

## The role of Zeus Meilichios in Argos

The Olympian gods famously have nothing to do with the dead.<sup>1</sup> ‘Farewell,’ says Artemis to the dying Hippolytos, ‘it is not lawful for me to look upon the dead or defile my sight with the last breath of the dying’.<sup>2</sup> They are, after all, defined by their immortality, and death is antithetical to their very being.<sup>3</sup> Thanatos is ‘hateful to men and loathsome to the gods’, and Hades himself is not exactly the most sociable of gods – and, notoriously, does not receive cult.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the god of the dead never leaves his realm, and does not operate in the world of the living. And yet, as always, when we look more closely at the situation on the ground, things are not so straightforward. In this paper, I would like to consider a case in which a god appears to be picking up a particular association with the dead, and to look at how this interaction affects the iconography of his cult statue. What I am interested in is how the presence of a localised hero- or chthonic cult can affect the way that a god’s cult, and cult statue, are depicted and understood.

The cult statue in question, in this case, is that of Zeus Meilichios at Argos. The epithet ‘Meilichios’ means ‘mild’, ‘kindly’, ‘open to propitiation’.<sup>5</sup> The name is placatory, and, as Walter Burkert suggests, ‘epitomises the appeasing effect of offerings to the dead’.<sup>6</sup> Like many such epithets, it has an ominous ring, implying a need to be particularly nice to a god who is potentially the opposite of kindly; and, indeed, this is a form of Zeus connected to the underworld. (James Davidson translates the name as ‘Zeus Be Nice Now’.<sup>7</sup>) Hades too attracts these euphemistic names, as do many of his underlings – most famously, perhaps, those kindly beings, the Furies.

Zeus Meilichios has cult in a range of sites throughout Greece.<sup>8</sup> Although there is no record of what went on in the Argive cult, there is a fair amount of evidence regarding his cult in Athens, which was very popular, and particularly its major festival, the Diasia.<sup>9</sup> This appears to have been a festival in two parts, with a grim, propitiatory side and a subsequent lighter aspect. The details are disputed; the grim part of the proceedings was perhaps to appease the dead in some way, and included a sacrifice of some sort. Even the nature of the sacrifice is obscure. An anecdote from Xenophon (*Anabasis* 7.8.4) indicates that Zeus Meilichios should be offered a pig, burnt whole – though this may or may not apply to the Diasia.<sup>10</sup> However, Thucydides 1.126.6 talks of ‘sacrifices not including blood sacrifices, but traditional local sacrifices’ (πολλὰ οὐχ ἱερεῖα, ἀλλ’ ἄγνὰ) θύματα ἐπιχώρια) offered by the whole populace – perhaps cakes or pastries in the shape of animals, which could be burnt whole without undue expense.<sup>11</sup> An inscription from Erchia, on the other hand, gives ‘an interesting

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the ASCS Conference in Perth, Australia, 2010. I am grateful to the participants for a lively discussion and many useful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Eur. *Hipp.* 1437-38 (trans. Kovacs).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Burkert 1985, 201; Clay 1981-2; Vernant 1991, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Eur. *Alc.* 62; the exception to Hades’ lack of cult is offered by the Eleians, who ‘are the only people that we know of who honour Hades’ according to Paus. 6.25.2; Strabo 8.3.15 also mentions an Eleian cult of Hades on the Acheron River. I am grateful to Graeme Bourke for these references.

<sup>5</sup> Burkert 1985, 201; Jameson et al 1993, 91-2; Parke 1977, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Burkert 1985, 201.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Cook 1914-40 vol. 2.2, 1091-1160 (Appendix M); Dowden 2006, 65-66; Jameson et al 1993, 81-107; Larson 2007, 21-23; Nilsson *GGR* 1.I.385-88. See also n. 9 on Attic cult.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Thuc. 1.126.6 and the fourth-century inscription from Erchia, *SEG* 21 n. 541 col. A lines 38-43. See Jameson 1965; Lalonde 2006; Parke 1977, 120-2; Simon 1983, 12-15.

<sup>10</sup> Parke 1977, 121-2.

