

Euripides' *Erechtheus* and the Erechtheion

Christoph W. Clairmont

IN AN ARTICLE recently published in this journal, W. M. Calder III argues convincingly that Euripides' *Erechtheus* was first produced in the City Dionysia in the year 422 B.C.¹ Only T. B. L. Webster, as far as I can see, also suggested this date, but he does not give his reasons.² Calder adduces besides the main argument (a reference in Plutarch, *Nicias* 9.5) several *termini ante*, namely Aristophanic comedies dating from 411, and at least one *terminus post*, the golden Gorgo on the shield of Athena Parthenos, dedicated in 438/7 B.C.

With regard to the dating of the play to 422 B.C., Calder thought that "some contemporary historical event . . . suggested the subject matter of the tragedy to Euripides." In this connection he discussed the date of construction of that building on the Athenian Acropolis which is commonly known to us as the Erechtheion.³ We should like to examine in the first part of this essay the question whether Calder's and Austin's belief concerning the source of inspiration for *Erechtheus* is likely. In the second part we should like to consider again from a new point of view the representation of an early South-Italiote pelike (PLATES 4 and 5) which has come to light recently in Heraclea. The connection between the story depicted on the vase and Euripides' *Erechtheus* has been recognized by archaeologists, but we believe that

¹ "The date of Euripides' *Erechtheus*," *GRBS* 10 (1969) 147-56 [hereafter cited CALDER]. Following a Latin literary convention the author spells throughout 'Erechtheus', but adheres to the spelling 'Erechtheion' for the building on the Acropolis. For the new frt. of *Erechtheus* see C. Austin in *Recherches de Papyrologie* 4 (1967) 11-69 [hereafter cited AUSTIN, *Recherches*]; *idem*, *Nova fragmenta Euripidea* (*Kleine Texte* 187, Berlin 1968) 22-40. See also J. C. Kamerbeek, "Remarques sur les fragments de l'Erechthée d'Euripide," *Mnemosyne* 23 (1970) 113-26.

² T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London 1967) 127.

³ Calder 154. Austin, *Recherches* 17, intimated the following: "N'est-il pas légitime de penser que cette magnifique entreprise"—the building of the Erechtheion—"peut avoir inspiré au poète l'idée de mettre sur la scène une légende à laquelle aucun autre poète n'avait auparavant consacré de drame?"

the interpretation hitherto proposed for the reverse side of the pelike can be improved.

I

For the end of the fifth century B.C. proof is lacking that a building on the Acropolis of Athens was named the Erechtheion. Calder himself, realizing the difficulty which arises from this fact for his contention, refers to Paton, who said that the designation is first "established for the third century B.C." and occurs only once more in Pausanias.⁴

There existed on the Acropolis, before the Persian Wars, a temple built by the Peisistratids.⁵ First it was only a *templum in antis*; later on, it was surrounded by a *peripteros*. Some of the foundations of this temple can still be seen to the south of the building which is presently called the Erechtheion. Herodotus refers to the Peisistratid temple both as *ἱρόν* (5.72, 8.55) and *μέγαρον* (5.77, 8.53). Whereas Dörpfeld never ceased to believe that this temple was identical with the so-called *Hekatompedon*, other scholars of Greek architecture prefer to connect the latter name with another temple erected on the site of the Parthenon but preceding it by at least three generations. The problems and discussions regarding both these temples—if there were ever two—are highly complex and involved. As diverse as opinions may be, however, scholars are in agreement that the temple of the Peisistratids was that of Athena Polias. Her image, which had fallen miraculously from the sky, was the cult image in this temple. It stood in its eastern half, in an almost square chamber, which may have suggested to Herodotus the term *μέγαρον*. The remaining two-thirds of the temple comprised an *opisthodomos* which gave access from

⁴ Calder 155. He cites the monumental work by J. M. Paton and G. P. Stevens, *The Erechtheum* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1927), as his only authority on the Erechtheion; the quote is from p.542 n.6. A reference to W. B. Dinsmoor, *The Architecture of Ancient Greece*³ (London/New York 1950) 187ff, would have been in order. Dinsmoor, like Paton, takes 421 as the year when the construction began. For the "interior arrangement of the Erechtheion" in the late fifth century see most recently J. Travlos, *AAA* 4 (1971) 77–81, and also the same author's magnificent *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (London/New York 1971) 213–27, and esp. fig.281 for the restored plan of the Erechtheion with all the cult places.

