

# HADES: CORNUCOPIAE, FERTILITY AND DEATH<sup>1</sup>

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The depiction of Hades in myth is fairly unrelenting in its gloom, and this is very much the most influential version today, as may be seen by the incarnations of Hades in modern movies; here he appears as pallid and miserable, or fiery and vengeful, but is never actually seen as enjoying himself. Hades shares the characteristics of his realm. And Hades' domicile is seen as dim, dank and generally lacking in those things that give the greatest pleasure to the living – food, drink, sex. The fact that other gods do not enter Hades has not only to do with the antipathy between death and immortality, but also emphasises the absence of things that are under their control: Aphrodite's love and sex, Dionysos' wine and good cheer, the food given by Demeter.

Hades is notoriously the god who receives no cult. This is not entirely correct, though it almost is. Pausanias, who is as usual our best source for this sort of thing, lists several examples of statues or altars in Greece which seem to imply some kind of cult activity, usually in someone else's sanctuary. So for example Hades has a statue along with those of Kore and Demeter in a temple on the road near Mycenae; he has an image in the precinct of the Erinyes in Athens; he has an altar under the name of Klymenos (whom Pausanias specifically equates with Hades) in Hermione in the Argolid.<sup>2</sup> And there are a few other places.<sup>3</sup> The one real exception seems to have been in Elis, where he had a temple and sanctuary; although even here, the temple was opened only once a year – because, Pausanias supposes, 'men too go down only once to Hades' – and only the priest was permitted to enter.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that Pausanias specifically says that the Eleans are the only ones to worship (τιμᾶσιν) Hades – which makes one wonder how he would classify the sacrifices to Klymenos.

This lack of enthusiasm for his society is reflected in the comparatively small number of depictions of Hades in art, in comparison with the other Olympians. Even so, I cannot of course cover all his iconography in this paper. What I would like to do here is pick out some specific features of interest, some areas, in fact, in which Hades has been seen to depart from his grim roots, and talk about what light they shed on how Hades was perceived.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a small beginning to a much larger project. I am grateful to the organisers of *ASCS 32* (2011) and to the audience for their helpful suggestions and comments. I have given full details for only those vases which I discuss in detail; I have also included weblinks to images for these vases, but have only used direct links when I have been able to locate images that are under free license.

<sup>2</sup> Statues near Mycenae, Paus. 2.18.3; image in Attica in the sanctuary of the Erinyes, Paus. 1.28.6; altars in the Argolid, Paus. 2.35.8.

<sup>3</sup> A partial list only: Altars of Hades and Persephone at Troizen, Paus. 2.31.2; statue of Hades at the temple of Athena Itonia in Phokis, Strabo 9.2.29; Altar of Zeus Chthonios at Olympia, Paus. 5.14.8. Nekyomanteion at Thesprotia, Paus. 5.14.2; Hdt. 5.92.

<sup>4</sup> Paus. 6.25.2: ὁ δὲ ἱερός τοῦ Ἅιδου περίβολός τε καὶ ναός—ἔστι γὰρ δὴ Ἥλείοις καὶ Ἅιδου περίβολός τε καὶ ναός—ἀνοίγνυται μὲν ἅπαξ κατὰ ἔτος ἕκαστον, ἐσελθεῖν δὲ οὐδὲ τότε ἐφέϊται πέρα γε τοῦ ἱερωμένου... ἐκάστου δὲ ἅπαξ ἀνοίγειν τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ νομίζουσιν, ὅτι οἴμαι καὶ ἀνθρώποις ἅπαξ ἢ κάθοδος ἢ ἐξ τοῦ Ἅιδου γίνεται. ('The sacred enclosure of Hades and its temple are opened once every year, but not even on this occasion is anybody permitted to enter except the priest ... The reason why they are wont to open it only once each year is, I suppose, because men too go down only once to Hades.' See Strabo 8.3.14-15.)