<sup>11</sup> Parke 1977, 121.

mixture of chthonic and Olympian rites', as Erika Simon has observed.<sup>12</sup> The inscription notes that no wine could be consumed until the sacrifice (a ram, in this case) was accomplished and the entrails burnt. Burning entrails without wine is an element common to a number of chthonic cults. The meat, however, was apparently then roasted and eaten – an Olympian element.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Aristophanes gives us cheerful references by Strepsiades to gifts for children and an exploding haggis, which sound to be in character with the happier part of the festival.<sup>14</sup> The picture is complicated by the question of exactly what constitutes 'Olympian' as opposed to 'chthonic' practice in terms of sacrifice and religious ritual.<sup>15</sup> All in all, it is very hard to tell what is going on here, and we should certainly not assume that cult practice in Argos was the same. However, what we can take from this is the strong element of chthonic practice in the worship of a god who, in most of his manifestations, is as Olympian as they come. We can also see, perhaps, the care for children which is not uncommon in chthonic deities.<sup>16</sup> This is borne out by the function of the festival, The common iconography of the god, in which he is depicted as a large snake, or accompanied by a snake, makes this particularly clear, as the snake is strongly associated with the underworld.<sup>17</sup> On one relief, the snake emerges from what seems to be a cave to meet his worshippers, a man and child.<sup>18</sup> The contrast between the man's apprehensive gesture and the fact that he has brought his child along with him indicate nicely both the frightening and beneficent sides of the god.

In Argos, Pausanias tells us that Polykleitos made a statue of the god in white marble, after an episode involving kin-slaying among the Argives (2.20.1-2).<sup>19</sup> As far as the historical account goes, the statue was erected as part of the propitiation rites after the civil strife in Argos in 417 BC, when the pro-Athenian democrats ousted the short-lived and tyrannical oligarchy supported by Sparta. Pausanias gives the following account:

ἡγεμῶν δὲ ἐτέτακτο ἐπ' αὐτοῖς Βρύας Ἀργεῖος, ὃς ἄλλα τε ἐς ἄνδρας ὕβρισε τοῦ δήμου καὶ παρθένον κομιζομένην παρὰ τὸν νυμφίον ἤσχυνεν ἀφελόμενος τοὺς ἄγοντας. ἐπιλαβούσης δὲ τῆς νυκτὸς τυφλοὶ τὸν Βρύαντα ἢ παῖς φυλάξασα ὑπνωμένον: φωραθείσα δὲ ὡς ἐπέσχεν ἡμέρα, κατέφυγεν ἰκέτις ἐς τὸν δῆμον. οὐ προεμένων δὲ αὐτὴν τιμωρήσασθαι τοῖς χιλίοις καὶ ἀπὸ τούτου προαχθέντων ἐς μάχην ἀμφοτέρων, κρατοῦσιν οἱ τοῦ δήμου, κρατήσαντες δὲ

<sup>12</sup> Simon 1983, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Simon 1983, 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> Ar. *Clouds* 408-9, 864.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Burkert 1985, 199-203; Ekroth 1999; Nock 1951; Scullion 1994 for the polarity and some of the problems with it.

<sup>16</sup> Simon 1983, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Larson 2007, 22: 'In Greek art, the snake as companion or attribute often indicates that the deity or hero in question belongs to the underworld.' See also Salapata 1993: 194 on the role of the snake in hero-cult iconography. Cf Jameson et al 1993, 94-7; Lalonde 2006, 46-7, conceding the underworld associations of the god, while arguing that the snake also signifies fertility and hence personal welfare. For the images of the god as snake, and as anthropomorph accompanied by snake, see Mitropoulou 1977, 112-155; Lalonde 2006, Appendix.

<sup>18</sup> Votive relief with man and child in front of Zeus Meilichios in the form of a snake, from Boeotia? Early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC. Berlin. Simon 1983, fig. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Pausanias' identification of the artist has been questioned; Polykleitos is of course best known for athlete sculptures in bronze, and some use this as a reason to deny Pausanias' attributions involving stone statues, on the basis of the medium (e.g. L. Beschi, 'Gli "Astragalizontes" di un Policleo', *Prospettive* 15 (1978) 4-12, cited in Ridgway 1995, 185 n. 27). However, other sculptors switch with apparent ease from one medium to another; Ridgway 1995, 185 cites the example of Pheidias. One might also consider Praxiteles, well known to prefer marble, but also known to work in bronze. For the debate as to which Polykleitos is referred to, see Ridgway 1995, 186.

οὐδένα ὑπὸ τοῦ θυμοῦ τῶν ἐναντίων ἔλιπον. ὕστερον δὲ ἄλλα τε ἐπηγάγοντο καθάρσια ὡς ἐπὶ αἵματι ἐμφυλίῳ καὶ ἄγαλμα ἀνέθηκαν Μειλιχίου Διός.

