

# HESPERIDES AND HEROES: A NOTE ON THE THREE-FIGURE RELIEFS

(PLATES 11-14)

THOUGH not a scrap of the original reliefs has been found, Thompson's attribution to the Altar of the Twelve Gods of the four famous three-figure reliefs known to us from Roman copies is one of the more important results of the Agora excavations for the history of Athenian sculpture in the late 5th century.<sup>1</sup> The dating and interpretation of these reliefs is also vitally related to the history of other monuments of the Agora. I should like, therefore, to suggest a modification of Thompson's views on these points.

Before Thompson's discovery that the dimensions of the reliefs admirably filled the spaces flanking the east and west entrances in the parapet surrounding the altar (Pl. 12, b), the originals had generally been attributed to a choregic monument. This was because two of the reliefs, the Orpheus and Peliad reliefs (Pl. 12, d, e), are notably tragic in their impact, including the elements of irony and reversal of fortune which we commonly associate with Attic tragedy. The two others, Herakles, Theseus and Peirithoos in the underworld (Pl. 12, a, c) and Herakles in the Garden of the Hesperides (Pl. 11, a-d), could also well be drawn from the subjects of tragedies performed in Athens.<sup>2</sup>

In order to interpret the last two in the same spirit as the first two, however, it was necessary to resort to the subtle language of literary interpretation rather than to the simpler language of art. No one could doubt, on looking at the Peliad with the

<sup>1</sup> "The Altar of Pity in the Athenian Agora," *Hesperia*, XXI, 1952, pp. 47-82. See *ibid.*, p. 60, note 35 for bibliography on the three-figure reliefs. To Götze's list of replicas of the Peliad relief, *Röm. Mitt.*, LIII, 1938, pp. 200-202, add the head of Medea in New York, Richter, *Catalogue*, p. 42, no. 62, pl. 54 a and the head of the central Peliad in Corinth, Johnson, *Corinth*, IX, p. 121, no. 246. This last, which is from a full-scale replica, is interesting because it is the first found in Greece, though all the copies are said to be in Pentelic marble. It was first published as a classical grave-relief but was recognized as Neo-Attic by Broneer, *Hesperia*, XX, 1951, p. 298, though he wrongly associated it with the maenads rather than with the three-figure reliefs.

Thompson's attribution of the reliefs to the altar was disputed by G. Zuntz, *Cl. et Med.*, XIV, 1953, pp. 71-85. R. E. Wycherley, *Cl. Quar.*, IV, 1954, pp. 143-150, accepts the attribution of the reliefs but demonstrates that the Altar of the Twelve Gods was certainly not called "Altar of Eleos" in the 5th century. He does not discuss the meaning of the reliefs. U. Hausmann, *Griechische Weihreliefs*, 1960, pp. 48-50, leaves it in doubt whether the reliefs belong to the altar, and is content to point out that they have characteristics of votive reliefs. W. Fuchs, *Die Vorbilder der neuattischen Reliefs*, 1959, p. 133, retains the attribution to a choregic monument, objecting to Thompson's interpretation of the reliefs "als Beispiele des Mitempfindens."

<sup>2</sup> Thompson points out, however, that no one has succeeded in establishing a direct connection between any of the four reliefs and any known tragedy (*op. cit.*, p. 70).

knife, that this is a moment of dark foreboding. No one could doubt, on looking at Orpheus and Eurydice, that this is an instant of irrevocable separation. The poses and the gestures of the figures by themselves tell this story. But in each of the other two reliefs the eye, unaided by research, sees only a peaceful grouping of three persons. Thompson himself seems to feel this difference, though he calls it only "apparent," when he says, "The presence of the seated figures, combined with the quiescence of the standing figures in the east panels, lends to the eastern pair something of the apparent tranquility which is repeatedly found in eastern pedimental groups; the feeling of movement and action is much more palpable in the western panels, as in the western pediments."<sup>3</sup>