Iconographically, Hades is a god who is made recognisable by his surroundings. As in cult, so in art, he is usually found in the company of others. Depictions of him fall primarily into three areas: scenes from the underworld, most commonly Herakles' visit to fetch Kerberos; the rape of Persephone; and Eleusinian scenes, in which his appearance is largely due to his role as Persephone's consort. Although he does occasionally crop up in other contexts, these make up the bulk of his appearances. This is also true of South Italian vase-painting – although considerably more ornate, it too references the rape, the underworld, Herakles, and mystery cults (although here Orphic rather than Eleusinian). This paper, however, will be confined largely to fifth century Attic vase-painting. Here we find a range of attributes. Hades may be depicted as in the prime of life, with black hair, or old, with white hair.<sup>5</sup> He is long-haired, bearded, with long robes and sometimes a wreath.<sup>6</sup> He keeps his dignity; he never appears completely nude, but is always at least partially robed.<sup>7</sup> He often carries a sceptre, a reminder of his power and status, as can be seen when he carries it in pursuit of Persephone.<sup>8</sup> He may carry a phiale, which could be regarded as simply an adjunct of divinity; gods are frequently depicted in the (slightly peculiar) action of pouring libations to themselves.<sup>9</sup> Again, this is an attribute shared by many others. He is once accompanied by a dog, and once perhaps by a snake, both of which have good underworld credentials.<sup>10</sup> None of these attributes are sufficient in and of themselves to identify him, though all are appropriate, referring to his dignity, his power, and its source.

Why, then, given the grim and barren nature of the underworld, does Hades so often appear holding a cornucopia? The cornucopia is not specific to Hades, but it is predominantly his, at least until the fourth century (more on this later). In those images in which the cornucopia appears, it is often the only really distinctive thing about him. And it is very distinctive: it is usually large, often fully half his height, and full of leaves or fruit or both. Round things that look rather like pumpkins are quite common; Katrin Bemann describes them as pomegranates, offering cakes, or 'small round unidentifiable fruit'; they have also been identified as poppy heads.<sup>11</sup> However, the contents of the cornucopia may vary from pot to pot.<sup>12</sup> The cornucopia first appears in the early fifth century BC, on two pots by the Oinokles Painter and one by the Berlin Painter.<sup>13</sup> It gains rapidly in popularity, and appears in some surprising contexts, such as during the rape of Persephone, where one would think it might be in the way.<sup>14</sup> One could perhaps explain this by arguing that at least on some pieces it is used simply to identify the god, and does not say anything specific about his

<sup>5</sup> Black hair: e.g., *LIMC Hades* 20\*, 24\*, 38\*; white-haired, e.g., *LIMC Hades* 29\*, 39\*, 121\*, 137\*.

<sup>6</sup> Wreath: e.g., *LIMC Hades* 20\*, 44\*.

<sup>7</sup> Usually with chiton and himation, e.g., *LIMC Hades* 14\*, 20\*, 24\*, 39\*, 77\*; occasionally with himation only, e.g., *LIMC Hades* 38\*, 44\*, 121\*.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., *LIMC Hades* 20\*, 34\*, 38\*, 39\*; in pursuit of Persephone, *LIMC Hades* 77\*.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., *LIMC Hades* 21, 26, 44\*.

<sup>10</sup> Dog: *LIMC Hades* 37\*; snake: *LIMC Hades* 30 (= Demeter 303\*).

<sup>11</sup> Bemann (1994) 160; (1997) 552. Compare e.g., on the pelike *LIMC Hades* 25, Linder (1988) ('poppies, pomegranates?'), Bemann (1994) 23 (offering cakes or bread). This piece will be further discussed below.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., *LIMC Hades* 20\* shows a cornucopia with grapes in it; *LIMC Hades* 36, 38\*, 44\* show one that is empty. See Bemann (1994) 160, arguing that there is no difference in usage between the full and empty cornucopia.

<sup>13</sup> Bemann (1994) 20-1; *LIMC Hades* 20\*, 77\*.

<sup>14</sup> *LIMC Hades* 77\*.

character. However, this does not seem a particularly strong argument, especially since he appears without it quite often. So if it is not simply an identifier, what is it?

