

New aspects concerning the Dionysiac cult in Nysa-Scythopolis

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NEW ASPECTS CONCERNING THE DIONYSIAC CULT
IN NYSA-SCYTHOPOLIS*

Plates 3 + 4

The image of Dionysos, one of the most widely worshipped pagan deities, seldom appears on coins minted in the city of Rome and is even rarer on coins of the imperial series struck in the west¹. On provincial city coins, however, depictions of Dionysos with his attributes occur frequently². Table I represents the distribution of cities in Palestine which bear the figure of Dionysos on their coins³.

Table I: Dionysos on coins of Palestine

| City | Antoninus Pius | Marcus Aurelius | Lucius Verus | Lucilla | Commodus | Septimius Severus | Julia Domna | Caracalla | Geta | Diadumenian | Elagabal | Severus Alexander | Gordian III | Philip Senior | Otacia Severa | Herennia Etruscilla | Hostilian | Volusian | |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|---------|----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|------|-------------|----------|-------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|-----------|----------|---|
| Aelia Capitolina | • | | | | • | | | | • | • | | | | | | | • | | |
| Caesarea | | | | | | | | | | | | | | • | • | • | | | • |
| Canatha | | | | | • | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Capitolias | | | | • | • | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Diospolis | | | | | | | • | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Esbus | | | | | | | | | | | • | | | | | | | | |
| Nysa-Scythopolis | • | • | • | | • | • | | • | • | | • | | • | | | | | | |
| Raphia | | | | | • | • | | • | | | • | • | | | | | | | |

* I am grateful to Alla Stein for suggesting improvements to the manuscript.

¹ For Dionysos-Bacchus on medallions struck at Rome see J.M.C. Toynbee, *Roman Medallions*, Numismatic Studies 5 (New York 1941), pp. 139, 161 and 209–210. See also BMCRE Vol. IV.

² M. Bernhart, *Dionysos und seine Familie auf griechischen Münzen*, JNG 1, 1949.

³ References to coins in Table I: *Aelia Capitolina*: Y. Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina* (Jerusalem 1989), nos. 14, 70, 84–5, 110 and 183 (Meshorer 1989); *Caesarea*: M. Rosenberger, *City Coins of Palestine*, vol. II (Jerusalem 1975), nos. 104, 107, 138 and 185; *Canatha*: Y. Meshorer, *City Coins of Eretz Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period* (Jerusalem 1985), no. 209 (Meshorer 1985); *Capitolias*: A. Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia* (Jerusalem 1978), nos. 10 and 12; *Diospolis*: Rosenberger, no. 5; *Esbus*: Meshorer 1985, no. 266; *Nysa-Scythopolis*: Spijkerman, nos. 5, 7, 12, 17, 20, 21, 21a, 23, 32, 34a, 38b, 40, 42, 46, 57, 58 (the Julia Domna bronze is located in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris) *Raphia*: Y. Meshorer, *Monnaies de Raphia*, RN 1976, pp. 57–68, nos. 5, 20, 25, 36 and 42 (Meshorer 1976).

In most cases Dionysos is shown nude or draped, standing l., resting l. arm on thyrsos and pouring wine with r. hand from an oenochoe over a small panther at his feet (*Fig. 1 here*)⁴. Some representations, however, are more elaborate, especially those found on the coinage of Nysa-Scythopolis. This city struck seven different coin types related to Dionysos and the Dionysiac cult.

Table II: Dionysiac scenes on Nysa-Scythopolis' coins

| Type | Antoninus Pius | Marcus Aurelius | Lucius Verus | Commodus | Septimius Severus | Julia Domna | Caracalla | Geta | Elagabal | Gordian III |
|--|----------------|-----------------|--------------|----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|------|----------|-------------|
| 1. Dionysos standing l., nude | • | • | • | • | | • | | • | | |
| 1a. Dionysos standing l., draped | | | | • | | | • | | | |
| 2. Dionysos advancing l. | | | | • | | | | | | |
| 3. Dionysos riding in a chariot | | | | | | | | | | • |
| 4. Zeus, Tyche (Nysa) and Dionysos | | | | | • | | | | • | • |
| 5. Tyche (Nysa) seated, nursing Dionysos | | | | | | | • | | • | • |
| 6. Dionysiac procession (schematic) | | | | | | | | | • | • |
| 7. Dionysiac procession | | | | • | • | | | | | |