H. Götze, in his attempt to find precisely parallel psychological dramas in all four reliefs, was forced to see in the Peirithoos and Hesperides reliefs moments of tragic parting. He therefore rejected Wilamowitz' interpretation of the former as the joint release of the two heroes according to a version that we have in the pseudo-Euripidean *Peirithoos*, plausibly attributed to Kritias.<sup>4</sup> This rejection was not based on the forms of the relief but simply on Götze's feeling that Wilamowitz' theory would deprive it of its tragic character. He was, in fact, moved by his interpretation to restore the head of Peirithoos turned toward Theseus (Pl. 12, c), though the preserved movement of the body suggests that it was turned toward Herakles. More important, perhaps, than the turn of the head is the fact that neither do Peirithoos and Theseus clasp hands nor does either of them make a gesture of the hand toward the other. It seems inconceivable that the artist who used the language of hands so eloquently in the Orpheus relief should let the hands be silent in another scene of parting. If there was a gesture it will have been Herakles who laid his hand on Peirithoos' shoulder.<sup>5</sup> This may be read as a liberating gesture, a signal to rise. Similarly the position of the seated man's legs on the Louvre relief and his holding out his staff in front of him may as well signify the act of rising as the frustrated wish to do so.

In the Hesperides relief an even larger portion of dubious content had to be read in, in order to wring from the harmony of the picture the desired note of tragedy. Here Götze relies on a supposed "version" of the story that was reconstructed from vase-paintings of the end of the 5th century B.C. by German scholarship of the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> According to this, Herakles does not wrest the apples himself from the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> *Röm. Mitt.*, LIII, 1938, p. 209, "Der Versuch v. Wilamowitz', das Relief auf die Tragödie des Kritias zu beziehen, nach der beide Freunde durch Herakles befreit werden, nimmt der Darstellung ihren besonderen, tragischen Sinn." See Wilamowitz, *Analecta Euripidea*, pp. 168-172. We do not know the date of the tragedy nor whether it was the only representation of this version of the myth.

<sup>5</sup> See Götze, *op. cit.*, p. 218. No evidence survives for the position of Herakles' hand, but Petersen suggested that it was on Peirithoos' shoulder and Götze follows this in his reconstruction.

<sup>6</sup> References given by Thompson, *Hesperia*, XVIII, 1949, p. 250.

dragon nor does he hold the heavens on his shoulders while Atlas gets them for him, but, charming the Hesperides with love as Jason charmed Medea, he lets the girls drug the serpent and bring the apples to him. Extrapolating from this, Götze imagines a painful scene of parting in which the love-struck maidens reluctantly hand over the apples knowing that by this generosity they will lose their hero.<sup>7</sup> There is no hint of this parting, however, in any of the vase-paintings, and it seems most unlikely that any such sad story existed.

The London hydria of the Meidias Painter (Pl. 13), having one of the richest Hesperides scenes of the late 5th century, is one of the most indicative of the meaning of such scenes.<sup>8</sup> Here Herakles sits at ease in the garden while two of the sisters pluck apples from the tree under the eye of a complacent serpent and another stands before Herakles, holding, to be sure, an apple in her hand but seeming to offer rather herself than the apple to the hero, lifting a corner of her veil in a bride's gesture. Herakles appears appropriately responsive. She is named Lipara,<sup>9</sup> and the other two are Asterope and Chrysothemis, all bright names, suggesting the glow of youth and happiness that fills the garden. Beyond sits Hygieia,<sup>10</sup> and after her follow without a break around the body of the vase other heroes and women. Some of the heroes are Argonauts and Medea is among the women (she too decked out like a bride), but there are also four of the Athenian Eponymous Heroes: Akamas, Antiochos, Hippothon and Oineus. This calls to mind a lekanis lid in Naples on which Pandion and Antiochos appear amid a bevy of beauties who are busy with wreath, libation, incense and offerings (Pl. 11, e). Of this Beazley has rightly said, "The subject of the Naples

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 246-247. Later, *Jahrb.*, LXIII-LXIV, 1948-1949, pp. 91-99, he sharpened this interpretation still further by identifying the figure behind Herakles as Hera, to whom Herakles must hand the apples which the Hesperid is about to give him. He points out that the left-hand figure in each relief represents the fate which awaits the right-hand figure, who is, according to him, faced with a momentous decision which will seal this fate. So the Hesperid, flinching before the sorrow of parting, hesitates to hand over the apples as the Peliad hesitates to use the knife. It should be noted that Götze misreads a gesture here, when he says that the Hesperid is in the same pose of deliberation and foreboding as the Peliad. The essence of that attitude, the propping of the head on a hand whose elbow is in turn propped on the other hand or arm, is missing in the Hesperid, whose pose is of simple hesitation. We may still recognize, however, without accepting Götze's theory of a moment of tragic decision in each relief, the truth of his observation that in each relief the left-hand figure is the more static, the right-hand one the more dynamic element, the one signifying end and the other process.