Bryas of Argos was put in command [of the Argive Thousand]. He committed a number of violent outrages against common people, and on one occasion he dishonoured a bridal procession by snatching a virgin girl they were leading to the bridegroom. When night fell the young girl watched Bryas going to sleep and then blinded him. But the coming of day betrayed her; she fled to the people as a ritual suppliant. They refused to give her up to the vengeance of the regiment, there was a fight, the people won it, and in their fury they left not one man of the thousand alive. Afterwards, among the ceremonies of their purification from the blood of kindred, they dedicated a statue of Zeus Meilichios.

Thus the dedication of the statue – and presumably the institution of cult with it – are a direct result of the killing of kin, which in its turn is a direct result of the impious and violent actions of the oligarchic army – the ‘Argive Thousand’ – and their leader. Even though some of the more purple aspects of the episode as Pausanias has described it have come under scrutiny, there seems no reason to doubt the dedication of the statue on this occasion, or the kin-slaying that gave rise to it.<sup>20</sup> A cult site of Zeus Meilichios on the border between Athens and Eleusis, where Theseus was purified after his Isthmus crossing, has led to the suggestion that the god was one who purifies after bloodshed; but as Erika Simon notes, his vast popularity in Athens implies a broader role.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he seems generally to have been more concerned with individuals than with civic matters.<sup>22</sup> However, the appeasement element, as we have seen, must have been a strong one. It is perhaps worth noting in passing that the Diasia, too, has a back-handed connection with such civil strife. Thucydides tells the story of the sixth-century athlete Cylon, famous as an Olympian, and married to the daughter of the tyrant of Megara, who attempted in 632 BC to seize political power in Athens. The Delphic oracle advised him to attack during the greatest festival of Zeus. Not surprisingly, he construed this to be the Olympic Games, but his attack went disastrously wrong. Had he attacked during the Diasia, Thucydides points out, he would have found the city largely empty as all the citizens left it for the sanctuary of Zeus Meilichios. Whether designedly or inadvertently, the god protects his worshippers from threats to the city, and ensures their safety.

The statue is generally connected with Roman coins depicting Zeus enthroned and holding a sceptre and a phiale.<sup>23</sup> Polykleitos’ statue at Argos is thus iconographically very unusual. The sceptre and throne are both well established attributes of the god by this time, but the phiale is particularly striking. The type of Zeus known as ‘Zeus Spondon’ – a *standing* Zeus offering a libation – appears in Attic vase-painting, and may first appear in sculpture, in about 450 BC.<sup>24</sup> I say ‘may’ because no intact examples of this type survive, and a phiale is not the only thing that may be held in an outstretched hand – especially given the range of Zeus’ attributes. When we look for the seated Zeus with phiale, the type does exist in Attic vase-

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<sup>20</sup> Paus. 2.20.1-2. Kagan 1981, 138 n. 3 suggests that Pausanias is probably overstating the causal connection but there is no reason to reject the rest of the story.

<sup>21</sup> Jameson et al 1993, 103: ‘the god is especially concerned with bloodshed committed both against the family and by the family’. Cf. Simon 1983, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Lalonde 2006, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Imhoof-Blumer and Gardner 1885-7, 36 first made the connection; it is also borne out by the later appearance of the type in reliefs (see below).

<sup>24</sup> LIMC Zeus 72, 73 (sculpture, identification as Zeus Spondon uncertain); 74 (vase-painting, perhaps part of a narrative scene with the running Athena on the other side).

paintings, although generally only when Zeus is in the company of others.<sup>25</sup> In short, it is entirely possible that Polykleitos was the first to create a cult statue of Zeus enthroned and offering a libation. We do not, unfortunately, know a great deal about earlier depictions of Zeus Meilichios, but we do know that there was an aniconic statue of him at Sikyon of unknown date, and that he was depicted as a snake in Attic reliefs and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Polykleitos, then, appears to be the first to use this particular iconography for Zeus Meilichios, and possibly the first to depict the god in sculpture in this way at all. The influence of Polykleitos' new interpretation is evident from later reproductions of the iconography; 4<sup>th</sup>-century reliefs in Athens show the god seated with sceptre and/or phiale and approaching worshippers, and the statue is also copied on Roman coins.<sup>27</sup> One relief shows an interesting variant on this type, with the god equipped with phiale and cornucopia.<sup>28</sup> Here the iconography may be influenced by Hades, god of the dead, who also carries a cornucopia. If Hades cannot act for the dead in the world of the living, his brother will do so, and it is not surprising that they should develop some elements of a shared iconography.

