

Vayos LIAPIS

Choes, Anthesteria, and the Dead: A Re-Appraisal

It is a vexed question whether the Choes, second day of the Athenian Anthesteria festival, was (as suggested by late sources) a ‘polluted day’, with the souls of the dead ascending from Hades, or whether it was in actuality a thoroughly enjoyable occasion, as evinced in *Ar. Ach.* 959ff. My paper will attempt to throw some light on this vexed question by means of a fresh interpretation of the iconography of the vases known as choes, in combination with the so-called ‘Orphic’ golden plates.

On purely thematic criteria, the images found on choes vases can be arranged into three groups: (a) small children and related items (pets, toys, amulets); (b) items associated with feasting or sports; (c) items associated with Dionysiac cult. Starting with group (c), Hamilton’s statistics show that out of a total of 804 choes no fewer than 188 items (23.4%) can be identified as featuring Dionysiac themes. This percentage is significantly raised to 32% if we limit our sample to *burial* choes: this is hardly surprising, since the close association between Dionysus and Hades, already heralded in Heraclitus fr. 50 Marcovich, has more recently been corroborated by such archaeological finds as a bone tablet from Olbia, and two gold plates from Pelinna. The images of group (b) may also have chthonic associations, pointing to the belief that the Underworld provides, for special dead, amenities including feasting, music, and games. Finally, as regards our iconographic group (a), a 15.5% of the surviving small choes depict food, remarkably in the form of *cakes*; and out of a total of 562 vases that depict children, 89 items (i.e. 15.3%) show children in combination with cakes. Cakes being usual funerary offerings, the question suggests itself whether the children depicted on the choes vases may represent souls of the dead. In that case, the depictions of cakes could perhaps be meant as surrogate offerings to the dead, in order to prevent them from coming up from Hades as *revenants*, or could represent, wishfully, the blessed afterlife of beloved dead.

For this question to be answered, the following considerations will be taken into account. In classical art the souls of the departed are sometimes depicted as (winged) miniature human beings — or as babies (the distinction is not easy to make). Moreover, several gold plates testify, or allude, to the belief that death, at least for initiates, was a process of *regeneration*. The prototype for the idea of the *mystes*’ regeneration is, of course, the myth of the baby Dionysus, who was reborn from his rescued heart: one of the blessings awaiting the *mystes* according to the Pelinna text is the *drinking of wine*, while both in the Pelinna and in the Hipponion lamellae Bacchus is instrumental in the post-mortem absolution of the defunct *mystes*. These considerations may permit us to combine the three thematic groups of images identified above into a single, coherent picture: the babies depicted on choes vases represent rejuvenated or re-born souls, perhaps of defunct *mystai*, whose transition to their new life in the Underworld is presided over by Dionysus (hence the Dionysiac themes on the choes); the *mystai* will also rightfully participate in the Underworld ‘symposium of the holy’ (hence the sympotic themes on the choes).