<sup>8</sup> *A.R.V.*, p. 831, no. 1. Furtwängler-Reichhold, pls. 8-9. The hydria is probably to be dated between 420 and 410 B.C.

<sup>9</sup> The impression that Lipara is a bride is reinforced by comparing this scene to that on the back of the Meidias Painter's Mousaios hydria in New York (Pl. 14, a). Here Herakles sits before a figure whose dress is almost identical with Lipara's. Her pose differs only in the fact that she holds no apples and so is free to lift the veil with both hands. She is labelled Deianeira (Richter, *A.J.A.*, XLIII, 1939, pp. 1-6, fig. 2; *A.R.V.*, p. 832, no. 6. Becatti, *Meidias*, pl. 12).

<sup>10</sup> Probably not Athena Hygieia, as Thompson tentatively suggests (*Hesperia*, XVIII, 1949, p. 254), but Hygieia herself, the natural companion of eternal youth.

vase is not 'ephebes and courtesans' but Pandion and Antiochos, heroes of the tribes, in glory and joy."<sup>11</sup> We begin to see the visit of Herakles and the Argonauts to the island of the Hesperides on the Meidias hydria not as a transitory stage on a legendary journey, for the Eponymous Heroes had no such legend, but as the permanent dwelling of the heroes in the Islands of the Blest.

Herakles, sitting in the Garden while the apples of eternal life and youth are brought to him and a Hesperid comes to him as a bride, is in his final state of bliss. It is simply another, less solemn and less theological, vision of the apotheosis and the marriage with Hebe. It is not, I should imagine, at all a literary version but one that was born, lived and died in the fragile semi-allegorical medium of post-Periklean art. The symbolisms of Aphrodite and of Dionysos become inextricably mingled with the story,<sup>12</sup> and there is no sharp line drawn between the quasi-political allegory of the glorification of heroes and the funerary symbolism of private Athenians. So we find an apple-picking scene on a private grave monument, a recently discovered lekythos-base in the Athens National Museum.<sup>13</sup> A youth plucks apples from a tree and a girl holds them in a fold of her dress as the Hesperid behind Herakles holds them on the three-figure relief. This is surely a symbol of the Elysian Fields, but the resemblance of the maiden to our Hesperid makes us feel that no real distinction is drawn between Elysium and the Garden of the Hesperides.<sup>14</sup> That this monument is directly influenced by the monument in the Agora is shown by the figure of Hermes Psychopompos on the side of the base. He is patently derived from the Hermes of the Orpheus relief.<sup>15</sup>

So it seems clear that the three-figure relief represents Herakles "in glory and joy" and that no sad parting or dire decision is imminent either for him or for the Hesperides. Since the Hesperides themselves are mere symbols of the gifts the apples embody, they cannot be actors in a human drama. Their abstract, interchangeable

<sup>11</sup> *A.J.A.*, XXXIX, 1935, p. 487. *A.R.V.*, p. 833, no. 12. Nicole, *Meidias*, p. 100, fig. 21.

<sup>12</sup> On 4th century vases Eros sometimes plucks the apples, e.g. the Kerch hydria in London from Cyrene (Pl. 14, c), Schefold, *Kertscher Vasen*, pl. 7, a. Here he is assisted by a Hesperid who looks so much like Aphrodite that we might as well call her Aphrodite. On the Kerch hydria by the Hesperides Painter in New York (Pl. 14, d), *ibid.*, pl. 11, as Schefold points out on p. 9, the Hesperides are shown as maenads and the scene characterized as a sanctuary of Dionysos by krater and boukrania. For a good general evaluation of Hesperides scenes on 4th century vases, see Metzger, *Les représentations dans la céramique attique du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 204-210.

<sup>13</sup> *B.C.H.*, LXXXV, 1961, p. 604, fig. 4 (right). The apple-picking scene is unpublished.

<sup>14</sup> On the *καρπολογία* as a representation of Elysium see especially B. Neutsch, *Röm. Mitt.*, LX-LXI, 1953-54, pp. 62-74. The principal difference between the private funerary symbolism and the Herakles symbolism seems to be that in the private scenes the deceased plucks the fruit or flowers and gives them to a goddess (Persephone or a Hesperid) and there is no immortal marriage, whereas in the Herakles scenes the marriage takes the center of the stage. Herakles sits and receives the bride, and the apples are plucked for him.