Types of Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are of particular interest. No. 3 represents Dionysos riding in a chariot drawn by two panthers⁵. No. 4 shows Tyche on l., standing r.; in r. she holds a sceptre and in l. the infant Dionysos. Opposite her stands Zeus l.; on his r. thigh appears the head and shoulders of the infant Dionysos. In this case, Nysa is identified with the city goddess, Tyche⁶. Type No. 5 shows Tyche wearing a turreted crown and long chiton, seated r. on a throne with a high back and nursing the infant Dionysos⁷.

Type No. 6 (*Figs. 2 and 2A*)⁸ shows Dionysos advancing r., holding long thyrsos in r. hand, placing l. hand on the head of a small figure, in field r., bunch of grapes (*see Fig. 2*); behind Dionysos, panther l., looking upwards. This type, dating to the second quarter of the third century AD, was described by Hill as «An unexplained episode of the Dionysiac legend... where the god seems to be threatening a small primitive idol with his thyrsos (which looks, however, more like a spear).⁹» On the other hand, Eckhel identified the small figure as Priapus¹⁰, while according to Seyrig: «...on ne peut guère douter que ce ne soit

⁴ See note 3.

⁵ Spijkerman (above, n. 3), nos. 60–61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, nos. 40–41, 57 and 57a.

⁷ *Ibid.*, nos. 32, 46–48 and 58.

⁸ Both coins are from the time of Gordian III; Fig. 2 from the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris (I am grateful to M. Amandry for the photograph), Fig. 2A from the Israel Antiquities Authority.

⁹ BMC Palestine, p. xxxvi.

¹⁰ J. Eckhel, *Doctrina Numorum Veterum*, vol. III (Vienna, 1828), p. 439.

un corybante, serait-ce un Scythe? exécutant sa danse autour de l'enfant divin (Bacchus)¹¹». Finally, Jonas made a somewhat fanciful suggestion which can hardly be true¹².

Coins belonging to type No. 6 depict a scene similar to the one of type No. 7, although in a more schematic manner. This latter type is unique and shows one of the most complicated representations of Dionysos on coins of the Roman period. Only two examples of this type are known, a medallion of Commodus published by Spijkerman (*Fig. 3*) and an unpublished medallion from the reign of Septimius Severus, struck in OC = 270 = 206/7 AD (*Fig. 4*)¹³.

The medallion of Commodus was first described by Spijkerman as follows: «Dionysos, nude but for chlamys flying behind him, advancing r., holding in extended r. short thyrsos, point downwards, placing l. on head of small herm-like figure; behind him, two similar small figures, bent forward and jumping¹⁴». Meshorer's description is similar: «Dionysos waving thyrsos at fleeing figures; Dionysos nude advancing r., holding short thyrsos in r., placing l. on small figure running r.; on l., two bent figures running l.¹⁵».

One may, however, interpret the scene in an entirely different way. It very probably illustrates a Dionysiac procession related to the festival of the Anthesteria.

The Anthesteria¹⁶, the Blossom festival, were celebrated in the early spring in Athens and many Ionian towns. On the second day, which fell on the twelfth of the month of Anthesterion, new wine was ceremonially blessed before Dionysos and throughout the city the day was celebrated by drinking from special jugs of a peculiar shape known as *choes*. The day, the most important of the festival, was called Choes, after these squat jugs with a trefoil mouth.

Many of the *choes* dating to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. were decorated with scenes of the different phases of mirth and play during the festival. One was a ceremony of initiation, *parastasis*, when three-year old children were admitted to the religious community. This was the first time in their lives that the children smelled and tasted wine, and for this purpose specially designed miniature *choes* were produced. Festal tables were placed in the sanctuary of Dionysos where the children received a choice of dainties and toys before joining the public Dionysiac procession¹⁷. By the end of the ceremony the children had become a part of the civic community. On the basis of the above description

¹¹ H. Seyrig, *Antiquités Syriennes*, 81: Note sur les cultes de Scythopolis à l'époque romaine, *Syria* 39, 1962, p. 210.

