

The Reliefs of the South Portico of the Theater in Philippi: Interpretation of the Narrative Program

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Archaeological excavations of the theater in Philippi in the 1920–30s led to a number of publications devoted to this structure. However, research was mainly devoted to the theater's architecture, and its sculptural decorations remained poorly investigated. The reliefs of the southern portico, discovered during excavation works of the eastern façade and the parodoi of the theater in 1997, evoked particular interest.¹ The initial interpretation of the story by archeologists connected the reliefs with Euripides' "Bacchantes".² However, the presence of a figure, which was once identified as Lycurgus,³ as well as the peculiar visual language and incomplete preservation of the reliefs, motivate further investigation and clarification.

The emphasis on local legend gives us good reason to appeal to historical and geographical context. The beginning of the history of Philippi is linked to ancient Thasos. In 360 BC the inhabitants of Thasos, attracted by fertile soil and deposits of gold and silver, set up a colony called Crenides. It is known that the colony occupied a strategic position on the narrow path between mountains and marshes, and the road from the harbor of Neapolis (modern Kavala) to Thrace went through its territory. However, until now there has been no archaeological evidence of the exact location and size of Crenides.⁴ Close relations between Thasos and other Greek cities contributed to the settlement in Crenides of the population from the different poleis, notably from Athens.⁵ It is worth noting that the area of Pangaion and the historically Edonian territories were of interest for Athenian foreign policy by the 5th century BC (the capture of Eion by Kimon in 475 BC and events of the Peloponnesian

¹ Touchais, Detournay, Touchais A-P., Varalis 1998, 891.

² Ibid, 892.

³ Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, Karadedos 2012, 197.

⁴ Koukouli-Chrysanthaki 2015, 438.

⁵ Ibid, 439.

War of 424–423 BC should be noted).⁶ The prevalence of Greek population on these territories remained even after the foundation of a fortified city by Philip II, when inhabitants mainly came from nearby villages and settlements, but not from Macedonia. The city kept minting its own coins; the Macedonian calendar was not in use here and people used the Thassian alphabet.⁷

Besides this historical background, the location between the rivers Strymon and Nestos at the foot of the Pangaion massif had an impact on city identity. It is known that Pangaion, which belongs to the Rhodopes Mountains, was associated with the cults of the kings Rhesus and Lycurgus of Thrace. The murder of Orpheus took place here as well. According to Herodotus, the famous Thracian Oracle of Dionysus (mentioned also by Euripides and by the author of “Rhesus”⁸), where “the prophetess utters the oracles like in Delphi”, belongs to the same locality.⁹ P. Perdrizet, based on the passage from Euripides’ “Bacchantes”, affirms the Thracian origin of the word “Nysa” and speculates that a mythological mountain Nysa where Dionysus was brought up by nymphs is the one called Pangaion.¹⁰ It seems obvious that such an important mythological environment had to be integrated (one way or another) into the later cultural context.

Taking this into consideration, it seems reasonable to assume that there was a firm connection between the theater (and its “Dionysian” decoration) and its exact locality and corresponding mythological associations. The theater itself was founded at the same time as the city by Philip II in 356 BC. Its eastern side fits into the part of the acropolis hill, and in the west a fortified rampart supports the structure. Therefore, the orientation of the theater towards the south-east opens up a magnificent view over Pangaion and its valley.

Archeological excavations of the theater revealed the evolution of its architectural form, starting from the Greek phase (with a round orchestra) dating to the mid-4th century BC. Greek archeologists divided further modifications into three Roman phases. The first Roman phase (1st–2nd centu-

⁶ Smart 1967, 136; According to Plutarch, Kimon had personal relations with Thracians (whose territories lay in close vicinity). He was a son of Hegesipyle, the daughter of Thracian king Olorus (Plut. Cim. 4, 1–2).

⁷ Ibid, 339–440.

⁸ Eur. Hec. 1267, Rhesus 972 f. (Βάκχου προφήτης ὥστε Παγγαίου πέτραιν / ὠκησε, σεμνος τοισιν ειδόσιν θεός)

⁹ Hdt 7.111

¹⁰ Perdrizet 1910, 50–51.

ry AD) was associated with the reconstruction of the theater by the Roman formula and the creation of a three-story stone scaenae with architectural decorations (scaenae frons). The second and third phases (the beginning and second half of the 3rd century AD) are connected with the transformation of the theater into an arena for gladiatorial combat (fig.1).¹¹

