

Priapus' Rock-cut Iambic Trimeters on Hellenistic Thera

Fourteen verse inscriptions accompany the rock-cut altars, reliefs, and statue bases installed by Artemidorus of Perge sometime in the third century BCE near the main entrance of the city of Thera (i.e. *IG XII³ Suppl.* 1336-1341, 1343-1348; XII³ 421a-b and 422). Two of these (*IG XII³ 421c-d*), which deal with the arrival of the god Priapus in Thera, are distinguished from the rest by their dramatic character and subject matter. In this paper, I argue that these two inscriptions point specifically to Euripides' *Bacchae*, and that this allusion may be explained by the contemporary Ptolemaic political agenda.

Since the excavation of the sanctuary and initial publication of its remains (von Gaertringen 1904) no specific attention has been paid to the metrical, linguistic, or literary aspects of these verses. Except for the observation that the two inscriptions in question contain the earliest known dedication to Priapus outside of Lampsacus (Cole 1984), and a discussion of the god's role in Ptolemy Philadelphus' procession (e.g. Hunter 2009), Priapus' inscription has either been examined collectively with the other dedications in the broader context of private cults and their relationship to state religion (e.g. Graf 2013), or mentioned as an example of the non-professional epigrammatic style (e.g. Bing and Bruss 2007).

In contrast to Artemidorus' other epigrams, which are dedicatory in nature, I argue that these lines are modelled on drama in both meter and style. They stand out as the only verses composed in iambic trimeters, the meter most characteristic of drama, whereas the rest are all dactylic hexameters and pentameters.

The particular association of *IG XII³ 421c-d* with Euripides is evident in the first trimeter, which echoes the first line of the *Bacchae*, wherein Dionysus announces his arrival in Thebes

(Eur. *Ba.* 1). The meter and structure of the lines are identical. The verb denoting the gods' arrival (*hēkō* in both); the gods' self-identification (*Priapos; Dios pais*); and the specification of space (*tēide Thēraiōn polei; tēnde Thēbaiōn khthona*) fall into identical metrical positions, with the main caesura preceding the third princeps. Although in Priapus' inscription the beginning of the first line of the second couplet is missing, the two couplets form a thematic unit. The god announces that he has come to the city of the Theraians bringing imperishable wealth (421c), and that he stands by as a supporter for all citizens and resident foreigners (421d). Unlike Dionysus in Euripides' play, Priapus arrives as a helper god. However, like Dionysus, he is a foreign god who comes to Greece from the east. Although the two gods' perceived foreign origins and Priapus' general association with Dionysiac contexts offer a plausible explanation for Artemidorus' choice to emulate the *Bacchae* in his dedication to Priapus, this choice is not limited to thematic affiliations. Instead, I argue, it reflects the new socio-political circumstances of the Ptolemaic kingdom, and especially Ptolemy Philadelphus' political, religious, and literary program.

Goyette has shown that Philadelphus strategically cultivated an affinity with Dionysus in order to exploit the god's broad, cross-cultural appeal for his new model of authority (Goyette 2010). Kallixenus' account of Philadelphus' Grand Procession (*FGrH* 627 F 2 = *Athen.* 5.197c-203b) exemplifies Dionysus' prominent position in Ptolemaic ideology, which included an interest in theatrical performances, especially tragedies. In this context, Euripides' *Bacchae* would hold special importance for the king. This is reflected in contemporary literature; Friesen has noted that Theocritus' twenty-sixth idyll 'serves as the earliest extant composition of [Dionysus'] myth following Euripides' *Bacchae*' (Friesen 2015:72).

Similarly, Priapus' inclusion in Philadelphus' procession as a follower of Dionysus supports the god's broader geographical emergence within the Ptolemaic empire. The appearance of Priapus' cult on Thera at a time when the island had passed under the Ptolemaic sphere of influence as evinced primarily by inscriptional evidence, seems then to be no coincidence. Artemidorus' contemporaries would have perceived imperial undertones in Priapus' dedication. Since Ptolemaic elements are in evidence elsewhere in the sanctuary (e.g. a relief of the Ptolemaic eagle), Artemidorus' connection to the rulers and his role in Theraian society deserve reexamination.

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