The cornucopia has long been associated with fertility, and more specifically with agricultural prosperity. Ruth Linder describes Hades as giver and guarantor of a rich harvest, aligned with Zeus Chthonios ('Spender und Garant reicher Ernte Zeus Chthonios angeglichen').<sup>15</sup> That certainly seems to underlie one unique scene on a pelike by the Orestes Painter, in which Hades does not merely hold his cornucopia but tips it.<sup>16</sup> The cornucopia, so large that he holds it in both hands, full of 'small round unidentifiable fruit', pours large leaf-shaped unidentifiable blobs of goodness onto the earth below, while Demeter stands facing him, holding a plough in her left hand.

At this point scholars often evoke the epithet *Plouton*, 'the rich one', originally an Eleusinian deity of the fertile earth, first perhaps attested in a fragmentary inscription from c. 500 BC, and certainly on a fragmentary cup by Douris in c. 490.<sup>17</sup> How, or if, *Plouton* is related to the child *Ploutos* son of Demeter and *Iasios* is unclear; but in any case, *Plouton* became a common designation for Hades, and is generally thought of as giving the grim god of the underworld a somewhat lighter designation as provider of agrarian fruitfulness.<sup>18</sup> This role is brought out in scenes with Demeter and Persephone; for example, the Dinos Painter depicts the venerable white-haired Hades in the centre carrying his sceptre and cornucopia, flanked by Demeter with her sceptre and a branch, and Persephone with torches.<sup>19</sup> It is arguable, however, that the designation 'Plouton' and the cornucopia, although they express the same idea, are not strongly linked to each other on vases. Inscriptions are rare; only two of the cornucopia-holders are inscribed as *Plouton*.<sup>20</sup> Nor is the cornucopia as closely linked as one might expect to scenes with Demeter and *Triptolemos* – in these scenes Hades is more often shown without it.

In fact, in the Eleusinian scenes Hades himself tends to be placed off to one side as the uninvolved onlooker rather than the active participant, rather like the man made to go shopping with his girlfriend when he would prefer to be holed up in his man cave. His contact with the living is reluctant. The fruitfulness signaled by the name *Plouton* was, as the Greeks well knew, a polite veneer over the dismal reality of death. To return briefly to the Athens pelike, in the *CVA* entry for this pot, Semni Karazou argues that the falling blobs are poppy leaves.<sup>21</sup> This does not seem entirely clear to me; but if they are, this seems an odd crop to sow, as poppies are linked rather with sleep and death than useful harvest. I do not wish to argue that the cornucopia does not signal fertility; clearly it does. But I do want to reiterate the point that Attic painters are creative with their symbols and may use them in unexpected ways. And if the 'small round unidentifiable fruit' are in fact pomegranates or poppies, these, too, have overtones of death. In a similar tone is the grim pun in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, when 'black Hades' is described as 'rich (*πλουτίζεται*) in groans and

<sup>15</sup> Linder (1988) 391.

<sup>16</sup> Attic red-figure pelike, Orestes Painter, 475-425 BC; Athens, NM 16346; *LIMC* Hades 25 (= Cornucopiae 1\*); Beazley Database 214719; image (accessed March 2011) at [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:NAMA\\_16346\\_Cornucopia.JPG](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:NAMA_16346_Cornucopia.JPG). See Bemmman (1994) 23.

<sup>17</sup> Bemmman (1994) 21-2; Linder (1988) 390. The inscription: *IG I<sup>3</sup> 5*. The Douris cup: *LIMC* 28.

<sup>18</sup> Linder (1988) 390.

<sup>19</sup> Attic red-figure amphora, Dinos Painter, c. 430 BC; Athens, Piraeus Mus. 343; *LIMC* Hades 29\*; Beazley Database 215292 (no image).

<sup>20</sup> *Plouton* without cornucopia: a first-century BC relief from Eleusis of Eleusinian gods and heroes, showing *Plouton* (inscribed) with sceptre; *LIMC* Hades 41.