¹² R. Jonas, *The Winged Dionysos*, Internal circular 3, Israel Numismatic Society, Haifa Branch, 1960, pp. 1–8, suggested that «Dionysos is here shown as in his wild character of the eater of raw flesh and the man tearer, pursuing and perhaps killing a victim».

¹³ This unique medallion from the reign of Septimius Severus was recently stolen from the Santa Anna Collection; unfortunately the photograph of only the reverse can be reproduced.

¹⁴ Spijkerman (above, n. 3), pp. 194–5, no. 21.

¹⁵ Meshorer 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 41, no. 107.

¹⁶ See L. Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin 1932), pp. 93–123; H.W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (London 1977), pp. 107–124 and E. Simon, *Festivals of Attica, An Archaeological Commentary* (Madison, Wisc. 1983), pp. 92–99. See also A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (Oxford 1968), pp. 1–8 with a collection of principal texts referring to the Anthesteria.

¹⁷ G. van Hoorn, *Choes and Anthesteria* (Leiden 1951), pp. 15, 17, 29–31, 40 and 43.

the following composite drawing (*Fig. 3A*)¹⁸ and interpretation of type No. 7 can be suggested.

Obv. [AYP] ΗΑΙΟC.KΟΜΟΔΟC.KΑΙCΑΡ.Γ.ΕΡΜ.CΑΡΜ
Bare-headed bust of young Commodus to r.

Rev. ΝΥC.Τ.ΚΚΥΘ.Τ.ΙΕΡ.ΑCΥ.Τ.ΚΥΡ.ΕΛ.ΠΟΛ/ΘΑC
Dionysos, nude but for nebris flying behind and in front of him, advancing r., holding short thyrsos in r. hand, placing l. hand on the head of a child who holds a *choes* in l. hand and a rattle in right, the child's head is slightly bent backwards; on l. of Dionysos, a boy carries on his back a small panther. 32.83 gr.

Dionysos is half-covered by the nebris¹⁹, a skin of a panther, hanging from his left shoulder²⁰. Flying behind him is one of the panther's paws and its tail; in front there is probably another paw. The boy on Dionysos' right holds a *choes*²¹ in his outstretched left hand²² and a rattle in his right hand²³. To the left of Dionysos, another boy with bent knees carries a small panther. This identification seems certain since a small panther also appears on the medallion struck under Septimius Severus.

The transliteration of the reverse inscription reads:
ΝΥC[ΑΕΩΝ]. Τ[ΩΝ].ΚΚΥΘ[ΟΠΟΛΙΤΩΝ]. Τ[ΗC].ΙΕΡ[ΑC].ΑCΥ[ΛΟΥ].Τ[ΗC].
ΚΥΡ[ΙΑC].ΕΛ[ΛΗΝΙΑΔΩΝ]ΠΟΛ[ΕΩΝ]²⁴, («of the people of Nysa-Scythopolis, holy and inviolable, one of the Greek cities of Syria»). Nysa-Scythopolis probably assumed the new titles ΙΕΡΑ and ΑCΥΛΟC in connection with Marcus Aurelius' visit to the area in 175–176 AD²⁵.

¹⁸ I would like to thank Carmen Hersch for making the composite drawing Fig. 3A from the two medallions, Fig. 3 and 4. She did the drawing of Fig. 4A as well.

¹⁹ P. Devambez, *Le cortège de Dionysos*, *L'Amour de l'Art* 29, 1949, p. 29.

²⁰ Dionysos and his entourage are sometimes shown wearing the nebris, as in Fig. 5, see S. Reinach, *Répertoire des reliefs grecs et romains*, tome 13 (Paris 1912), p. 85: a and W. Fuchs, *Die Vorbilder der neuattischen Reliefs*, *JDI Ergänzungsheft* 20 (Berlin 1959), Taf. 29, c and pp. 141–142 note 127, pp. 177–178 No. a) 21. I thank G. Foerster for bringing this second reference to my attention. See also Y. Meshorer, *The Coins of Caesarea Paneas*, *INJ* 8, 1984/5, p. 48, F, pl. 7 (bronze coin with Pan walking l., wearing a nebris) and Bernhart (above, n. 2), p. 118, 907, pl. 6, 8 (bronze coin from Pergamon with a seated figure wearing a nebris).

