

# Possible Ancient Prototypes for the Cyprus Plates

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ON ONE of the seventh century<sup>1</sup> silver plates from Cyprus is depicted David slaying the lion (PLATE 3). David rests his left knee on the lion's back and braces himself with his right leg. He grasps the lion's ear with his left hand and raises a stick in his right. Scholars have been puzzled about the ancient model for this plate, as the type of Heracles and the Nemean lion on which the design ought to have been based is generally depicted in a very different way. In Graeco-Roman art one pose had become canonical—Heracles choking the lion with both hands.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have tried to explain the deviation of the design on the Cyprus plate from its presumed prototype in various ways. John Beckwith suggests a derivation from the type of Mithra *tauroctonos*.<sup>3</sup> Charles Morey suggests the type of Heracles and the stag as the model,<sup>4</sup> Hugo Buchthal either Heracles and the stag or Heracles and the bull.<sup>5</sup> Weitzmann argues that the change from the usual pose represents the artist's reworking of a more spread-out composition in order to fit the scene into a circle.<sup>6</sup> The peculiarity of the pose even led Wilpert to suppose that the plate is a forgery based on the pose of Mithra.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the fact that the beast involved is not a lion, each of these suggested prototypes differs in some significant way from the pose of David on the plate. In an overwhelming majority of Mithraic sculptures, Mithra does not grasp the horn or the ear of the bull, but

<sup>1</sup> For the date of the plate, see Erika Cruikshank Dodd, *Byzantine Silver Stamps* (DOSudies VII, Washington 1961) 189.

<sup>2</sup> Roscher, *Lexicon* I.2 (1886–90) 2223, 2243 s.v. HERAKLES. The predominance of this type is shown by Graeco-Roman coins: Reinhold Bräuer, "Die Heraklestaten auf antiken Münzen," *ZfN* 28 (1910) 38–48. See also the reliefs on sarcophagi: Carl Robert, *Die antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs* III (Berlin 1897) pls. 31–38.

<sup>3</sup> John Beckwith, *The Art of Constantinople* (London 1961) 53.

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Morey, *Early Christian Art* (Princeton 1953) 97.

<sup>5</sup> Hugo Buchthal, *The Miniatures of the Paris Psalter* (London 1938) 17.

<sup>6</sup> *JWalt* 10 (1947) 39–40.

<sup>7</sup> J. Wilpert, "Early Christian Sculpture: its Restoration and its Modern Manufacture," *ArtB* 9 (1926) 117.

pulls the bull's head back by the muzzle.<sup>8</sup> Generally he plunges the dagger into the bull's throat; only exceptionally does he raise the dagger in his right hand.<sup>9</sup>

The type of Heracles and the stag which appeared as early as the beginning of the fifth century B.C. in the metopes of the Athenian treasury at Delphi and of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia remains almost constant throughout Greek and Roman art. Heracles kneels on the stag's back and grasps the antlers with both hands.<sup>10</sup> Only on one coin does a variant appear, in which Heracles grasps the antlers with one hand and raises a club in the other.<sup>11</sup> This isolated instance may be accepted as a die cutter's invention.

The type of Heracles and the bull is less fixed. Of the two major types, the one generally used on frieze sarcophagi, in which Heracles runs alongside the bull and grasps his horn or muzzle, may be dismissed as a possible prototype for the David scene.<sup>12</sup> On the column sarcophagi Heracles usually kneels on the bull's back, a position influenced by the desire for parallelism with the deer slaying on the same sarcophagi.<sup>13</sup> The position of the arms varies. On a sarcophagus in the Villa Borghese, Heracles grasps the bull's horn with his right hand, while his left hand is lowered.<sup>14</sup> On a sarcophagus in the Museo Torlonia, Heracles raises his club in his right hand and holds his left hand behind him.<sup>15</sup> In neither case, then, does he take a position like that of David on the plate.

In various parts of the periphery of the Roman Empire appears an odd type of Heracles kneeling on the lion's back and raising his club. One of these is a clumsy relief from Dura Europos on the Euphrates (PLATE 4, figure 1). Heracles kneels on the lion's back, raising the club behind his head with his right hand and grasping the top of the lion's

<sup>8</sup> M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* I (The Hague 1960) fig. 14, 15, 26, 27 *et passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Statue in Ostia by Krition of Athens: *ibid.*, mon. 230, fig. 69; terracotta plaque from Panticapaeum: *ibid.*, mon. 11, fig. 2; relief from Gaganica (Thrace): *ibid.*, II, mon. 2327, fig. 646.