The first reconstruction of the theater in the Roman manner was caused by the increased role of the Roman colony – Colonia Philippensis Augusti – founded here by Marcus Antonius and later reorganized by Octavian. These events came after the victory over Cassius and Brutus in the battle near Philippi in 42 BC. Since Augustean times, the theater in Philippi, which once hosted the performances of Greek drama, has undergone architectural changes intended to glorify the emperor and the viability of the city's Roman community.¹² Such artistic propaganda was characteristic of imperial public buildings and was in particular demand on these territories. Despite the fact that Roman citizens belonged to the ruling strata of society, the influx of outlanders arriving mainly from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire through Via Egnatia contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the city.¹³ In addition, the strong historical ties with Greek cities had an impact on the local political institutions and cultural environment of Philippi. The analysis of the city inscriptions showed that, by the 3rd century AD, the Greek language superseded Latin in popularity.¹⁴

Returning to the issue of the theater's dating, it is necessary to note that the changes were most likely made during important city reconstructions, to be more precise, when new public facilities were being built. The plan of the city itself, designed under the rule of Philip, did not undergo any significant changes during the times of the Roman Empire. Thus, the main city artery going through the whole city from the western Crenides Gates to the eastern Neapolis Gates becomes part of Via Egnatia and Decumanus Maximus of the Roman city. The theater occupied the terrace to the north of the main artery and was surrounded by public and religious buildings throughout ancient history.

Reliefs of the theater's south portico had been widely dated to the 2nd century AD. However, there is still disagreement concerning the exact date of the monument. A series of the city reconstructions and the correlation of scaenae decorations with details from the other city buildings, as

¹¹ Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, Karadedos 2012, 193–196.

¹² Karadedos, Koukouli-Chrysanthaki 2007, 275.

¹³ Koukouli-Chrysanthaki 2015, 450.

¹⁴ Ibid, 450.

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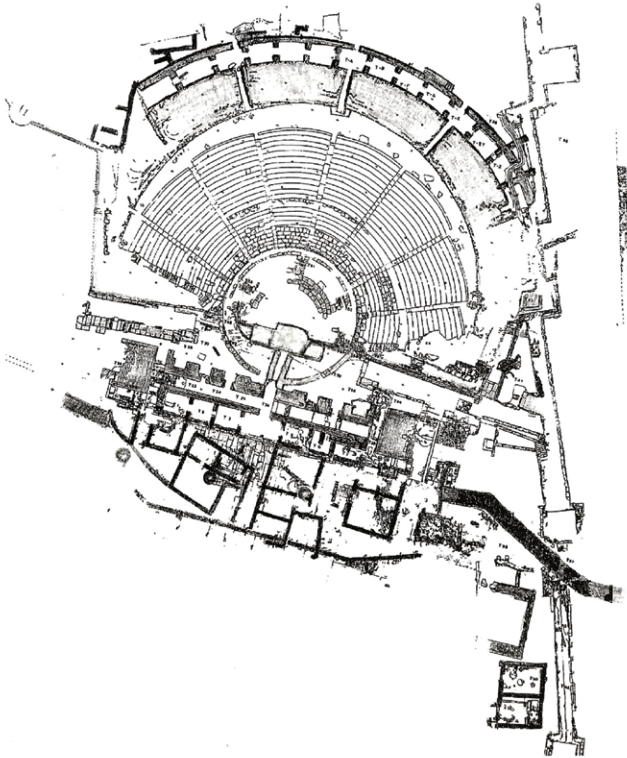


Fig. 1. Plan of the theater at Philippi (4th century BC – 3rd century AD). Adapted from Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, Karadedos 2012, fig. 1



Fig. 2. South portico of the theater at Philippi. In situ. Photo by author



Fig. 3. South portico of the theater at Philippi. Eastern first, fourth (originals, Archaeological museum of Philippi) and third (cast, in situ) pylons. Photos by author