²¹ Fig. 6 shows this type of juglet; Athens, Ceramicus Museum, from van Hoorn (above, n. 17), fig. 418, cat. no. 140.

²² Fig. 7 depicts a boy holding the *choes* in the same manner as the child on Commodus' medallion, while the boy on fig. 8 carries the *choes* on the palm of his hand as does the child on Septimius Severus' medallion. Fig. 7: Athens, Ceramicus Museum, from: *Ibid*, fig. 509, cat. no. 73. Fig. 8: Ferrara, Museo di Spina, from: *Ibid*, fig. 207, cat. no. 523.

²³ Fig. 9 shows a child at the Anthesteria holding a rattle; Taranto, Museo Nazionale, from: *Ibid*, fig. 399, cat. no. 925.

²⁴ A new inscription found in Beth Shean shows that the letters ΕΛ ΠΟΛ stand for ΕΛΛΗΝΙC ΠΟΛΙC; see G. Foerster and Y. Tsafirir, *Nysa-Scythopolis – A New Inscription and the Titles of the City and its Coins*, *INJ* 9, 1986/7, pp. 53–58.

²⁵ See the forthcoming article by the present author, *Numismatic Evidence on the Visit of Marcus Aurelius to the East*, *INJ* 11.

Furthermore, the legend stresses that Nysa-Scythopolis was «one of the Greek cities of Syria» (ΤΗΣ ΚΥΡΙΑΚ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΔΩΝ ΠΟΛΕΩΝ). This unique *accolade* emphasizes the city's links to Hellenistic culture. The date was read as ΘΜC=249=185/6 AD, by Spijkerman and Meshorer (see notes 14 and 15). The correct date, however, is ΘΛC=239=175/6 AD, the year of the imperial visit²⁶.

It seems therefore preferable to regard the detailed representations on the medallions of Commodus and Septimius Severus, as well as on the coins struck under Elagabal and Gordian III, as illustrations of parts of a Dionysiac procession at the Anthesteria. Most elements in these scenes have their parallels on fifth-fourth century B.C. Attic *choes*, which were used by children at the festival of the Anthesteria²⁷. Although the Nysa-Scythopolis medallions and coins were produced approximately six centuries later²⁸, there is a remarkable resemblance of the representations on the coins of the Syrian city and the Attic *choes*. Especially noteworthy is the similarity in the postures of the children's bodies and in their handling of the *choes*²⁹.

Numismatic material from mints of Asia Minor could be also relevant to our question. The small figures in the Dionysiac scenes there are usually called Satyrs, Silenoi or Pan. However, there are parallels between these scenes and the two medallions from Nysa-Scythopolis. On some of the coins from Asia Minor the small figures are crouching or standing at the feet of Dionysos. The most striking examples are Figs. 11³⁰ and 12³¹ where Dionysos is pouring wine from an oenochoe to the small wine-jug (*choes*?) which a small figure holds. These small figures are bending their knees in a very similar way to the boys of the Nysa-Scythopolis' medallions. In Fig. 13³² Dionysos is pouring wine from an oenochoe directly into the mouth of a small figure who seems to be seated on the shoulders of another standing, small figure. It is therefore highly probable that these small figures on the coins of Asia Minor mints have the same meaning as those on the medallions of Nysa-Scythopolis, i.e. they are young children participating in the feast of the Anthesteria.

Meshorer believed that the increase in the depictions of Dionysos on coins of some Palestinian cities during Commodus' reign reflects the introduction of a new syncretistic cult of Dionysos³³. The similarities between the representations on the coins of Nysa-Scythopolis and the much earlier depictions of the Anthesteria on the *choes*, however, would

²⁶ This date is appropriate for the portrait of young Commodus before he became emperor; moreover, the titles Germanicus and Sarmaticus were used by him only in 175/6 and 176/7 AD. only; see BMCRE Vol. IV pp. cxli-cxlii.

²⁷ The connection of these wine-jugs with the Anthesteria festival have been mentioned by several scholars, see E. Simon (above, n. 16) p. 95 note 29. Van Hoorn (above, n. 17) remains the classic study on the subject.