<sup>21</sup> *CVA* Athens, NM 2, p. 15 (Group III I d pl. 27.1-3).

weeping'.<sup>22</sup> Although the Athens pelike has no inscriptions, the male figure is commonly described by scholars as Plouton rather than Hades; but perhaps that is a distinction that the contemporary viewer of the pot would not make.<sup>23</sup>

To further this point, it is worth looking briefly at the other holders of the cornucopia. From the fourth century, the cornucopia develops a life of its own, and may be found in the hands of the Agathos Daimon, the hero Melikertes-Palaimon, Herakles, Pankrates, Zeus Meilichios and Zeus Philios. Arguably, however, it is not straying that far. The last three, as their names imply – the All-conquering One, Kindly Zeus, and Zeus of Friends – are all chthonic deities closely identified with Hades himself. Melikertes-Palaimon, as a cult hero, gains his power through his existence between the worlds of the dead and the living. And Herakles, as an immortalised hero, has much to do with Hades and his realm in the course of his life. These are all, one way or another, figures who are connected to Hades and to the house of Hades.<sup>24</sup> None of the Olympians carry a cornucopia. Certainly neither Persephone nor Demeter holds one.

I wish to turn now briefly to a very different body of evidence, a series of clay relief plaques from Locri Epizephyrii, down near the toe of Italy.<sup>25</sup> The Locrian *pinakes* are a group of terracotta plaques roughly A4 size (though they vary) bearing representations in low relief, made in multiple copies from molds. They have holes in the top and the vast majority of them were probably hung in the sanctuary of Persephone as dedications. They date mostly to the first half of the fifth century. The iconography is diverse and controversial; even scenes with which we are familiar – such as the rape of Persephone – may add distinctly unusual elements to them – such as presence of the so-called 'Young Abductor' (clearly not Hades, as not only does he look quite different, but Hades may also be present).<sup>26</sup> They seem to show a mixture of scenes from myth and ritual. The images focus on Persephone, and to a lesser extent Aphrodite, who shared the cult.

The earliest interpreters of these, such as Paulo Orsi, saw them as eschatological in origin.<sup>27</sup> Since then, interpreters have tended to move away from this view; Paula Zancani Montuoro saw them as largely reflecting the local cult and myth of Persephone; Helmut Prückner read them more as depictions of local ritual for Aphrodite, in particular as regards sacred prostitution.<sup>28</sup> More recently Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood has returned the dominance to Persephone and argued persuasively for a synthesis of myth and cult, with a particular focus on marriage.<sup>29</sup> James Redfield, in an interesting but idiosyncratic reading, points to the joint cult of Persephone and Aphrodite (unique to Locri, so far as we know) and argues that the depictions of Persephone abducted and Persephone enthroned reflect the negative and positive sides of marriage: both death and marriage are seen as translations to a better

<sup>22</sup> Soph. *OT* 29-30: μέλας δ' Ἄϊδης στεναγμοῖς καὶ γόοις πλουτίζεται, 'black Hades is wealthy in groans and laments.'

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Bemann (1994) 172; Carpenter (1991) fig. 120; Beazley, *ARV<sup>2</sup>* 1113.11; Karazou in *CVA Athens*, NM 2, p. 15, identifying the figure as 'Plouton/Ploutos'.

<sup>24</sup> Bemann (1997) 552.

<sup>25</sup> Full publication, unfortunately not available to me at the time of writing this paper: *I Pinakes di Locri Epizefiri*, M. Cardoso et al. (1999); E. Grillo et al. (2003); F. Barello et al. (2007). See Sourvinou-Inwood (1991) 147-88; Prückner (1968); Redfield (2003).

<sup>26</sup> See Sourvinou-Inwood (1973) for a discussion of this particular type. Hades as onlooker while a youth abducts a girl: e.g., Sourvinou-Inwood (1973) pl. 2a; *LIMC* Hades 63.

<sup>27</sup> Orsi (1909).

<sup>28</sup> Zancani Montuoro (1954); Prückner (1968).