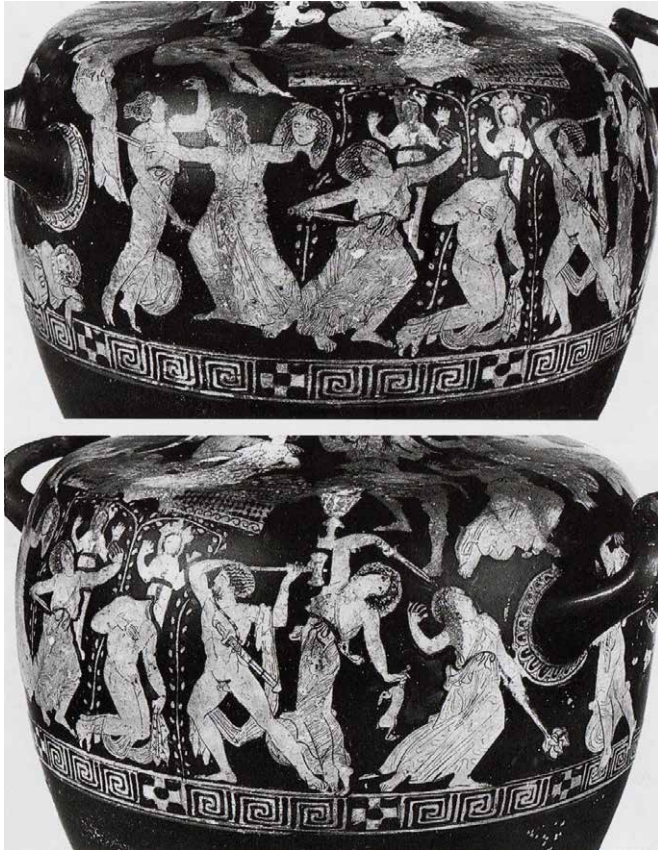


Fig. 4. Attic red-figure hydria, related to the Painter of Louvre (end of the 5th century BC). Rome, Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Adapted from Ilieva 2013, fig. 4



Fig. 5. Figure of Amazon from the frieze of the temple of Apollo at Bassae (420–400 BC). London, British Museum (Inv. NM 4766-7). Source: © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 6. Agave with sword and the head of Pentheus. Gem from the Tommaso Cade collection (Impronti: Libro 9, classe II, A, no.89). Source: Beazley Archive, 9.II.A.89

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/551A19E4-1FBF-4233-BBA6-8A3F3369FFA1>
(accessed on October 15, 2017)

well as its comparison to other theaters (especially in Asia Minor), set a big range of dates between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

Based on the similarity of architectural décor of scaenae building in Philippi and those in Perge, Aspendos and Sagalassos, Paul Collart – the first archeologist who led the excavation of the Philippi theater – set the date of the scaenae building at the 2nd century AD (presumably during the reign of the Antonines).¹⁵ This date is also supported by the similarity of scaenae frons decorations and some elements of the Roman forum created (as it was supposed) under the rule of the Antonine dynasty.¹⁶ Yet later exploration of the forum revealed among the constructions a pre-Antonine phase, which allowed shifting the date of the scaenae building to the 1st century AD.¹⁷ The unpublished findings of architectural components of the scaenae building, presumably connected with the rule of Vespasian, should help to finally set the date.¹⁸

Despite the poor state of preservation it was determined that the rectilinear structure of the scaenae frons had two levels designed in accordance with the Corinthian and Ionic orders. The entablature of the lower order had a rich frieze that included representations of tragic masks.¹⁹ It is very likely that the niches contained round sculptures with the portraits of Roman emperors; however, just one sculpture, interpreted as a Muse, stayed undamaged.²⁰

The south portico itself appeared as an exterior part of the scaenae building. The former was provided with five doors; the central one had a passage to portico. Its interior was composed as a range of compartments adjoining each other, and the external side facing the street consisted of seven arches divided by eight pylons. The corner pylons of the portico from the west and east were wider than the rest. In addition, the central arch aperture was also broader than the others to emphasize a single axis of the through passage (fig 2).

The reliefs were arranged on the pylons in two registers. The main subject was represented in vertical panels, with accompanying decorative compositions above. Out of the eight main panels, only five were discovered and reconstructed in situ with plaster casts. Two originals are on display in permanent exhibitions of the archeological museum in Philippi.

¹⁵ Collart 1928, 124.

¹⁶ Karadedos, Koukouli-Chrysanthaki 2007, 276.

¹⁷ Seve 2014, 39.

¹⁸ Karadedos, Koukouli-Chrysanthaki 2007, 276.

¹⁹ Collart 1928, 93–94.

²⁰ Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, Karadedos 2012, 194.

It is known that the original succession of panels has been kept.²¹ Thus, only the western part of the portico decoration survived, and depictions on the last three pylons from the east remain unknown.

The figures on the preserved panels were once interpreted as the Thracian king Lycurgus (hostile to the cult of Dionysus) and four maenads depicted in ecstatic dance (fig.3).²² The composition begins from the western side with the image of a bearded man depicted as a hunter: he is wearing hunting boots and in his right hand he is holding an axe. His posture indicates running or walking quickly. On the next pylon facing east, the lower part of a woman's figure survived – probably a maenad fleeing away from the man, who is chasing her. The third pylon depicts a woman raising a sword above her head; in her left hand she is holding a severed head. On the next pylon another woman is dancing holding the severed head in her hand. And finally, on the last surviving pylon, the ecstatic dance of the woman (maenad?) is represented. There is a suggestion that the fragment of a leg preserved on the corner eastern pylon could belong to the image of Dionysus.²³ If this is the case the narrative cycle could be arranged between two protagonists – Dionysus and Lycurgus – and their figures were additionally accentuated by the architecture itself (the corner pylons were wider than others).

