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RITUAL SURPRISE AND TERROR IN ANCIENT GREEK POSSESSION-DROMENA

The daduch of the Eleusinian mysteries Themistokles, descendant of the great Athenian citizen of the 5th century B.C.¹, is honoured by a decree of 20/19 B.C.² for «he not only exhibits a manner of life worthy of the greatest honour but by the superiority of his service as daduch increases the solemnity and dignity of the cult; thereby the magnificence of the Mysteries is considered by all men to be of much greater excitement (*ekplexis*) and to have its proper adornment»³. P. Roussel⁴, followed by K. Clinton⁵, points out the importance of excitement or surprise (in Greek : *ekplexis*) in the Mysteries quoting analogous passages from the *Eleusinian Oration* of Aristides⁶ and the *Platonic Theology* of Proclus⁷, both writers of the Roman times.

In Greek literature one of the earlier cases of terror connected to any cult is that of the terror-stricken priestess of Apollo coming out from the shrine of Delphes in the tragedy *Eumenides*⁸ by Aeschylus of Eleusis :

Ah ! Horrors, horrors, dire to speak or see,
From Loxias' chamber drive me reeling back.
My knees are weak beneath me, and I lack
The strength to fly... O hands, drag me from here
If feet fail !

After a few verses⁹, the Furies who had terrified the god's priestess are described as :

¹ PAUS., I, 37, 1.

² Published by I. THREPSIADES *apud* K. KOUROUNIOTIS, 'Ελευσινιακά, 1 (1932), p. 223-236, and republished by P. ROUSSEL, *Un Nouveau Document concernant le génos des KHPYKEΣ*, in *Mélanges Bidez, AIPhO*, 2 (1934), p. 819-834. Cf. also K. CLINTON, *The Sacred Officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, Philadelphia, 1974 (*TAPhS*, 64. 3), p. 50-52.

³ V. 33-36 (translated by CLINTON, *op. cit.*, p. 56).

⁴ ROUSSEL, *op. cit.*, p. 833-834.

⁵ CLINTON, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁶ ARISTIDES, *Eleusinian Oration*, 2 Keil.

⁷ PROCLUS, *Platonic Theology*, III, 18, p. 151 Portus.

⁸ AESCH., *Eumenides*, 34-38 (tr. by Murray quoted by T.B.L. Webster : cf. *infra* n. 10).

⁹ AESCH., *Eumenides*, 48-49.

Women ? Nay, never women ! Gorgons more :
And yet not like the Gorgon shapes of yore.

T.B.L. Webster¹⁰ quotes the above passages of the *Eumenides* to prove that «the word *ekplexis* (consternation) is used more than once of the effect produced by Aeschylus (e.g. scholiast to the Cassandra scene of the *Agamemnon*); the poet uses all his resources of spectacle, language, and music to break down the resistance of his audience and convey to them his religious meaning. Many of the spectacles in early classical tragedy have this object and thus differ from the older decorative spectacle. The most sustained example is the prologue of the *Eumenides*». The eclectic spectacle, which replaces the decorative one also in the *Agamemnon*¹¹, must have been adopted by tragedy from the religious sphere¹² and it certainly owes a lot to the Archaic appearance of the Gorgons, the dark daemons¹³ nearly identified by Orestes in the *Eumenides* with the Furies.

The horrible, ugly face of the archaic masks found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta¹⁴ and at Tiryns of Argolid¹⁵ (fig. 1) suggests that these ritual masks (*prosôpeia*) were to create to the spectator a violent surprise which immediately yielded to real fear. That the mask could create a deep fear is clear from the narration of Herodotus¹⁶ concerning the victory of Phocians over the Thessalian army in late Archaic times, victory prevailed thanks to a stratagem devised by the diviner Tellias of Elis who was an expert on ritual practices :

For the Phocians being beleaguered on Parnassus and having with them the diviner Tellias of Elis, Tellias devised a stratagem for them : he covered six hundred of the bravest Phocians with gypsum, themselves and their armour, and led them to attack the Thessalians by night, bidding them slay whomsoever they should see not whitened. The Thessalian sentinels were the first to see these men and to flee for fear,

¹⁰ T.B.L. WEBSTER, *Greek Art and Literature 530-400 B.C.*, Oxford, 1939, p. 57-58.