<sup>15</sup> The lekythos of Myrrhine is another example of such direct influence (see Thompson, *Hesperia*, XXI, 1952, p. 70, note 58). The lekythos is now exhibited in the Athens National Museum (*B.C.H.*, LXXXV, 1961, p. 605, fig. 5).

names are a symptom of their impersonality. If they are distinguished from one another in the pictures, this does not make of them separate characters but only separate aspects of the gift of immortality. The apple-pickers are not jealous of the bride, nor does she fear the sequel of their gift. In the marble relief, one Hesperid stands behind Herakles holding the apples in her dress. Whether or not the tree was shown in the relief,<sup>16</sup> her pose signifies the *καρπολογία*,<sup>17</sup> and her stately form and posture, which led Götze to think that she might be Hera rather than a Hesperid, make us feel the permanence of the good that she holds. At the same time the fragile intensity of the transitory joys here made permanent is conveyed in the youthful Hesperid who approaches Herakles. Her hesitancy does not spring from inner conflict but from simple modesty. It is the sign of her youth and freshness. This clear picture-language can almost dispense with names, but if we wanted to pin down its meaning with words we might almost say that these two Hesperides are *named* Hera and Hebe.

The reliefs of the Altar of the Twelve Gods are linked, then, not so much by a common compassion for reversals of human fortune as by a common theme of the quest for eternal good. The simple folk who rely on primitive witchcraft to renew the single body and the Shaman who tries to bring back the single soul from Hades are alike doomed to failure. It is the heroes who have established order among mankind, and so assured true honors for the gods,<sup>18</sup> who have won their way, for themselves and their people, out of the darkness of death into undying light. Without probing too deeply into the difficult question of exactly what the Twelve Gods meant to Athenians of the late 5th century, we may still feel that this subject was appropriate to their altar in the Agora. The Twelve Gods must have stood for much the same thing as the simpler phrase "the gods" which we meet so much in the literature of the time. The harmony of the well-governed city is under their care, and its achievement and well-being are symbolized by the labors and rewards of the heroes.

<sup>16</sup> Amelung, *78th Berlin Winckelmannsprogramm*, p. 6, suggests that since the tree does not appear in the Leningrad relief, it was probably not shown in the original. Götze, *Röm. Mitt.*, LIII, 1938, p. 222, follows him. Thompson, *Hesperia*, XXI, 1952, p. 61, note 36, prefers to reserve judgment.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the pose and its implications are retained in the scene on a pelike in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Pl. 14, b), though Herakles is pictured as just arrived in the garden and no apples have yet been plucked (*Hesperia*, XVIII, 1949, pl. 62, 2; Richter and Hall, no. 166, pl. 163; Metzger, *Representations*, pl. 27, 2). Again we have two Hesperides, one characterized as the apple-picker by her gesture of lifting the overfall with both hands, the other holding out her veil and turning toward Herakles, an Aphrodite-like figure in her lushness and her pose. Her name is Pasithea.

<sup>18</sup> Compare Euripides, *Herc. Fur.*, 851-853:

ἄβατον δὲ χώραν καὶ θάλασσαν ἀγρίαν  
ἐξημερώσας, θεῶν ἀνέστησεν μόνος  
τιμὰς πιτνούσας ἀνοσίῳ ἀνδρῶν ὕπο.

One begins to feel that the new enclosure for the Altar of the Twelve Gods and the enclosure of the Eponymous Heroes are joined by something deeper than just the similar technique of their sills and parapet posts.<sup>19</sup> The ideal of the heroes which they embody is the same. A study of the tribal dedications in Athens suggests that the Eponymous Heroes outside the Agora tended to keep the ancient character of personal ancestral heroes in spite of the artificial selection of the heroes and the tribes under Kleisthenes. Each tribe took for the center of its tribal activities a shrine which was connected either with the actual supposed grave of the hero or with a place sacred to a member of his family.<sup>20</sup> The creation of the group of statues in the Agora presented the heroes all together on a more abstract plane, and this enclosure was a center for announcements which concerned the whole citizen body: drafts of new laws, lists for military service, lists of ephebes, and the like.<sup>21</sup> The company of the Eponymous Heroes stood for the body of Athenian citizens, and Theseus summed up the Athenian heroes as Herakles summed up the heroes of all Greece.