In the upper register all compositions have a symbolic and decorative function. These reliefs represent attributes of Dionysus' cult: a kantharos and two panthers, fruits, a satyr's mask. The presence of Dionysian attributes as well as images of maenad-like women and their enemy – most probably Lycurgus – gives us the starting point. In order to clarify the precise storyline, we should turn to literary sources that include references to the Lycurgus myth or similar narratives.

Several versions of Lycurgus' story exist. One of the earliest references to him is found in Homer's *Iliad*. Diomedes tells of Lycurgus as a mortal who revolted against a deity. For unknown reasons, Lycurgus pursues Dionysus' nurses all the way to Mount Nysa, where they start running and hide in the shelter, and Dionysus throws himself into the sea, where Thetis gives him refuge. As punishment Zeus inflicts blindness on Lycurgus.²⁴

Sophocles in his "Antigone" endorses the line of Homer: Lycurgus resisted Dionysus and, as punishment, was imprisoned in the rock fissure.²⁵

²¹ Ibid, 197.

²² Ibid, 197.

²³ Ibid, 197.

²⁴ Hom. Il. 6.130–140.

²⁵ Soph. Ant. 955–965.

The events in the first Tetralogy of Dionysus (Lycourgeia) by Aeschylus were reconstructed through several preserved fragments and Lycurgus-related scenes in contemporary vase paintings. It consisted of three plays: “Edonoi” was devoted to the story of Lycurgus²⁶, “Bassarai” to the story of Orpheus’ death²⁷ and the subject of “Neaniskoi” was probably related to the events surrounding the foundation of the cult of Apollo-Helios.²⁸ Most likely, the stories of the second Tetralogy of Aeschylus (“Semele” – “Pentheus” – “Xantriai”) supported the same ideological line, since its two plays referred to the foundation of Dionysus’ cult in Thebes.

Returning to Lycourgeia, it is generally accepted that, according to Aeschylus’ “Edonoi”, Dionysus maddened Lycurgus, whereupon the king killed his son, mistaking him for a grapevine.²⁹ There is a general assumption that Pseudo Apollodorus was inspired by Aeschylus’ version of the legend and included it in his “Library”.³⁰

In the myths of Gaius Julius Hyginus, Lycurgus kills not only his son, but also his wife, and also impulsively cuts off his own foot.³¹ This version seems to be quite common in the late Hellenic world – one of the epigrams of “Anthologia” describes a bronze statue of Lycurgus, king of the Edoni, dressed in just one boot.³²

Finally, there is one more version of Nonnus Panopolis that appears much later. The author lets Lycurgus overtake one of Dionysus’ nurses – Ambrosia. Ambrosia asks Gaia for protection and she turns her into a grapevine. The king desperately fights the vine, which twines around his body, and he finally dies of suffocation.³³

²⁶ Ilieva 2013, 99.

²⁷ Weřt 1990, 36.

²⁸ Ibid, 46.

²⁹ Ilieva 2013, 99; Topper 2015, 140–141, Vatin, Bruneau 1966, 403.

³⁰ Topper 2015, 140–141; Apollod. III.5; however, there is a difference in how Lycurgus died. It seems that Aeschylus has another version and horses did not tire the Thracian king (Ilieva 2013, 102).

³¹ Hyg. 3.132.

³² Ant.Pal. 16.127.

³³ Nonn. Dion. XXI; the origin of the legend described by Nonnus is not quite clear. Paul Perdrizet, for example, endorses its Thracian sources (Perdrizet 1910, 34). The other circle of scholars, notably C.Vatin and Ph. Bruneau, suppose that Syrian origin is more probable. (Vatin, Bruneau 1966, 417). One of the earliest monuments with the depiction of the fight between Lycurgus and Ambrosia is a mosaic from the island Delos dated to 2nd century BC, which means long time before the works of Nonnus.