⁵ The following discussion is largely based on Dinsmoor, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) *passim*, and H. Berve, G. Gruben, M. Hirmer, *Griechische Tempel und Heiligtümer* (Munich 1961) 63ff, 168ff. The bibliography on the Acropolis in general and the Erechtheion in particular is immense. Besides Dinsmoor and Gruben, I have profited especially from Dörpfeld, *JdI* 34 (1919) 1ff, and from G. P. Stevens, *Hesperia* 16 (1946) 93ff. See also Dörpfeld's rev. of *The Erechtheum* in *PhilWoch* 48 (1928) 1062ff.

the west to two oblong rectangular chambers. Though Athena Polias was the primary goddess worshipped in the temple, she was not the only one; other deities, primordial kings of Athens, and heroes of old were assigned cults in its western half. They were Poseidon, Hephaistos, (Poseidon)-Erechtheus-(Erichthonios), and possibly Boutes, Erechtheus' brother. To the north lay the tomb of Kekrops, whose daughters are said to have nursed Erichthonios, son of Hephaistos and Ge (or, in another version, Athena). Kekrops' grave was later incorporated within the *temenos* of Pandrosos, one of his daughters.⁶ If Herodotus' reference to an *'Ερεχθέος νηός* (8.55), mentioned side by side with *ἱρόν*, does not refer to the cult chamber within the Peisistratid temple of Athena Polias (which is certainly one possibility), we must look for it, as a second possibility, in a region to the northeast of Kekrops' grave. This *ἱρόν* may never have been a covered building, however, but perhaps only a simple precinct with an altar dedicated to the worship of Erechtheus, who was here freed from union with Poseidon and Erichthonios.⁷

The Peisistratid temple did not survive the Persian devastation of the Acropolis. While the *opisthodomos* and the adjacent chambers seem to have been restored to serve as treasury, the eastern half of the *ἱρόν* lay in ruins. The building which was eventually going "to replace the Peisistratid temple of Athena" is specifically referred to in the famous building accounts of 409/8 and the following years.⁸ It is spoken of as *τὸ νεὸς τὸ ἐμ πόλει ἐν ἡδὶ τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἄγαλμα*.⁹ In other words, the archaic image of Athena Polias (or a substitute for it) was to be placed in this newly constructed temple, in which, as in the earlier Peisistratid *ἱρόν*, Athena Polias was to be the patron goddess. What is remarkable is that in these unique building accounts which have as subject matter the 'Erechtheion', the name Erechtheus never occurs. This is the more astonishing since the inscriptions do refer in more than one instance to the *Προστομιαῖον*, *Κεκρόπιον*, *Πανδρόσειον*, the *πρόστασις ἢ πρὸς τῷ Κεκροπίῳ* and *ἢ πρὸς ἑέο*, and the *βομὸς [τῷ] Θυεχῶ*.¹⁰

⁶ For the complex problems of the origin and cult of the minor deities see Roscher, *Lexicon*, and *RE* s.vv. ΚΕΚΡΟΣ, ΕΡΕΧΘΕΥΣ, ΕΡΙΧΘΗΝΙΟΣ, ΠΑΝΔΡΟΣΟΣ, etc.

⁷ For the *'Ερεχθέος νηός* see Dörpfeld, *JdI* 34 (1919) 5f, 35. Scholars seem not to have been greatly concerned with this building.

⁸ The quote is from Dinsmoor, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 187. For the building accounts see Paton-Stevens, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 277ff.

⁹ That we should add in our minds *ἔσται* after *ἄγαλμα* has been emphasized in Dörpfeld's review (*supra* n.5) 1067, and has remained unchallenged as far as I can see.

¹⁰ See the accounts, *passim*.

Most scholars who have dealt with the architecture of the 'Erechtheion' agree that, on analogy with the Peisistratid *ἱρόν*, the 'Erechtheion' served for the purpose of multiple cults: for Athena Polias foremost; for those divinities and heroes who are closely connected with Athens' and Attica's very existence and oldest history, namely Poseidon and Hephaistos on the one hand, Kekrops, Erechtheus and their relatives on the other. The classical temple thus merely replaced an earlier, now destroyed building. Speaking of a late fifth-century Erechtheion suggests a major worship of Erechtheus in this specific building. For this, however, there is no evidence. It is also the chief reason why the building of the 'Erechtheion' must be excluded as some "contemporary historical event" which could have "suggested the subject matter of the tragedy to Euripides."