<sup>29</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1973); (1991) 147-88.

life.<sup>30</sup> In the *pinakes*, this world and the next are often hard to distinguish; as Redfield puts it, ‘both are women’s worlds of house and garden, furniture, dishes, basketry, and fabrics. Hell is a city very like Seville.’<sup>31</sup>

I want to look at just one type, in which Persephone appears with Hades, both enthroned.<sup>32</sup> The famous *pinax* in Reggio Calabria is an example of the type; it shows Hades and Persephone enthroned side by side, with Persephone holding a cock and an ear of wheat, and Hades holding a phiale and a flowering branch.<sup>33</sup> The plaques tend to be attribute-heavy. Hades may carry the phiale, a sheaf of wheat, a water-bird (or possibly a goose), a cock, a flowering branch, a sceptre, a pomegranate. Sometimes other divinities are included, with their own attributes; Apollo with lyre, Dionysos with kantharos. To a degree, Hades’ and Persephone’s attributes are interchangeable; either may carry wheat, sceptre, phiale. And to some extent, there are equivalences: Hades carries a pomegranate, whereas Persephone carries a ball; Hades carries a goose or water bird, whereas Persephone carries a cock. (I should add that I cannot say for certain that these distinctions are always observed, as the full publication of the *pinakes* is not available to me at the time of writing.) Here too, I suggest, there is a distinction between the types of object. The ball has nuptial associations derived from the practice of girls dedicating toys to divinities on marriage.<sup>34</sup> The pomegranate also has nuptial connotations, as it sealed the union between Hades and Persephone – but it also bound her to the world of the dead. I do not want to push this too far; Persephone often carries a cock, for example, ‘a universal Greek chthonic symbol’.<sup>35</sup> Something similar may operate with the distinction between Persephone’s wheat and Hades’ flowering branch. The identity of this leafy branch is not clear. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, who gives perhaps the most detailed discussion of the individual attributes of Persephone, simply comments that ‘the blooming twig held by Hades undoubtedly has the same connotation of fertility’ as Persephone’s ubiquitous stalk of grain; similarly, Prückner comments that Hades appears here more as Plouton than as the death-god.<sup>36</sup> Now, it is possible that this is true, and the artist is simply adding a little variation by way of interest. Nonetheless, if we can read a ball and a pomegranate, or for that matter Hades’ phiale and Dionysos’ kantharos, as distinct symbols with different meanings, it seems at least possible that there is some distinction being drawn here between ear of wheat and flowering branch. A lot depends on what this branch is. H. F. Schölchs suggests that it is a figment of the artist’s imagination; Prückner is convinced that it is true to life, and thinks it is something akin to *asafoetida*.<sup>37</sup> Poppy, asphodel, and even narcissus have also been suggested.<sup>38</sup> And if we are looking at poppy or asphodel, then once again this is a symbol in which agricultural fertility is mixed with underworld symbolism.

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<sup>30</sup> Redfield (2003) 346-85.

<sup>31</sup> Redfield (2003) 369.

<sup>32</sup> See *LIMC* Hades 49-61.

<sup>33</sup> Locrian *pinax*, c. 500-450 BC; Reggio Calabria, Mus. Naz. Arch.; *LIMC* Hades 50\*; image at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Locri\\_Pinax\\_Of\\_Persephone\\_And\\_Hades.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Locri_Pinax_Of_Persephone_And_Hades.jpg) (accessed March 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1991) 159.

<sup>35</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1974) 133.

<sup>36</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1991) 159; Prückner (1968) 75.

<sup>37</sup> Prückner (1968) 154 n. 576, citing Schölchs (without ref.). While the *asafoetida* plant looks similar to the one in our relief, any further significance is unknown. (In late antiquity it was regarded as an aphrodisiac – rather surprisingly, in view of its unappealing smell when raw.)

<sup>38</sup> Prückner (1968) 154 n. 576 gives references.