Now, having looked at the different versions of Lycurgus' legend, we can emphasize some common features. In most cases there is a precise geographical reference – Mount Pangaion (in some cases called Rhodopes). Since Aeschylus an accent is made on the demonstration of Dionysus' triumph through various punishments of Lycurgus. In Iliad we can still see that Zeus punishes Lycurgus, and in later versions Dionysus avenges his enemy himself. We can observe how Dionysus is gradually turning from a victim to a persecutor.³⁴

The representation of the Lycurgus myth in Greek art generally corresponds to literary sources, although can differ in specific details. One of the earliest representations of the story in sculpture is a bronze miniature group from the Louvre (5th century BC).³⁵ It obviously refers to Homeric texts: Lycurgus swings an axe over the nurse of Dionysus. The scene of violence towards the nurses of Dionysus also has analogues in later vase painting. Thus, on an Apulian hydria from Munich (330 BC), Lycurgus is depicted carrying the corpse of one of Dionysus' followers in his arms.³⁶

Another 5th century BC example reveals a significant similarity with the reliefs in Philippi. In the composition on the hydria from Villa Giulia Museum, we see the king swinging his axe, and to the right of Lycurgus, the beheaded body of his son Dryas. The scene is flanked by the figures of dancing maenads, one of which is holding a severed head (fig.4). The presence of some motifs – rushing Lycurgus with an axe, maenads dancing and displaying a severed head – gives a good iconographic parallel to our reliefs.

The scene of Dryas' murder is depicted on an Apulian krater (350–340 BC) from the British Museum by the Lycurgus Painter.³⁷ On the front side Thracian king holding an axe over his kneeling wife is depicted. Obviously, the events are taking place just after Dryas' murder – to the right, a procession carrying the dead body of the youth appears.

The two former examples (among a number of others) show that Dryas' death could be treated in different ways. Such diversity might be evidence

³⁴ It is interesting to note that in many cases the opposition of Lycurgus to Dionysus is shown through the fight with a grapevine, image of which is taken (in the mad mind of the king) by different characters and objects – Dryas, Ambrosia, and feet of Lycurgus himself. P. Perdrizet finds an explanation for these incarnations connecting the myth of Lycurgus (as well as that of Pentheus) with ancient agricultural rituals (Perdrizet 1910, 35).

³⁵ Louvre Museum, Inv. BR 4290, BR4291.

³⁶ Antikensammlungen, Inv. J 853.

³⁷ British Museum, Inv. A 271.

of the painter's inspiration by a specific theatrical drama in which Dryas' death certainly occurred off stage.³⁸ Moreover, the very character of the images refers to the performance, as we can see on the vase painting from the Villa Giulia: the severed head of Dryas can easily be associated with the theatrical mask (fig.4).

Later representations of Lycurgus, both in vase paintings and reliefs, are mainly focused on the story of his fight with Ambrosia. A series of such representations begins with the mosaic from the Archeological Museum of Delos mentioned above (n. 33),³⁹ followed by later Imperial examples from Herculaneum, Djemila, Narbonne and others. In sculpture, the reconstruction of the friezes of the adyton in the temple of Bacchus (2nd century AD) made by Piccard is of great importance. It includes depictions of an exhausted Ambrosia, Dionysus and Lycurgus yielding to his fight with Pan.⁴⁰

Despite a broad context, the image of Lycurgus has quite firm attributes: a double-edged axe, a short cloak swung behind the shoulders - eira, hunting boots - embades. Lycurgus is depicted bearded in an expressive three-quarter turn. His straddling pose with support on one foot demonstrates the culmination of a muscular strain while he is swinging his weapon.⁴¹ All of these features emphasize the king's Thracian origin and barbarian nature. D. Tsiafaki argues that Lycurgus was especially known in Athenian iconography as "an example of the savagery attributed to Thracian males in Athenian myth".⁴²

Thus, we can conclude that the depiction of a man on the western pylon of the theater portico in Philippi perfectly matches the accepted iconography of Lycurgus. Just one detail should probably be pointed out: in most cases, the Thracian king is depicted naked, but in our reliefs Lycurgus is wearing clothes.⁴³

The retrospective analysis of literary and artistic testimonies allows us to suppose the source of our narrative. The creator of the portico in Philippi most probably refers to the classical version of the myth. Moreover, the

³⁸ It is known that Greek theatrical performances did not support scenes of violence.

³⁹ Vatin , Bruneau 1966, 39, fig.1.

⁴⁰ Vatin , Bruneau 1966, 412; Coche de La Ferté 1954, 145, fig.15.

⁴¹ Farnoux 1992, 309–319.

⁴² Tsiafaki 2016, 275.

⁴³ The Image of Lycurgus wearing cloth probably belongs to an early presentations of Thracian king (Ilieva 2013, 100, fig.3).

depiction on the Villa Giulia hydria provides grounds to associate the reliefs' subject with Athenian drama, and Aeschylus' *Lycourgeia* in particular. The choice could be driven by a desire to stress the special status of the place where the city was founded and emphasize the triumphal character of the narrative. The position of Dionysus' cult in the Roman Empire at the time of the reliefs' creation could be a significant factor. In 186 BC the Senate suppressed Bacchanalian rites in the Roman republic, which certainly had a strong negative impact on the cult itself.⁴⁴ In the Roman Empire (after Augustus) the suppression ended, the position of the cult was restored, and Dionysus got the active support of emperors. Thus, we can suspect that the triumphal character of the plot – the victory of Dionysus over his persecutors – may, to some extent, have political implications (although it is difficult to discuss this topic without the exact dating of our reliefs).