¹¹ Cf. WEBSTER, *op. cit.*, p. 57, n. 3.

¹² Cf. generally M. BIEBER, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, Princeton, 1971², p. 22 (for Aeschylus) and *passim*.

¹³ For Gorgons, cf. especially TH. KARAGIORGA, *Γοργεῖν Κεφαλή*, Athens, 1970 (Libr. of the Archaeolog. Soc., n° 69); cf. also W. BURKERT, *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical*, transl. by J. Raffan, Oxford, 1985, p. 104, 138, 141, 173.

¹⁴ Published by R.M. DAWKINS, *The Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia*, London, 1929 (*JHS Suppl.*, 5), p. 163-186, pl. XLVII : the ugly masks are the earliest ones.

¹⁵ Cf. among others KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, pl. 14-15.

¹⁶ HDT., VIII, 27.

supposing falsely that it was something beyond nature, and next after the sentinels the whole army fled likewise.

Herodotus' testimony confirms that the mask could transform a human being into a daemonic one – and, in the Greek sense of the term, to a divine one; and Xenophon testifies that the participants of a possession-*dromenon* behave as the daemonic Gorgon, to whom they have been identified¹⁷. V. Karageorghis, insisting on the *imitatio dei* function of the mask in the early religion, writes that «the idea of entering into a direct association with the god by putting on the divine image led to the invention of masks which were worn during religious rituals»¹⁸. The well-known Archaic Cypriot idols of priests wearing bull-masks¹⁹ (fig. 2) constitute, according to V. Karageorghis, a remnant, or, perhaps it is better to say, a survival of the monsters with bulls' heads which appear in the early Mediterranean religion²⁰.

We believe that the common relation between daemonic Gorgoneion-mask and animal-, zoomorphic-, or theriomorphic-mask is confirmed, among others, by the 6th century B.C. plastic-vase found in 1960 on the hill of Nea Ekkhissoula (N.E. of the Arkadian city of Megalopolis), today in the Tegea Museum²¹ (fig. 3 a-b). It represents a figure squatting and wearing a Gorgoneion-mask on its head, and a lion-skin tunic with the beast's head at the back. As Th. Karagiorga²² has proved on the basis of stylistic and morphological elements, this figure is really a human wearing a

¹⁷ XEN., *Banquet*, I, 10. Cf. M. DETIENNE and J.P. VERNANT, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La métis des grecs*, Paris, Flammarion, 1974, p. 183.

¹⁸ V. KARAGEORGHIS, *Notes on some Cypriote Priests wearing Bull-Masks*, in *HThR*, 64 (1971), p. 261-271, especially p. 261. For the *imitatio dei*-function of the mask see among others KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 112-132 and BURKERT, *op. cit.*, p. 103, for whom masks are «the most ancient means of surrendering one's own identity and assuming a new extraordinary identity».

¹⁹ Except KARAGEORGHIS, *art. cit.*, cf. also S. SOPHOCLEOUS, *Atlas des Représentations Chypro-Archaïques des Divinités*, Göteborg, 1985, pl. III. 7-8, IV. 1-2, and V. TATTON-BROWN (ed.), *Cyprus B.C. 7000 Years of History*, London, 1979, fig. 267.

²⁰ Cf. for example the famous terracota sanctuary model of c. 1900 B.C. from Kition (Cyprus) with the three xoanon figures wearing bulls' heads : KARAGEORGHIS, *art. cit.*, p. 264, fig. 1; SOPHOCLEOUS, *op. cit.*, pl. II. 3; TATTON-BROWN, *op. cit.*, fig. 54.

²¹ Studied by KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 135-149, pl. 19-21. The plastic-vase belonged to a sacred *apothetes* of an archaic sanctuary : *AD*, 17 (1961-1962), Chron., p. 88 and KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

²² KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 84-87.

Gorgoneion-mask and not a Gorgon-deamon²³; and we believe that, in this concrete case, the Gorgoneion-mask (an attribute of a *potnia* who, in Archaic times, rejects her primitive animal character and her zoomorphic appearance²⁴) replaces the lion mask, worn, perhaps together with the lion-skin, at earlier times. In fact, paintings of the prehistoric period show hunters as well as worshippers disguised as animals²⁵; and in our opinion the ritual masks of Tiryns dated to the 7th century B.C. and generally called Gorgoneia must rather be considered as animal-masks²⁶.