²⁸ There is a representation of the feast of the Anthesteria on two frescoes from Ostia from the Roman Period; see L. Deubner, Dionysos und die Anthesterien, JDI 42, 1927, p. 186.

²⁹ Cf. Figs. 7, 8 and 10 (the latter Leningrad, Hermitage, from: van Hoorn [above, n. 17], fig. 527, cat. no. 581).

³⁰ Cf. Bernhart (above, n. 2), p. 126, 989, pl. 7, 1; see also nos. 1003, 1004 and 1029, pl. 7, 14, 18, 22.

³¹ SNG von Aulock 3609.

³² Cf. Bernhart (above, n. 2), p. 126, 990, pl. 7, 4.

³³ Meshorer 1989 (above, n. 3), pp. 35–36, suggests that the new cult was introduced in three cities, i.e. Aelia Capitolina, Nysa-Scythopolis and Canatha.

indicate that the ceremony derives from the much older tradition. Unfortunately, there is neither epigraphic nor literary evidence of such a festival in Nysa-Scythopolis. It is interesting that up to the reign of Commodus, there was only one type featuring Dionysos on coins of the city. During the next 65 years, until the city stopped minting coins in 240/1 AD, no less than seven different coin types from Nysa-Scythopolis show Dionysiac scenes. It is difficult to say what prompted them but we may safely assume that the city was one of the most important centers of Dionysiac worship in the region³⁴. This is no surprise because, after all, the city was named after Dionysos' nurse Νύσα who, according to a popular tradition, was buried at Beth-Shean³⁵.

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³⁴ For the Dionysiac worship in Nysa-Scythopolis see A. Ovadia, Greek Cults at Beth-Shean/Scythopolis in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, *Eretz-Israel* 12, 1975, pp. 116–124, passim (in Hebrew); C. Vermeule and K. Anderson, Greek and Roman Sculpture in the Holy Land, *The Burlington Magazine* 123, 1981, p. 8 (Hellenistic sculpture of Dionysios-Alexander); G. Fuks, Scythopolis – a Greek City in *Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem 1983), pp. 75–81 (in Hebrew); G. Foerster and Y. Tsafir, A Statue of Dionysos as a Youth Recently Discovered at Beth-Shean, *Qadmoniot* 89–90, 1990, pp. 52–54 (in Hebrew). For a wider survey of the worship of Dionysos in Palestine see M. Smith, *On the Wine God in Palestine*, Salo Wittmayer Jubilee Volume, English Section vol. III (Jerusalem 1974), pp. 815–829.

³⁵ The mythological tradition related to Dionysos mentions that he was given to divine nurses, the nymphs of Nysa; see H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York 1959), p. 152. Two literary sources relate that Dionysos buried his nurse Nysa in the town of Scythopolis; cf. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, V, 18, 74 «Scythopolim, antea Nysam, a Libero Pater sepulta nutrice ibi». A similar passage is found in Solinus, *Colletanea Rerum Memorabilium* ch. 36: «Liber Pater cum humo nutricem tradidisset, condidit hoc oppidium, ut sepulturae titulum etiam urbis moenibus ampliaret. Incolae deerant; e comitibus suis Scythas delegit, quos ut animi firmaret ad promptam resistendi violentiam, praemium loci nomen dedit.» These traditions as well as the text in Diodorus Siculus, III, 64,5–7; 65,7, give Dionysos a part in the foundation of Nysa-Scythopolis. We find it again in a Greek inscription on a hexagonal altar, decorated with Dionysiac elements, from Beth-Shean; see G. Foerster and Y. Tsafir, *Beth-Shean, Excavations and Surveys in Israel 1987/88*, 6 (1988), p. 31 (according to the archaeologists, the Roman temple uncovered near the basilica where the altar was found may be that of Dionysos; *ibid.*, p. 27). Two other cities in the area, Damascus and Raphia, had similar traditions in which Dionysos took part in the cities' foundation; cf. Stephanus of Byzantium, *Ethnicorum* (ed. by A. Meinekii, Berolini 1849): *Damaskos* p. 217: 7–18, *Rapheia* p. 543: 20–21.