Suggesting that reliefs from Philippi appeal to the classical Athenian drama, we have to make an important remark: the depiction of a woman on the third pylon of the portico does not fit into the general context of the narrative. Moreover, none of the considered versions of the myth in literature or visual arts assume that the actions ascribed to Lycurgus (cutting off a head) were committed by somebody else. Therefore, the depiction of a woman holding a severed head is intriguing and provokes further investigation.

Some specific features of this image grab the viewer's attention. Firstly, the scene is shown as an action that has just been committed by this very woman: she is raising a sword in a victorious gesture. Secondly, the master accentuates the figure, expanding it frontally in contrast to others depicted in perspective. Such elements of iconography (triumphal gesture and frontal view) surprisingly refer to Amazons in their classical iconography, although the style of cloth is absolutely "maenadian". The Amazon from the frieze of the Apollo temple at Bassae (420–400 BC) (fig.5) is a good comparison.⁴⁵ It may be appropriate to recall here a passage from Diodorus, who speaks about women soldiers and Amazons in Dionysus' army.⁴⁶ We can suppose that the creator of the portico emphasized the militant nature of this female figure, again, in order to give a triumphal accent to the whole cycle. Furthermore, iconographically, this image allows for associations to be made with two other subjects similar to the myth of Lycurgus: those of Orpheus and Pentheus.

⁴⁴ Tenney F 1927, 128.

⁴⁵ British Museum, Inv. NM 4766–7, NM 4777.

⁴⁶ Diod.Sic. 3.74.

M. West suggested that Aeschylus' plays of *Lycourgeia* were united by a single theme, and assumed Orpheus' appearance in "Edonoi" as a reference to the next tragedy – "Bassarai".⁴⁷ Pseudo-Eratosthenes, in his "Catasterismi", refers directly to the events described by Aeschylus, even mentioning the name of the author. Orpheus did not worship Dionysus. The Sun was the greatest of the gods and he called him Apollo. At night, he ascended a mountain called Pangaion, and was waiting for the sunrise to first see the sun. Enraged, Dionysus sent the Bassarai to punish Orpheus, and these Thracian women murdered him.⁴⁸ The death of Orpheus was obviously a climactic event of Aeschylus' "Bassarai".

However, the text doesn't match the visual record. Whereas in the tragedy the Bassarai dismember Orpheus' body,⁴⁹ in the vase painting they kill him using a weapon.⁵⁰ The depiction of Thracian women attacking Orpheus with a sword on the amphora from Nola gives us the closest analogue to the sword-wielding maenad from the Philippi reliefs.⁵¹ However, this vase shows not a hint of dismembering or beheading. On a second vase, attributed to the Group of Polygnotos,⁵² we do find a depiction of Orpheus' severed head, but it has another meaning, being associated not with physical violence, but with the Oracle.⁵³

No images of Thracian women holding the severed head of Orpheus are found in Greek vase painting or other arts, which makes it difficult to draw parallels with the Philippi reliefs (and the mysterious figure on the third pylon). But we have to keep in mind another possibility – such unique iconography could be inspired by the theatrical act itself. In Aeschylus' drama the killing of Orpheus was most probably off stage, but according to M. West, the Bassarai brought the news of Orpheus' death

⁴⁷ Ilieva 2013, 99.

⁴⁸ Erat. Cat. 24.

⁴⁹ Ilieva 2013, 109.

⁵⁰ The good examples might be Attic red-figured stamnos attributed to Hermonax, ca. 470 BC., Louvre G 416; Ovid makes Irrespective to Aeschylus the mentioning of a weapon - thyrsus while killing Orpheus (Ov. Met. XI.1–41)

⁵¹ Amphora from Nola, 4th century BC, Louvre Museum, Inv. G 436.

⁵² Attic hydria attributed to the Group of Polygnotos (about 440 BC), Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, Basel. Inv. BS481.

⁵³ Tsiafaki distinguishes only three subjects in vase painting related to Orpheus: the death of Orpheus by the hands of Thracian women, the musician Orpheus charming wild Thracians and his oracular head (Tsiafaki 2016, 271).

and were probably displaying his head, which was later to become an oracle. Anyway Orpheus can be a suitable parallel for Lycurgus, considering his Thracian origin and opposition to Dionysus.