It is clear that the ritual surprise and terror observed in the religion of historic times must be joined with the primitive fear of nature and, in particular, wild beasts experienced by human beings. The representation of Fear on Agamemnon's shield on the chest of Kypselos (end of the 7th century B.C.) constitutes a good example of a reminiscence of this primitive feeling : according to Pausanias²⁷, on the shield of the chief of the Achaeans was painted the figure of Fear (*Phobos*) whose head was not human but that of a lion²⁸.

Where divinities of the primitive substratum of Greek religion survived and where they were associated with the world of wild beasts even in Classical and posterior times, the ritual, which maintained its zoomorphic character, had recourse to animal-masks to obtain the possession of the worshipper by the deity, or, that is to say, his identification with the divinity²⁹.

²³ Cf. G. MYLONAS, 'Ο πρωτοαττικὸς ἀμφορεὺς τῆς Ἐλευσίνοϋς, Athens, 1957 (*Libr. of the Archaeolog. Soc.*, n° 39), p. 89-92, who supports the idea the figures of Gorgons of the Proto-attic amphora of Eleusis wear Gorgon-masks.

²⁴ In Arcadia, where primitive religious concepts survived till the end of the ancient world, the *potnia* did not reject zoomorphic appearance : cf. the horse's head Demeter of Phigalia (statue described by PAUS., VIII, 42, 4). For the anthropomorphism as a main character of Greek religion at historic times, cf. BURKERT, *op. cit.*, p. 182-189.

²⁵ For literature, cf. M. ELIADE, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, t. I, Paris, 1976 (1984), p. 27-30; E.O. JAMES, *Le culte de la Déesse-Mère dans l'histoire des Religions*, Paris, 1960, p. 15-18; *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, New York, 1959, p. 1-8 (with illustr.).

²⁶ Among the masks founded at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta and called «warrior-» or «grotesque-masks» count a few animal-masks : DAWKINS, *op. cit.*, pl. LIV.1, LVI.1, LXII.1.

²⁷ PAUS., V, 19, 4.

²⁸ Cf. MYLONAS, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁹ For the main phases of the possession ritual (*extasis*, *enthousiasmos*, possession, identification) cf. BURKERT, *op. cit.*, p. 109-111; É. DES PLACES, *La Religion Grecque*, Paris, 1969, p. 308-314; H. JEANMAIRE, *Dionysos. Histoire du culte de Bacchus*, Paris, 1951 (1978), p. 105-106; KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 112-132.

The most characteristic example is the orgiastic, ecstatic, possession-*dromenon* in honour of Despoina, the old Arcadian goddess³⁰, at Lykosoura³¹. There, the worshippers were identified with the divinity of the wild nature Despoina³² after a possession-ritual based on zoomorphic disguise³³. This is proved by, among others things, the human figures dancing and playing musical instruments and wearing animal-masks shown on the embroidered border of the veil of the statue of Despoina³⁴, as well as by the some 140 terracotta figurines of worshippers wearing animal-masks found at the *megaron* of the goddess³⁵ (fig. 4). According to Pausanias³⁶ in this secret *megaron*, a kind of monumental altar³⁷, were celebrated the mystic ceremonies (*teletai*) and a «cut-to-pieces» primitive sacrificial *dromenon* (*diasparagmos*)³⁸.

An identical example comes from the cult of Artemis at Brauron where the goddess was associated with the bear by the local legends³⁹. For E. Simon⁴⁰, «The bear (...) is a neolithic relic in the cult of Artemis. According to Karl Meuli (*Gesammelte Schriften*, Basel, 1975, *passim*), bears were the most important game for neolithic Eurasian hunting tribes. The killing of these animals, which resemble man, was always followed by an

³⁰ PAUS., VIII, 10, 10; 27, 6; 35, 2; 36, 9; 37, 1-10; 38, 2; 42, 1.

