pl. 19; also B. Philippaki, *The Attic Stamnos* [1967] pl. 27, 3.) For the subject, Dodds *op. c.* (*supra* n. 9) 277, quoting Photius; and Philippaki *op. c.* (*supra* n. 8) 41f.

²³ Lullies *supra* n. 21.

²⁴ K. Braun, *Untersuchung zur Stilgeschichte bärtiger Köpfe auf attischen Grabreliefs und Folgerungen für einige Bildnisköpfe* (1966). The possibility of the Derveni figure being a portrait would involve a discussion as to whether it was the custom in Macedonia or Thessaly at the time for older men to wear beards. The inscription on the lip of the Derveni krater identifies the owner (and probably the deceased whose remains were found in the krater) as a man from Larissa. (For the inscription, J. Bousquet, *BCH* 90, 1966, 281-2). Thessalian grave reliefs of the second quarter of the Fourth Century show older men, dressed as hunters, with beards. For an example, H. Biesantz, *Die thessalischen Grabreliefs* (1965) pl. 14 and 15 (K 33); F. Stählin, *Das hellenische Thessalien* (1924) 125; and *AD* 5, 1919, 123, fig. 1-5. If, following Dr. Manolis Andronikos, one of the ivory heads found in the so-called Philip II tomb in Vergina is to be correctly identified as a portrait of Philip, then wearing a beard may have been customary for mature men, at least during the following quarter century, also in Macedonia.

²⁵ Discussed by S.G. Kapsomenos, *Gnomon* 35, 1963, 222-3. See also the *BASP* 2, 1, 1964, 3f., and C. Picard, in: *Mélanges J. Carcopino* (1966) 737-46.

²⁶ The Relief Sculpture from the Necropolis of Taranto, *AJA* 74, 1970, 125-37, pl. 27-34. Compare also plates in Hans Klumbach, *Tarentiner Grabkunst* (1937) especially pl. 6.

²⁷ *Der Berliner Mänapdenkrater* (98. *Berliner Winckelmannsprogramm*, 1938).

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