Following the line of Dionysus' antagonists, we should finally turn to the story of Pentheus. This myth does not have so many discrepancies in literary sources. In accordance with Ovid, the young Dionysus comes to his fatherland, Thebes, in order to establish his cult, but is faced with resistance from King Pentheus, who considers the new cult immoral. Dionysus induces madness in the Theban king. Pentheus spies on orgies before being noticed by bacchantes, and dies at their hands.⁵⁴ If we agree with the assumption that Athenian drama had an important influence on our reliefs, we should look how the story was presented there. The second play of the second Tetralogy of Dionysus by Aeschylus is extremely fragmentary, so we can hardly reconstruct the description of Pentheus' death. However "Bacchae"—a later drama on the same subject, created by Euripides—has survived, and includes a detailed description of Pentheus' murder. Like Orpheus, the Theban king was torn to pieces:

"...Scattered lies

His corpse, part beneath the rugged rocks, and part amid the deep Dark woods, no easy task to find; but his poor head hath his mother Made her own, and fixing it upon the point of a thyrsus, as it had Been a mountain lion's, she bears it through the midst of Cithaeron, Having left her sisters with the Maenads at their rites. And she is Entering these walls exulting in her hunting fraught with woe, calling On the Bacchic god her fellow-hunter who had helped her to triumphing a chase where her only prize was tears."⁵⁵

Agave and Ino tearing Pentheus to pieces with their hands is a common feature of different versions of the myth. There is no mention of a sword or any other weapon. The vase painting supports this line,⁵⁶ however, sculpture demonstrates the opposite. The depiction of dancing maenads (Ino and Agave) in stucco reliefs of the underground Basilica of Porta Maggiore in Rome (1st century AD) is a strong argument in favor of another iconography. Agave is depicted raising her sword in a triumphal gesture and holding Pentheus' severed head in another hand.⁵⁷ In some

⁵⁴ Ov. Met. III.511–733.

⁵⁵ Eur. Bacc. 1130–1140 (trans. by G. Murray).

⁵⁶ The good examples of Pentheus death might be the vase paintings of 5th century BC. Louvre Museum, Inv. G 445; Kimbell Art Museum, Inv. AP 2000.02.

⁵⁷ Philippart 1930, 79, fig.15.

imprints of ancient gems from the Tommaso Cade collection, there are similar images of Agave holding a sword in one hand and her son's head in the other (Fig .6). It's important to note that both examples are associated with Euripides' "Bacchae".⁵⁸

As we can see, the figure on the third pylon – albeit remaining unique and with no direct visual analogies – can be correlated with the murder of Orpheus or Pentheus. This means that our reliefs, apart from Lycurgus' story, might represent another myth of the Dionysian circle. This hypothesis could also be supported by the presence of two maenads holding severed heads in the theater's portico (the one with the sword, and another dancing on the next pylon). This exceptional feature does not occur in other representations of any of the three stories.

However, the choice of the hero (Orpheus or Pentheus) as a possible parallel for Lycurgus is still a matter for conjecture. The story of Pentheus looks more credible, primarily due to the iconographic similarity. Furthermore, both Lycurgus and Pentheus perform similar mythological functions and are associated with ancient agricultural cults: their deaths open the way to restoring fertility.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that the heroes' punishment is inflicted in different ways, there is a certain similarity in the methods of fighting and manifestation of Dionysus' cult: the deity induces madness, Lycurgus kills his son, and Agave kills hers. Thus, the triumph of Dionysus is performed through the punishment of parents with madness, which provokes the murder of children.

There are also some indirect arguments which allow us to suppose that the second story (if it exists in our cycle) appeals to the Pentheus myth as presented by Euripides. The neoattic style of the female figures in the portico brings to mind Roman reliefs ascending to some famous works by Callimachus, an Attic sculptor of the 5th century BC.⁶⁰ Its "manneristic" folds, the spiral sweep of the body and low relief correlate with Callimachus' manner. It is possible that Callimachus' maenad series was created as a decor for the monumental dedication to the victory of Euripides' "Bacchantes" in 405 BC.⁶¹ Thus, looking at the portico reliefs, the ancient spectator might see an allusion to Attic drama in general, and "Bacchantes" in particular.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 1–85.

⁵⁹ Perdrizet 1910, 35 : the name "Pentheus" symbolize the death or affliction

⁶⁰ Among many examples – the relief with dancing maenad from Uffizi (late 1century AD), Galleria Uffizi, Inv.318 (1914).

⁶¹ Pollitt 1986. 169–170.