³¹ PAUS., VIII, 37, 1-10. Cf. especially M. JOST, *Sanctuaires et Cultes d'Arcadie*, Paris, 1985, p. 172-179, 326-337; É. LOUCAS-DURIE, *Les fonctions sacerdotales au sanctuaire de Despoina à Lykosoura*, in *HOROS*, 2 (1984), p. 137-148; I. LOUCAS & É. LOUCAS-DURIE, *La mention du mot ΑΓΑΜΑ dans la loi sacrée de Lykosoura*, *IG*, V 2, 514, in *Peloponnesiaka*, 16 (1985-1986), p. 562-578; R. STIGLITZ, *Die Grossen Göttinnen Arkadiens*, Vienne, 1967.

³² PAUS., VIII, 37, 9 distinguishes Despoina from Kore-Persephone, the Eleusinian goddess of the Underworld with whom is mistakenly equated by modern scholars (for example, BURKERT, *op. cit.*, p. 280); Despoina of Lykosoura must be equated rather with Artemis : she was honoured by an artemisiac possession-ritual, her sacred animal was a deer (PAUS., VIII, 10, 10) and an inscription from the sanctuary of Lykosoura is dedicated to «*Artemis Despoina*» (*IG*, V 2, 522) : cf. É. LOUCAS-DURIE, *Le vrai nom de la Thea Despoina*, in *Acts of the 3rd International Congress of Peloponnesian Studies, Kalamata, 8-15 Sept. 1985*, t. 2, Athens, 1987-1988, p. 401-419.

³³ Cf. I. LOUCAS & É. LOUCAS-DURIE, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Cf. A.J.B. WACE, *The Veil of Despoina*, in *AJA*, 38(1934), p. 107-111, pl. X-XI.

³⁵ Cf. among others K. KOUROUNIOTIS, *Tò ἐν Λυκοσούρῃ Μέγαρον τῆς Δεσποίνης*, in *AE* (1912), p. 155-156 and K. KONTOPOULOS, in *PAAH* (1887), p. 28.

³⁶ PAUS., VIII, 37, 8.

³⁷ Cf. its reconstruction by KOUROUNIOTIS, *op. cit.*

³⁸ Cf. I. LOUCAS & É. LOUCAS-DURIE, *op. cit.*, p. 574-575.

³⁹ Cf. HESYCHIUS, s.v. ἄρκτος; *Suda*, s.v. ἄρκτος ἡ Βραυρωνίτις.

⁴⁰ E. SIMON, *Festivals of Attica*, Wisconsin, 1983, p. 85-86.