<sup>10</sup> Roscher, *Lexicon* I.2 (1886-90) 2224, 2243 s.v. HERAKLES. Bräuer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 57-8. Robert, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2), pls. 29-34, 37, 38. Elaine Loeffler, "Lysippos' Labors of Herakles," *Marsyas* 6 (1950-53) 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Bräuer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 58 pl. III.2.

<sup>12</sup> Loeffler, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 21 pl. v.1; Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de reliefs grecs et romains* III (Paris 1912) pl. 30 no. 2; pl. 29 no. 2; pl. 51 no. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Loeffler, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 21; Marion Lawrence, "The Velletri Sarcophagus," *AJA* 69 (1965) 215.

<sup>14</sup> Reinach, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) pl. 169 no. 2; Loeffler, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) pl. IV.2.

<sup>15</sup> Reinach, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) pl. 340 no. 3.



DAVID SLAYING THE LION: BYZANTINE SILVER PLATE FROM CYPRUS  
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NO. 17.190.394  
(Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917; diam. 5½ in.)



*Figure 1. Relief from Dura Europos  
(photograph courtesy of  
Dura Publication Fund)*



*Figure 2. Stele from Ghorfa, Tunisia  
(photograph courtesy of  
Musée du Bardo, Tunis)*

PROVINCIAL RELIEFS SHOWING HERACLES SLAYING THE NEMEAN LION

head with his left hand. His head and torso are frontal; his left leg is bent to follow the curve of the lion's back, while his right foot rests on the base of the tail. Heracles wears a Parthian aureole hairdo.<sup>16</sup> The clumsy style of the relief clearly indicates a local sculptor. The relief probably dates to the late second or early third century.

There is nothing in the local tradition to explain the appearance of this odd pose at Dura. The suggestion of influence from Mithraic iconography is difficult in view of the fact that in the Mithraeum at Dura, Mithra as usual grasps the bull's muzzle with his left hand and plunges the dagger into its throat.<sup>17</sup> In several reliefs at Dura, Heracles stands frontally and raises his club against a rampant lion.<sup>18</sup> It is possible, then, that in the relief under discussion the artist has conflated the type of Heracles and the lion usual at Dura with the frontal kneeling pose of Mithra *tauroctonos*.

A closely similar type occurs on the reverse of two coins of the city of Blaundus on the Lydian-Phrygian border, one struck under Caracalla and the other under Trebonianus Gallus. Heracles plants his left knee on the lion's back and braces himself with his right leg. He grasps the lion's mane with his left hand and raises the club in his right hand. Illogically, the lion skin hangs over his left arm.<sup>19</sup> The little that is known about Blaundus does nothing to explain the appearance of an odd type on its coins.<sup>20</sup> Konrad Kraft's work on the Greek imperial coins has shown so many obverse die links from town to town that it has become apparent that the coins were struck either at a central mint city or at a traveling mint.<sup>21</sup> Therefore it is impossible to ascertain whether the people of Blaundus asked a die cutter to copy a type they had in the city or simply asked for Heracles killing the lion. It is perhaps more logical to attribute the odd type to the wishes

<sup>16</sup> On this hairdo see Clark Hopkins in M. I. Rostovtzeff, ed., *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Preliminary Report of the Fifth Season* (New Haven 1934) 86–8.

<sup>17</sup> M. J. Vermaseren, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) mon. 37, 40, fig. 14–15; M. I. Rostovtzeff, F. E. Brown and C. B. Welles, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Preliminary Report of Seventh and Eighth Seasons* (New Haven 1939) 92–101.

<sup>18</sup> P. V. C. Baur and M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Preliminary Report of First Season* (New Haven 1929) 23–4, 75–7, pl. iv.3; *idem*, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Preliminary Report of Third Season* (New Haven 1932) 88–100, pl. xi.2; M. I. Rostovtzeff *et al.*, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Preliminary Report of the Ninth Season I* (New Haven 1944) 75, 159, pl. xv.1.

<sup>19</sup> Barclay V. Head, *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Lydia* (BM, London 1901) 54 no. 81; 57 no. 90.