While the figure of Lycurgus accentuates a local cult, the story of Pentheus is in no way associated with the myths and cults of Pangaion. However, we can suppose that its local character is related to the author of “Bacchantes” himself. It is known that Euripides wrote his drama at the Macedonian court, and it was first presented to the audience of Dion.⁶²

Greek art gives us at least one precedent for the combination of the stories of Pentheus and Lycurgus in a single pictorial cycle within a theatrical context. Pausanias describes the paintings in the temple of Dionysus in Athens, located near the theater.⁶³ Amongst other subjects related to Dionysus, he mentions the punishment of both kings for their opposition to the god.⁶⁴

In addition, we can find examples where the iconography of Lycurgus and Pentheus are so close that it is difficult to distinguish one character from the other. There is a discussion about the interpretation of the so-called “bearded warrior” depicted on the Derveni krater (4th century BC). The image has been linked to Pentheus, Lycurgus and Jason. Those who support the interpretation of the figure as Pentheus insist that the scene with maenads dismembering a deer (on the opposite side of the vase) hints at Pentheus’ own death.⁶⁵ The iconography of the “warrior” himself rather speaks in favor of Lycurgus – the man is depicted wearing only one boot.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that there is an image of just one figure (either Pentheus or Lycurgus), it is obvious that the difficulty in interpretation is linked to the similarities in the iconography and narrative content of these two myths.

An architectural accent on the two corner pylons in the Philippi theater, aiming to emphasize the figures depicted on them, might be used as an argument against the presence of the second story in the narrative. If the image of Dionysus appeared on the eastern pylon and that of Lycurgus on the western one, it would seem logical that the conflict was unfolding only between these two antagonists. In this case, the sequence of pylons could represent gradual plot development: the maenad was cutting off the head (or holding up the head of Dryas, killed by his mad father?) and

⁶² Perdrizet 1910, 50.

⁶³ Paus.1.20.3.

⁶⁴ According to my knowledge there is no examples of such combination in the theater’s sculptural decoration. The story of Pentheus once appears in reliefs of Perge theater (Inan, Atik, Öztürk, Alanyalı, Ateş 2000, 332; Di Napoli 2015, 285). The image of Lycurgus – in the decoration of Fiesole theater in central Italy (Fuchs, M.1986, A 1, fig.16).

⁶⁵ Barr-Sharrar 2012, 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 11.

the same woman was depicted dancing with the severed head on the next slab. The unusual iconography of the figure with the sword might visually hint at (while not directly depicting) some other story – that of Pentheus or Orpheus.

Such a composite solution with different “cross-references” could correspond to the complex cult of Lycurgus, or rather his integration into Dionysus’ cult. There is reason to believe that the Thracian king was given, at a certain stage, the status of prophet.⁶⁷ In this regard, Orpheus’ Oracle, and his prophetic head, once again come to mind. Strabo, based on Aeschylus, noted that poets juxtaposed Dionysus and Lycurgus alluding to their ritual similarities⁶⁸ (perhaps “Edonoi” transmitted such ideas). The location of Dionysus’ oracle quite close to Philippi in the Rhodope Mountains could stimulate such a strong ritual background in our reliefs. From this angle, their narrative, with its triumphal character, appears in a slightly different context – as an allusion to Lycurgus’ penitence, and subsequent worship of Dionysus and joining of his cult.

Although the incomplete state of preservation prevents any final conclusions from being drawn, the idea of combining or imposing the myths (represented directly or through allusions) in the Philippi cycle seems reasonable. Taking into account the precedent set in the Tetralogies of Aeschylus, we can assume that the author of the portico might follow in his composition the structure of the theatrical drama, probably from the Athenian repertoire of the 5th century BC.

Nevertheless, the choice of the plot seems to have been motivated by the intention to confer special status to a local legend. Appealing to the complexity of Lycurgus’ image, the master of the portico succeeded in transmitting the importance of the mythological environment of the whole area. Drawing on associations with Orpheus or Pentheus (or both), he raises the locally-important theme to a more “universal” level, and strengthens the main idea which unifies these three stories. This way, the relief cycle of the southern portico in the theater of Philippi appears to be a complicated synthesis of Greek and local traditions. If the allusion to the “Greek classics” in themes and formal language seems to be a reminder of former grandeur within the framework of a new world, then the local accent rather testifies the strength of old cults and their successful assimilation by Roman society.

⁶⁷ Perdrizet 1910, 37; Ilieva 2013, 102. The allusion on this concept is already seen in Sophocles’ *Antigona*: the author affirms that Lycurgus had repented after his imprisonment (Soph. Ant. 955–965).

⁶⁸ Strab. 10.3.16.

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Abbreviations

BCH – *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique*

JHS – *Journal of Hellenic Studies*