What is the significance of this depiction? The throne and sceptre are straightforward; both are common attributes of Zeus, and go to reinforce Zeus' supremacy and emphasise his kingship. They do not necessarily denote justice or any of this other attributes; only power. This iconography lays emphasis on Zeus' authority to do what is needed. The phiale is trickier. Where does this come from? In human hands, the phiale pours offerings to placate the gods when a request is made. On this level, it is odd for a god to carry a phiale at all: whom is he placating? However, they often do pour themselves libations. Karim Arafat, in his discussion of the motif in Attic vase-painting, suggests that libations are ordinary events, and need not carry any special meaning. Erika Simon, in a discussion of the phiale in scenes with both Zeus and Hera, recognises it as a symbol of the *hieros gamos*, the divine marriage.<sup>29</sup> Neither of these answers seems helpful in our case. There is more work to be done here; the phiale seems not to be unusual in sculptures of gods, and its meaning appears to be flexible. However, the placatory aspect implied by the phiale, or rather by the libation poured from it, does make sense in this context of kin strife and violent death.

Several factors may have been at play in Polykleitos' decision to use this innovative iconography. It is worth noting that there are other statues of Zeus nearby, one of whom is Zeus Soter. So Meilichios is in like company, and his iconography may have been chosen to reflect this in some way or, alternatively, to distinguish him from the others; unfortunately,

<sup>25</sup> Arafat 1990, 89-103. For an exception see Arafat 1986.

<sup>26</sup> Sikyon: Paus. 2.9.6. Snakes: Cook 1914-40 vol. 2.2, 1107-1110, figs. 944-46; Simon 1983, 15 fig. 2; Nilsson *GGR* 1.I.386; Foucart 1883. Secondary sources seem to assume that the snake iconography is early (e.g. Simon 1983, 13 implies that the seated god with the snake next to him postdates the god as snake), but I have not been able to find any evidence of it before the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC; Mitropoulou 1977, 49 notes that all dateable reliefs are from the second half of the fourth century but 'it is not easy to date snakes if there is no epigraphy'. Shapiro 1989, 78-90 notes one possible acknowledgement of chthonic Zeus Meilichios in sixth-century art, in the form of a bearded figure with a sceptre named Ploutodotas (Attic black-figure amphora, c. 530 BC, Reggio 4002; Shapiro 1989, pl. 33a). See *LIMC* Zeus 202\* for an example of the motifs combined: Zeus seated with sceptre and phiale, with snake coiled in front of his seat (second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century).

<sup>27</sup> Attic reliefs: *LIMC* Zeus 200-209; Cook 1914-40 vol. 2.2, 1106, figs. 942-43; Lalonde 2006, Appendix. Coins: AE, Argos, mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD; *LIMC* Zeus 519; Imhoof-Blumer and Gardner 1885-7, 36, pl. K.25.

<sup>28</sup> From Athens, Piraeus; 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC; Piraeus Mus. 3. *LIMC* Zeus 206; Cook 1914-40 vol. 2.2, 1106, fig. 943; Parke 1977, fig. 48. The god is enthroned at left facing an altar, behind which a group of worshippers (both children and adults) bring a pig to sacrifice. The inscription reads, '-toboule, to Zeus Meilichios' (ΤΟΒΟΛΗΔΙΜΙΛΙΧΙΩ).

<sup>29</sup> Simon 1953, 58-66.

we do not know how the others were depicted.<sup>30</sup> In addition, and perhaps more importantly, in view of the fine line that Argos was treading politically between Athens and Sparta at the time of the statue's dedication, there may also have been a desire to differentiate the iconography from that of the god at Athens, so as not to identify too closely with the Attic cult.

And this raises another question; we should also ask why the Argives chose this particular cult. Why not simply appease the dead with offerings and ancestor worship, or perhaps through hero-cult? Hero-cult in particular seems to offer a very likely formulation for both explaining and honouring the dead in this case. Heroes of cult are often men who have died violently and taken revenge, in various ways, upon the community that they hold to be responsible for their deaths, and the rituals offered to them are designed not only to limit the harm they may do, but further, to make them into actively beneficial presences within the community.