Though there were statues of the Athenian Eponymoi at Delphi and Samos and no doubt statues of at least some of the heroes in their individual sanctuaries, it seems to have been only after the establishment of the precinct in the Agora that we find these heroes appearing as heroes (that is, not simply as participants in their own myths) on Attic vases. These occur only in the last three decades of the 5th century.<sup>22</sup> The first certain reference to the statues in the Agora is in Aristophanes' *Peace*, of 421 B.C.,<sup>23</sup> and it seems likely that the statues were set up some time in the twenties. For the altar, the style of the reliefs would suggest a date around 420-410 B.C.<sup>24</sup> It may have been one of the monuments executed during the Peace of Nikias. Its Herakles panel reflects the same Utopian spirit that Aristophanes satirized in the *Birds* in 415 B.C. The wedding of the hero of the *Birds* to a beautiful abstraction suggests that some such image had been prominent in art or literature of the years preceding.

Thompson now believes that the pediments and akroteria of the Hephaisteion were also executed in this period, at the same time with the cult statues of the

<sup>19</sup> On the similarity see Thompson, *Hesperia*, XXI, 1952, pp. 58-59.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Aiantis used the Eurysakeion, Wycherley, *Agora*, III, pp. 92-93 and Antiochis the Herakleion at Kynosarges, *S.E.G.*, III, p. 26, nos. 115, 116, 117; Karouzos, *Δελτίον*, VIII, 1923, pp. 83-99, nos. 1-2, 4.

<sup>21</sup> For the ancient references, see Wycherley, *Agora*, III, pp. 85-90.

<sup>22</sup> Beazley, *A.J.A.*, XXXIX, 1935, p. 487: "All these representations of tribal heroes belong to the last twenty-five or thirty years of the fifth century."

<sup>23</sup> *Peace*, 1183-4; Wycherley, *op. cit.*, p. 86, no. 232.

<sup>24</sup> This date has been suggested by various scholars and accords with the stylistic parallels adduced by Thompson himself, *Hesperia*, XXI, 1952, p. 71. When we realize that the spirit of the Herakles relief is triumphant rather than tragic there remains no motive for associating the reliefs with the Syracusan disaster of 413 B.C. as Thompson had proposed, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-74.

temple.<sup>25</sup> If so, the older, formal version of the Apotheosis of Herakles as a reception into Olympos which was no doubt planned in the Parthenon period may have been deliberately linked to the new conception by the addition of akroteria in the form of Hesperides and by the insertion of the tree of the golden apples into the pediment, where it would have been not so much a misplaced topographical prop as a symbol of the hero's immortality.

If one looked over the Agora in the years around 415 B.C., he would find himself surrounded by a hierarchy of heroes, of whom the oldest as a monument, Harmodios and Aristogeiton, were the youngest as heroes and the closest to the living Athenians. The process by which Herakles, the most Olympian of the heroes, was moved down to the more accessible paradise, the Islands of the Blest, where the skolion had long ago placed Harmodios, forged a continuous chain between all these heroes. It was not a long step from this to the time in the early 4th century when the last link was added to the chain and portrait statues of the greatest living Athenians were for the first time set up in the Agora.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *A.J.A.*, LXVI, 1962, p. 344, note 22.

<sup>26</sup> See Wycherley, *op. cit.*, p. 207 and p. 94, no. 261. Demosthenes (XX, *Leptines*, 70) says that Konon was the first after Harmodios and Aristogeiton to receive a bronze statue from the Athenians. After that it gradually became common.





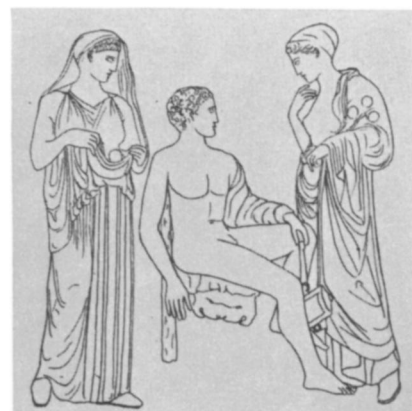
a. Herakles and Hesperid. Leningrad, Hermitage