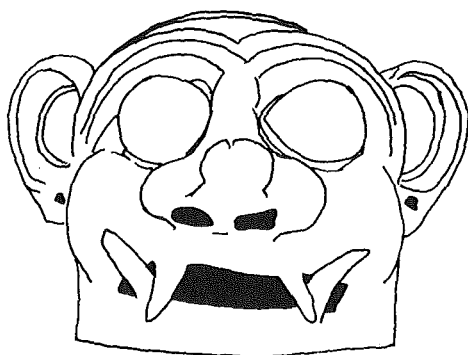


Fig. 1

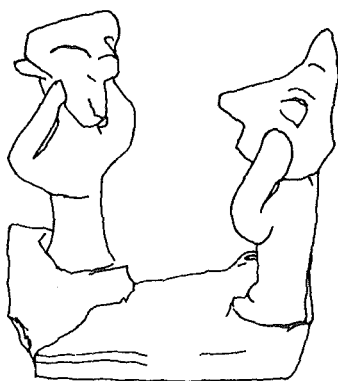


Fig. 2

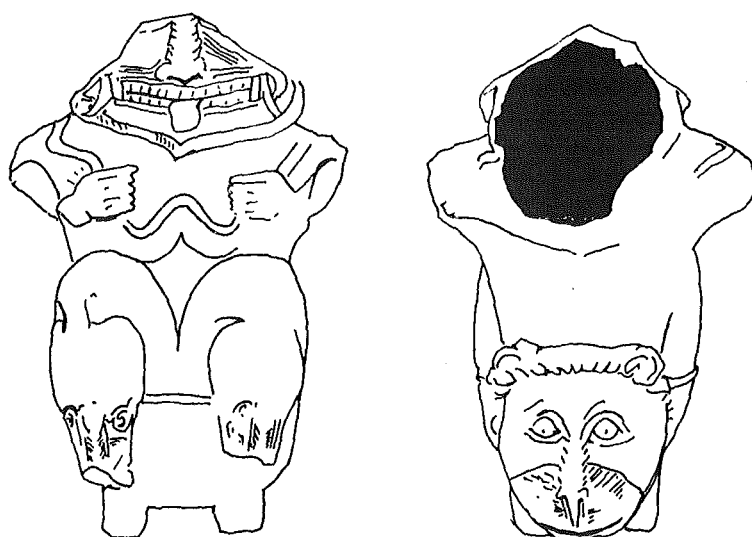


Fig. 3

Fig. 1 : Archaic ritual mask from Tiryns (Argolide).

Fig. 2 : Archaic Cypriot idols of priests wearing bull-masks.

Fig. 3 : Arcadian plastic-vase (6th century B.C.).

Fig. 4 : Terracotta figurine of worshipper wearing animal-mask from the megaron of Lykosoura.

Fig. 5 : Fragmentary cult vessel from Brauron (5th century B.C.).



Fig. 4

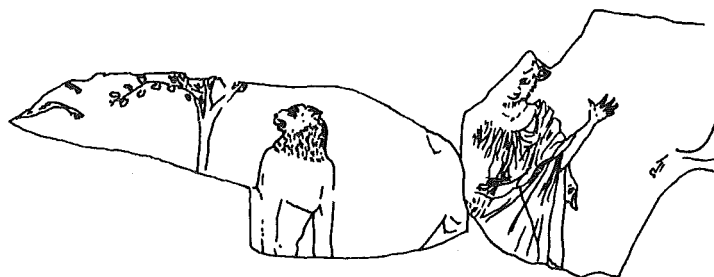


Fig. 5

expiatory rite like that of the Dipoleia to avoid the rage of Artemis. From the Neolithic and from the Eurasian steppe the bear came to be the sacred animal of the goddess (sc. Artemis); it was even dedicated to her in marble on the Akropolis». One of the 5th century fragmentary cult vessels which must come from the Brauronian sanctuary and are called by L. Kahil *krateriskoi*⁴¹, shows, on one side, Artemis, flanked by Leto and Apollo, shooting, with bow and arrow, a deer and, on the other side, a male figure looking towards the three deities and a running female figure, both of them wearing bear's-head masks⁴² (fig. 5). As we support elsewhere⁴³, the Brauronian *dromenon* contained the following successive phases : A) The priestess⁴⁴, i.e. the female figure wearing bear-mask, proceeds to the ritual «invitation»⁴⁵ of the divinity. B) Artemis sends her sacred animal⁴⁶, the bear, incarnated by the male figure with the mask who looks towards the other side of the vessels to emphasize the movement «divinity → mortal world» he has just achieved; he creates the surprise and the terror of the priestess who, running and terror-stricken, behaves exactly as the priestess in the Apollo's temple in the *Eumenides*. This is the concrete scene of the *krateriskos* and, that one of an other Brauronian cult-vessel⁴⁷ showing naked girls, – the consecrated to Artemis Athenian virgins⁴⁸ – running at the sight of a real bear. C) Terror will yield to ecstasy and to possession, and the priestess will be finally identified to the goddess.

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⁴¹ L. KAHIL, *L'Artémis de Brauron : Rites et Mystères*, in *AK*, 20 (1977), p. 86-98.

⁴² KAHIL, *art. cit.*, p. 92-93, fig. 6-8, f. C, pl. 20.

⁴³ I. LOUCAS, *Illustration du Mystère de Brauron*, in *Φίλια ἔπη. Studies presented to G. Mylonas*, t. III (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Or a woman worshipper ?

⁴⁵ Perhaps by the mean of a κλητικὸς ὕμνος : cf. KARAGIORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 112-113.

⁴⁶ The sending of the sacred animal is a kind of epiphany of the divinity : cf. literature in L. WENIGER, *Theophanien, altgriechische Götteradvente*, in *ARW*, 22 (1923-1924), p. 16-57.

⁴⁷ KAHIL, *art. cit.*, p. 90-91, fig. 3-4, fig. B; pl. 19; SIMON, *op. cit.*, p. 84, fig. 10.

⁴⁸ The famous ἄρκτοι.