Key to plates 3+4

- 1 Bronze coin of Nysa-Scythopolis struck under Antoninus Pius. Flagellation Museum, Jerusalem.
- 2 Bronze coin of Nysa-Scythopolis struck under Gordian III. Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (n. 8).
- 2A Bronze coin of Nysa-Scythopolis struck under Gordian III. Israel Antiquities Authority (n. 8).
- 3 Bronze medallion of Nysa-Scythopolis struck under Commodus. Flagellation Museum, Jerusalem (n. 14).
- 3A Drawing of Fig. 3 (n. 18).
- 4 Unique bronze medallion of Nysa-Scythopolis struck under Septimius Severus. The medallion was recently stolen from the Santa Anna collection, Jerusalem, and only the photograph of the reverse is available (n. 13).
- 4A Drawing of Fig. 4 (n. 18).
- 5 Dionysos, Pan and Bacchante. Neo-Attic bas-relief from Herculaneum, Augustan period. Museo Nazionale, Naples (n. 20).
- 6 *Choes*. Athens, Ceramicus Museum (n. 21).
- 7 *Choes*. Athens, Ceramicus Museum (n. 22).
- 8 *Choes*. Ferrara, Museo di Spina (n. 22).
- 9 *Choes*. Taranto, Museo Nazionale (n. 23).
- 10 *Choes*. Leningrad, Hermitage (n. 29).
- 11 Bronze coin of Hadrianoi struck under Philip Senior (n. 30).
- 12 Bronze coin of Hadrianopolis struck under Caracalla (n. 31).
- 13 Bronze coin of Hadrianoi struck under Philip Senior (n. 32).



1



2



2A



3



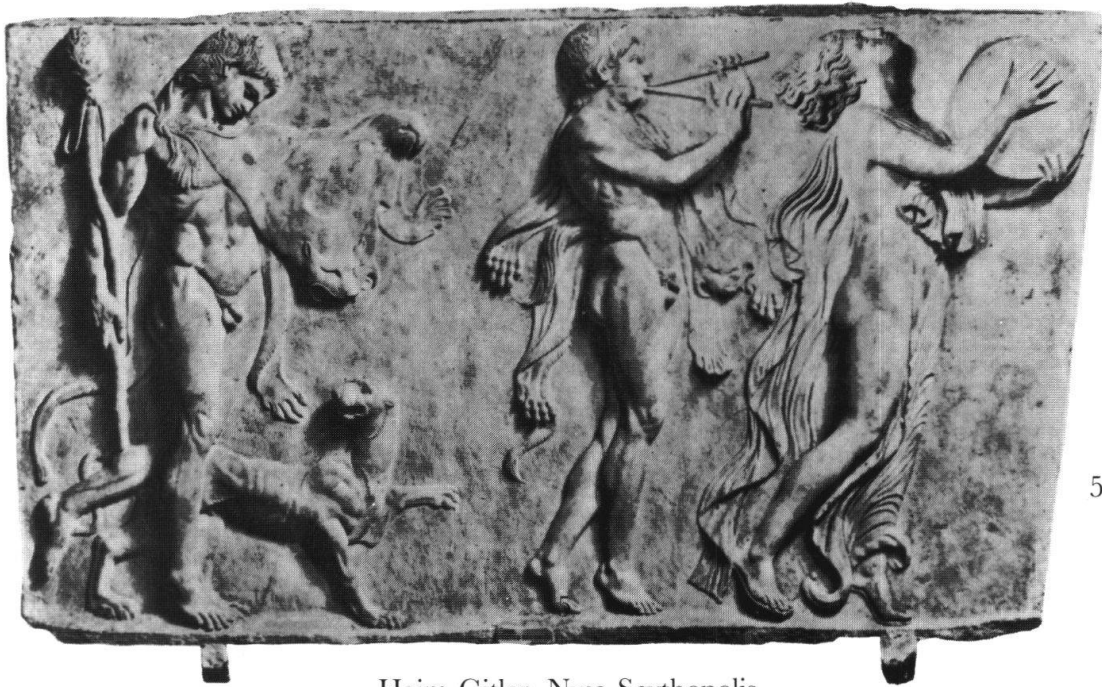
3A



4



4A



5

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6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13

Haim Gitler, Nysa-Scythopolis