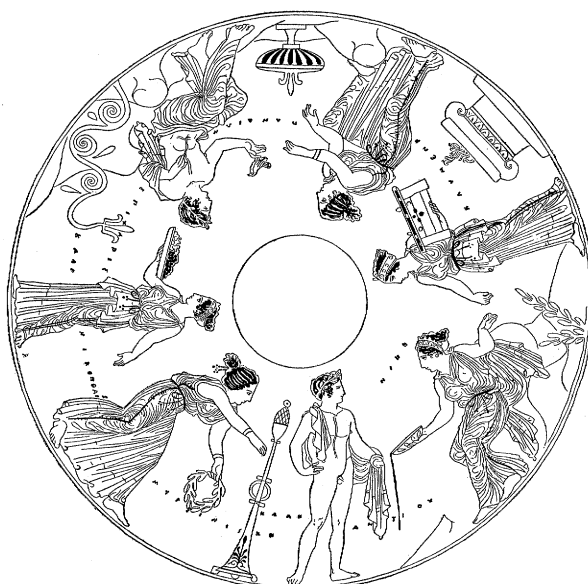
b. Hesperid. New York, Metropolitan Museum



c. Herakles and Hesperides. Villa Albani

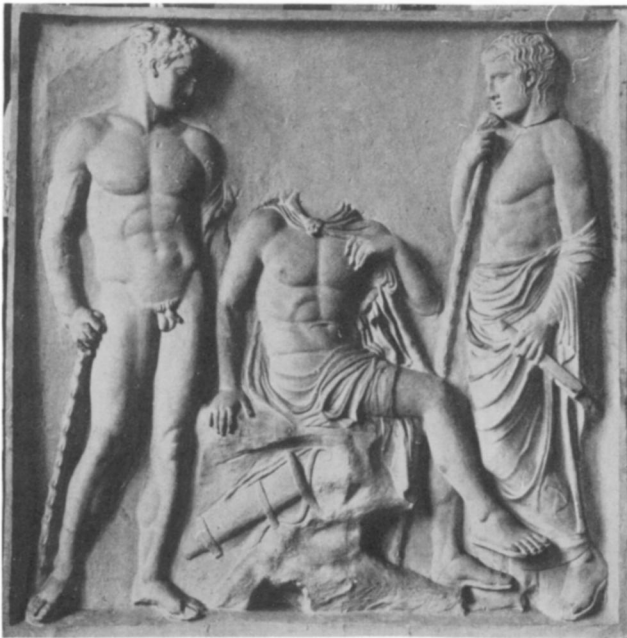


d. Hesperides Relief Restored (Götze)