What are the reasons that prompted Euripides to choose the myth of Erechtheus' warfare against Eumolpos as a subject matter for a play? As long as *Erechtheus* is preserved only in fragments, the reasons for writing it can never really and fully be known. We can only guess. Webster writes: "It is difficult to assess this play. The political philosophy clearly comes from the same spirit as the *Supplices*, and the sacrifice of the daughter is in the tradition of the *Heraclidae* and the *Hecuba*."¹¹ Austin intimated that "le drame semble avoir été dominé par le conflit entre deux puissances divines."¹² As much as the conflict between Athena and Poseidon dominated the western pediment of the Parthenon, we have in *Erechtheus*, towards the end of the play, the appearance of Poseidon and Athena, which is like an aftermath to their earlier, *big* struggle. True, the earthquake which shakes and literally makes the soil of Athens dance is overwhelming and greatly impressive:¹³

] ἄτασ· ὀρχεῖται δὲ π[ό]λεος πέδον κάλιω·
]. ἐμβάλλει Ποσειδῶν πόλει·
] ἦ περ δυστανοτάτα ἐμοὶ
] ων πόνοι πάρεισι, συμπύπτει στέγη·

It is Poseidon's wrath at his son Eumolpos' death which is the cause of this earthquake. With Athena's arrival on stage, it is stopped immediately. Poseidon's effort at damage, his deploying of physical

¹¹ Webster, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 130.

¹² Austin, *Recherches* 19.

¹³ Fr.65 (*PSorb.* 2328) 48-51, quoting here and later from Austin, *Nova fragmenta Euripidea*, with Nauck's fragment numbers or other information in parenthesis.

strength and the rumbling which accompanies the earthquake appear almost ridiculous in comparison with the calm but none-the-less firm and contemptuous words of Athena with which she counters the physical destruction of Poseidon (fr.65.55–62):

αὐδῶ τρίαιναν τῆσδ' ἀποστρέφειν χθονός,
 πόντιε Πόσειδον, μηδὲ γῆν ἀναστατοῦν
 πόλιν τ' ἐρείπειν τὴν ἐμὴν ἐπήρατον·
 μηδ' εὐτυχῆ σοι δοι οἱ·
 οὐχ εἰς ἄδην σ' ἐπλησεν; οὐ κατὰ χθονός
 κρύψας Ἐρεχθέα τῆς ἐμῆς ἡψω φρενός;
 κάπε]ιτα μέλλεις ταῦτα δῆ τ . . ες . . ρα
]εραπεροι[] εν θεά.

Rather than being a main theme like their earlier struggle, the aftermath shows that the drama was not “dominated by divine powers.”

We venture to say that Erechtheus was the dominating character in the play which bears his name. Furthermore, from the story as we know it, there is little doubt that Eumolpos on the one hand and Erechtheus' daughter on the other, who was sacrificed for the salvation of Athens, appeared as principals alongside the central figure of the King of Athens. Moreover one should like to think that Erechtheus' wife Praxithea, as well as the remaining two daughters of the ζευγος τριπάρθενον,¹⁴ who remained faithful to the oath which they had given their sister and killed themselves, rounded off the set of main characters in the play.

The battle itself, namely the heroic defence of Attica's soil, which reached a climax when Eumolpos was struck down by Erechtheus and when the latter was literally “hidden within the earth” by Poseidon, all of this was very suitable subject matter to be commented upon by the chorus of elder men and to be narrated by the messenger, who also informed Praxithea of her husband's fate.

It seems to me that, in the period from 431 onwards, when peace was constantly endangered and enemy troops had on several occasions invaded Attic territory, threatened and conquered Athenian possessions (Amphipolis!), the subject matter of the myth of Erechtheus, who killed a Thracian King, could easily assume a political tinge. As becomes clear from the surviving fragments, *Erechtheus* stressed the theme of war and emphasized the longing for peace.¹⁵

¹⁴ Austin 47 (357).

¹⁵ Austin 60 (369).

On the human-mythological level, there is the fight and victory of Erechtheus over Eumolpos, which meant the rescue of Attica from invasion and foreign dominion. The price for this glorious deed was high: the sacrifice of one of Erechtheus' daughters, the death of Athens' king, and the self-chosen death of the other two sisters.