It is interesting in this context to look at the Lakonian hero reliefs, which share many elements of their iconography with that of Zeus Meilichios – the enthroned deity, the snake, the worshippers, the extended libation bowl. Over forty have now been found.<sup>31</sup> They commonly depict a seated man (or, in the earlier ones, a seated couple), with some kind of cup – often a kantharos, but a phiale in at least one case – and often with a snake curled under the chair or elsewhere in the picture. Comparison of those from the fifth century with their earlier counterparts shows how consistent their iconography is even when the style of the reliefs changes.<sup>32</sup> Their function has been debated; they may be heroised dead, or cult heroes, or underworld divinities (all of which groups may overlap to some degree). Gina Salapata has argued that the Lakonia reliefs were applicable to a range of different heroes throughout the area; this accounts for both their widespread distribution and their complete absence from the major divine sanctuaries in Lakonia. Since a hero's grave is also the site of his cult, they may have acted as both votive and grave stele, both memorialising and placating the dead. I hesitate to argue for direct influence between these and Polykleitos' Zeus, since these have not (so far as I know) been found outside of Lakonia, and there is no evidence that Polykleitos ever went there – although that does not necessarily mean that he was ignorant of them. What I do think we may have here is a similar kind of function for the chthonic god and the heroes, expressed in similar forms.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Elpis Mitropoulou records a relief of Zeus Meilichios from Sparta, in which the god appears with sceptre, phiale and snake, enthroned frontally.<sup>34</sup> In the absence of any inscription, the possibility that it is a misidentified hero relief cannot be excluded; but if nothing else, this demonstrates the similarities in iconography.

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<sup>30</sup> See Marchetti 1994, 142-53 on the layout of the *temenos* of Zeus. Dowden 2006, 66 notes the connection in cult between Zeus Meilichios, Zeus Soter and Zeus Philios.

<sup>31</sup> The scholarship is extensive, but there are useful summaries in Salapata 1993, Hibler 1993. The best known of these is a relief from Chrysapha, showing an enthroned couple with offering bearers, dating to the third quarter 6<sup>th</sup> cent. BC (Berlin, Pergamonmus. no. 731; Salapata 1993, fig. 1). The man, in the front, holds a kantharos and turns his head to look out at the viewer. A snake extends itself behind the throne, and two diminutive worshippers approach in the right corner.

<sup>32</sup> See for example a Lakonian relief showing a seated man with phiale from which a snake drinks, from Sparta, in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Sparta Mus. 6519, Salapata 1993, fig. 4). The rounded forms and relaxed pose contrast strongly with the stiff archaic formality of the example mentioned in n. 31 above.

<sup>33</sup> Salapata 1993, 194.

<sup>34</sup> Sparta Mus. 5408, c. 340 BC; Mitropoulou 1977, 136 fig. 61. The left hand holds a sceptre and the right holds out a phiale, from which a snake drinks; compare the relief in n. 32 above.

The primary function of this newly instituted cult at Argos is clearly a desire to placate the dead. As noted, one of the most important functions of the phiale, with its implied libation, is precisely this kind of appeasement. A libation to the dead also asks their assistance, whether in specific or more general terms; this occurs not only in hero-cult but also in ancestor cult. This particular group of dead may be regarded as both. They died violently, just as heroes almost inevitably do, and which also makes them likely to be restless dead. And they were enemies, killed in battle. And (by Pausanias' account) they were lawless and perhaps sacrilegious. But they are also a group with closer than usual ties to the community, in that they are part of it, and related to it. They are, then, a particularly dangerous group of dead, with considerable potential power for harm or for benefit, and not likely to lie quiet in their graves without some strong incentive and control. Accordingly, the Argives may well have felt that something more powerful than hero-cult should be established for this group. Zeus should be strong enough to control them. But this is also a very gentle depiction. The lack of eagle or thunderbolt, the presence of the libation bowl which arguably always has a placatory aspect to it, are a response to a very unusual group of heroic dead who must be both kept in line and also looked after well. And not only the dead: the families on both sides, too, must put the deaths behind them and learn, literally, to live with those who killed their kin.<sup>35</sup> The un-chthonic iconography of the statue may reflect an understanding of the need to placate the living as much as the dead. To sum up, the combination of protection and appeasement found in hero-cult is also characteristic, as we have seen, of Zeus Meilichios. I would suggest that both cult and statue arise out of a complex situation, and reflect the desire to mark out and commemorate this group of dead in a way that emphasised their familial and community ties, placated their enmity, and gave them a kindly role to play.

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<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Ken Sheedy for this point.

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