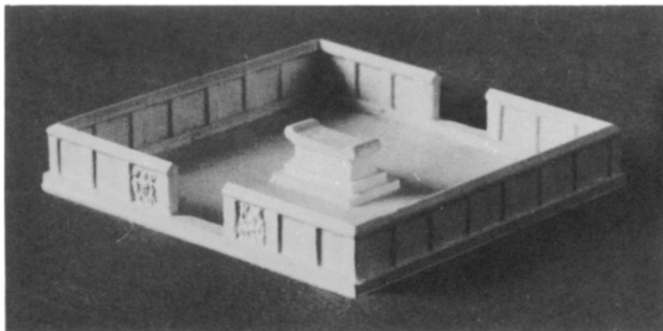


e. Antiochos and Pandion. Meidias Painter, Naples



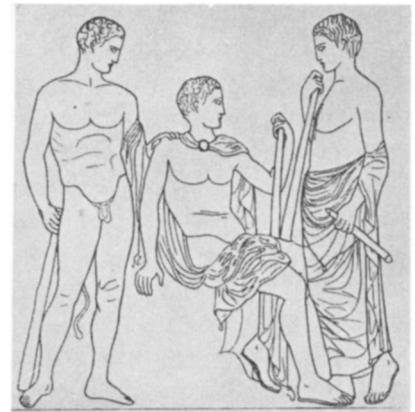


a. Peirithoos Reliefs. Torlonia (with head of Theseus in Berlin) and Louvre

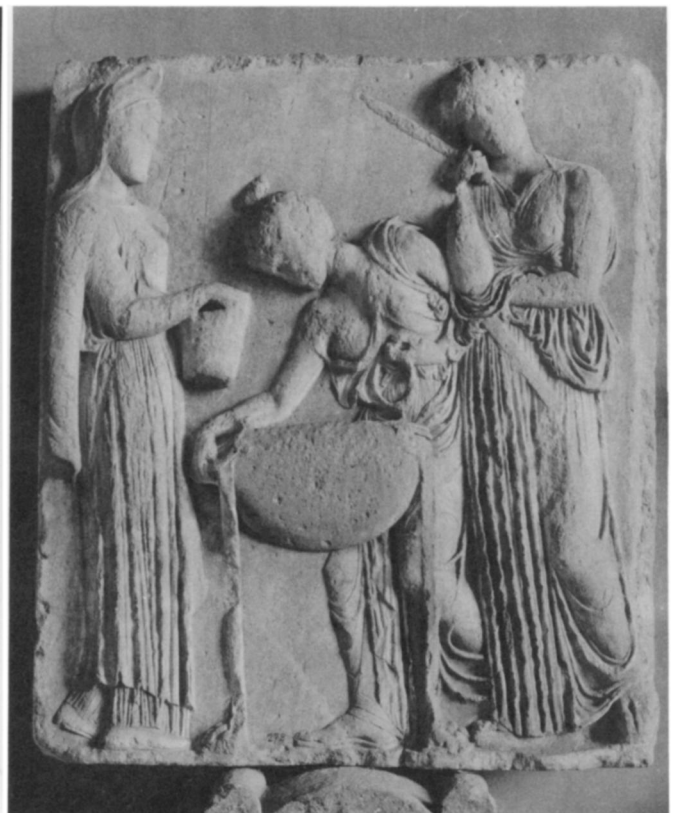


b. Altar of the Twelve Gods. Second Period. Model

c. Peirithoos Relief Restored (Götze)



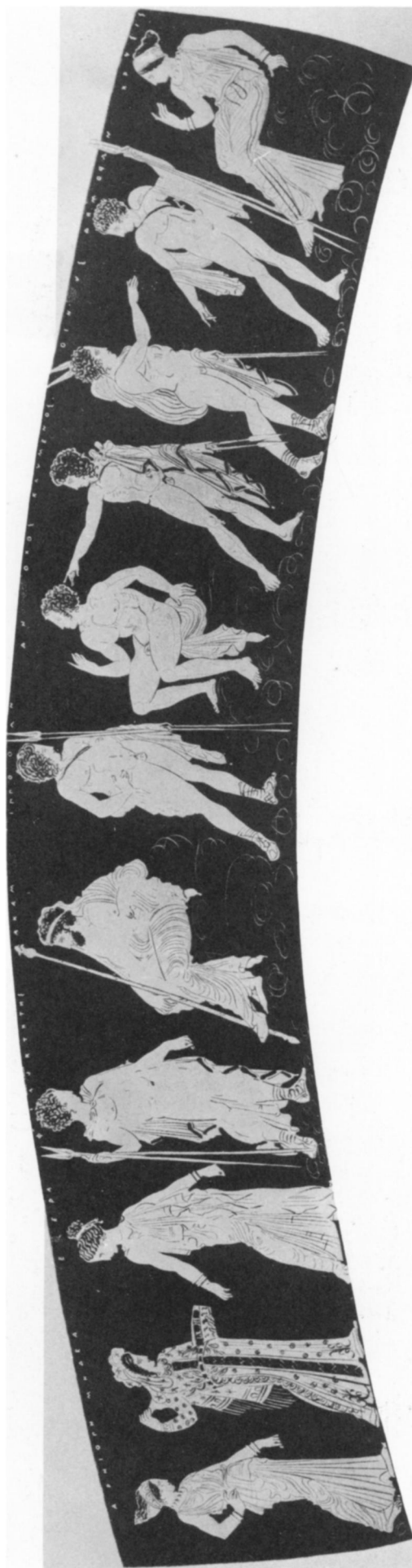
d. Orpheus Relief. Naples



e. Peliad Relief. Lateran



a. Herakles in the Garden of the Hesperides. Hydria by Meidias Painter. London. Obverse



b. Argonauts and Eponymous Heroes in the Garden of the Hesperides. Reverse of a.

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a. Herakles and Deianeira. Pelike by the Meidias Painter. New York, Metropolitan Museum



b. Herakles and Hesperides. Pelike. New York, Metropolitan Museum



c. Herakles, Hesperides and Eros. Hydria in London from Cyrene



d. Herakles, Hesperides and Nike in Sanctuary of Dionysos. New York, Metropolitan Museum