<sup>20</sup> *RE* 3 (1899) 560 s.v. BLAUNDOS.

<sup>21</sup> Work in progress. I am indebted to T. V. Buttrey for this information.

of the people of the city, but the possibility of a die cutter's invention cannot be excluded. Thus, the coin cannot help explain the origin of the type.

Judging from the description, the group which crowned the Arch of Caracalla at Thasos was similar, though the position of the legs differs slightly. "C'est un lutteur étouffant un fauve. Le genou droit repose bien en terre, mais le genou gauche écrase le corps de l'animal, le bras gauche encercle sa tête, au-dessus de laquelle la main droite brandit la massue."<sup>22</sup> Here probably the local type developed during the archaic period, Heracles as a kneeling archer, influenced the choice of this unconventional pose. Marcel Launey suggests an ultimately Anatolian, perhaps Lydian, origin for the Thasian Heracles.<sup>23</sup>

The fourth example, which is more dubious, occurs on one of the curious stelai from Ghorfa in Tunisia. The interpretation of these stelai is not clear on all points, but they appear to have been dedicated to Dea Caelestis.<sup>24</sup> On one of them Heracles killing the Nemean lion is substituted for the usual sacrifice scene in the lower register<sup>25</sup> (PLATE 4, figure 2). Heracles is presented with his head and torso frontal, his legs in profile and widely spread out. With his left hand he clutches the mane of the lion who lies behind him; in his right hand he raises a club. The complete illogicality of the pose of Heracles makes interpretation difficult. It is possible that Heracles is to be understood as running along in front of the lion, as is usual in combats with the bull and with the horses of Diomedes.<sup>26</sup> In these combat scenes, however, the animals are running, not lying down. It seems more plausible, therefore, to assume that Heracles is to be understood as kneeling on the lion's back, in a pose somewhat like that on the coin from Blandus.

None of the authors who have discussed this stele mention the peculiarity of the pose of Heracles. There seems to be nothing in the iconography of Heracles in Africa which would explain this deviation from the norm. As far as I know, Melqart, the Tyrian god transplanted

<sup>22</sup> Marcel Launey, *Études thasiennes* I (Paris 1944) 142. The group is now lost.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* 142-3.

<sup>24</sup> C. Gilbert Picard, *Catalogue du Musée Alaoui*, n.s. Collections puniques, I (n.d.) 262-5; G. Charles-Picard, *Les religions de l'Afrique antique* (Paris 1954) 111-4.

<sup>25</sup> C. Gilbert Picard, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.24) 270, Cb 971, pl. 106; G. Charles-Picard, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.24) 127-8; C. and G. Charles-Picard, "Hercule et Melqart," *Hommages à Jean Bayet*, ed. M. Renard and R. Schilling (*CollLatomus* 70, Brussels 1964) 571 nn.1 and 2.

<sup>26</sup> On the bull see *supra* n.12; for the horses, see e.g., Frank Brommer, *Herakles* (Munich 1953) pl. 1.8, pl. II.

to Carthage, never appears in this pose.<sup>27</sup> In any case, Charles-Picard points out that in spite of the assimilation of Heracles to Melqart, the cult of Heracles in Africa seems to have had no peculiarity worthy of mention.<sup>28</sup>

In only one of these cases, then, is there firm evidence in the local tradition to explain the appearance of a pose which deviates so strongly from the Graeco-Roman norm. It is possible that in all cases the peculiarity of the pose is the result of the confusion of an individual—admittedly clumsy—sculptor, unfamiliar with the tradition, who conflated the lion slaying with the killing of the deer or with a more general type of a deity slaying a victim.<sup>29</sup> Possibly, however, the appearance of the type in such widely separated parts of the Empire indicates a more widespread existence of the type than appears from the present evidence.

While it would be absurd to suggest any of these clumsy works as a direct source for the Cyprus plate, their existence does suggest the possibility that the Cyprus plate might have been modelled directly on an antique prototype which showed Heracles and the lion in this unusual pose.

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April, 1967

<sup>27</sup> On the iconography of Melqart, see René Dussaud, "Melqart," *Syria* 25 (1946–48) 205–30.

<sup>28</sup> G. Charles-Picard, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.24) 127–8.

<sup>29</sup> On groups of deities slaying a victim, see Ernest Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain* (BEFAR 183, Paris 1955) 169–76.