I would like to finish up with a well-known kylix by the Codrus Painter, which shows a *theoxenia*, a feast of the gods.<sup>39</sup> On the exterior are depicted four pairs of gods (all with names inscribed): Poseidon and Amphitrite; Zeus and Hera; Ares and Aphrodite; and Dionysos and Ariadne. Hades and Persephone (labeled ‘Plouton’, ‘Persephratta’) occupy pride of place in the tondo. John Boardman notes that this is an unusual scene; as a general rule, gods sit or stand, and ‘it was only exceptional demi-gods who had much to do with mortals and mortal ways, like Dionysus, Hermes and Herakles who might be shown reclining’.<sup>40</sup> T. H. Carpenter takes his cue for the interpretation of the kylix from the one deity here who does commonly recline, Dionysos.<sup>41</sup> Carpenter shows that scenes which show Dionysos and Ariadne reclining evoke both marriage and eroticism, and argues that the imagery used on the Codrus Painter kylix, such as Amphitrite’s alabastron, Aphrodite’s pyxis, and Zeus touching Hera’s veil, similarly ‘allows each to be understood as a couple on its nuptial couch’. The *kline* is here elevated from symposiastic couch to nuptial couch. Each couple, moreover, is subtly different; Zeus’s gesture refers to the marriage itself; there is a nice irony in the fact that the fickle Aphrodite is the only woman who is standing, not yet seated next to her beloved, and Ares is the only god who is not holding his phiale, having put it down on the table in order to better deal with her. Carpenter notes the way in which Persephone’s feet dangle as she sits on the edge of Plouton’s couch, perhaps referring to her helplessness as his captive. However, she does not look unwilling to be there; her gesture is similar to that of Ariadne, as if she is reaching out to receive the phiale.

This leaves us with Plouton – name inscribed, this time – and Persephone in the tondo. Why this particular pair? On the one hand, Hades *is* the only other major god who is eligible to make a fifth couple (the others are either single – Demeter – chaste – Athena, Artemis – or playing the field – Apollo, Hermes. Hephaistos’ wife, of course, is already present). On the other hand, their placement in the tondo isolates them from the other figures and thus makes a stronger impression than the pairs on the outside – especially as their identity is not revealed until the drinker has polished off his wine and can see the tondo clearly. Tondo images are often used to surprise the viewer and make him reconsider his expectations, and that may be the case here.

Plouton’s cornucopia is noticeably empty here; this is not unique but it is unusual, and in the hands of this painter, serves as an ironic reminder that fertility is not part of this picture.<sup>42</sup> Without its overflowing leaves and fruit, it bears more than a passing resemblance to Dionysos’ *keras*. In fact, as Konrad Schauenburg has argued, in some pots it is hard to tell who is who, and whether we are looking at an empty cornucopia or a very large drinking horn.<sup>43</sup> The *keras* is no longer common, but the viewer would recognize the resonance, and be reminded that Dionysos himself is an ambivalent figure, whose wine and cult may lead to death as readily as ecstasy. The presentation of Plouton and Persephone in the tondo thus causes the viewer to reconsider the roles of the gods on the exterior, to realize that the pyxis and alabastron also have funerary connotations, and the *kline* can serve as a funerary couch.

<sup>39</sup> Attic red-figure kylix, Codrus Painter, 430-20 BC; London, BM E 82; *LIMC* Hades 44\*; Beazley Database 217212; images on the British Museum website.

<sup>40</sup> Boardman (1990) 24.

<sup>41</sup> Carpenter (1995).

<sup>42</sup> See Carpenter (1995) 162.

<sup>43</sup> Schauenburg (1953) 52.

In the Attic pots, then, as in the Lokrian *pinakes*, the god characterised by fertility may yet be defined by his status as ruler of the dead. To regard Plouton as *solely* a god of fertility risks omitting an important aspect of his character. Hades' wealth, from which he draws his epithet Plouton, is not only composed of the fertility drawn from the earth but also refers to the wealth of souls he holds underneath the earth. Wherever Plouton, or Hades, is, and whatever he does, he brings with him a faint but pervasive reminder of mortality.

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