After the death of Erechtheus, the quarrel continues on a divine level. The beginning takes the form of a vast quake which causes terror and a forecast of even greater disaster and annihilation than the war. But the beginning finds no continuation, because Athena comes to the quick rescue of her land. No weapons, not even physical strength are needed to establish peace. Poseidon is kept within bounds with words only. Thus, there was eventually twofold victory and twofold glory. And there was more than just peace among mortals. There was also peace once more among the original contenders for the land of Attica.

If the play is interpreted in political terms it should, at the end, have become quite clear to the audience that whoever—men or gods—dare to attack this sacred land shall face the consequences, as did first Eumolpos and secondly Poseidon.

It is in conclusion to the play that Athena proclaims the worship of Erechtheus' daughters as *Hyakinthidae*; that Erechtheus' wife Praxithea becomes the priestess of the goddess; and that finally Athena reveals to Praxithea: "And for your husband I order a shrine to be constructed in the middle of the city with enclosing walls of stone."¹⁶

Obviously the talk about the building of the 'Erechtheion' was very much in the air when Euripides wrote the play. Athena's speech quoted above makes good sense since it is spoken in anticipation of the actual building of the 'Erechtheion', plans for the construction of which were a major topic of discussion in 422 when Euripides wrote *Erechtheus*. The playwright must have been fully aware of the fact that the building which was to be erected was also to comprise a chamber (*σηκός*!) for the cult of Erechtheus, otherwise Athena's revelation to Praxithea just would not make any sense. It is worth noting that the word *σηκός* is in entire agreement with the subordinate rôle

¹⁶ Translation Calder 156. Austin, *Recherches* 59, writes: "Euripide, ici, fait allusion sans doute à la reconstruction du temple qui venait de commencer quand il écrivait sa pièce." Against Austin, however, it must be said that the passage under consideration would make little sense if construction had *already* begun. The building was definitely a thing of the future. If it *was* begun in 421, Athena's proclamation, uttered on stage in 422, lies as close as can be.

assigned to Erechtheus in the new temple of Athena Polias. What we have here, then, is an open allusion or *citation* of a contemporary event. Euripides, through the speech of Athena, acclaims the decision of the Athenian ἐκκλησία to erect a shrine for Erechtheus. The event in itself, however, was not the inspiration for Euripides to write *Erechtheus*, even though the dates for the decision and the writing of the play virtually coincide.

II

The recently discovered pelike from Heraclea is one among several highly interesting vases illustrating Greek myths and plays of the late fifth century. The pots represent specimens of the so-called Lucanian fabric which, broadly speaking, belongs to early South-Italian vase-painting.¹⁷

Our vase depicts Eumolpos and Poseidon on the obverse (A), riding side by side on horseback (PLATE 4); the son has his left hand on the shoulder of his father, who is holding the trident.¹⁸ The reverse (B) is a little more problematical (PLATE 5). Not, of course, the figure of Athena fully armed, which is as clear as one could wish. But what about the youthful female figure who stands in the chariot together with Athena? Miss Weidauer discards the interpretation that she is Nike or Iris, since one would expect wings for either goddess.¹⁹ Whether or not our painting is an excerpt from a many-figured scene

¹⁷ For a full discussion of the vases see B. Neutsch, *Archäologische Forschungen in Lukanien II, Herakleistudien* (RömMitt Ergänzungsheft 11, 1967) 193–231, contributed by W. Degrassi. See also A. D. Trendall, *The Red-figured Vases of Lucania, Campania, and Sicily* (Oxford 1967) 50ff, 692ff. See also A. Greifenhagen, *Frühlukianischer Kolonettenkrater mit Darstellung der Herakliden* (Winckelmannsprog. 123, Berlin 1969); for the obverse of the pelike see p.13 fig.5. Greifenhagen's dating of the vase, namely 430–420 B.C., is too early. Degrassi and more recently L. Weidauer (see following note) attributed our pelike to the Policoro painter as against Trendall, who gives it to the Karneia painter. F. Brommer's remark in *AthMitt* 84 (1969) 125 that "zu den wenigen Darstellungen des Westgiebelthemas in der Vasenmalerei ist inzwischen die Pelike aus Policoro hinzugekommen" is not to the point. For the photographs of the pelike, now in the Museo Nazionale, Taranto, I am grateful to Dr H. Sichtermann. It is illustrated also in E. Simon, *Die Götter der Griechen* (München 1969) 80–81, figs. 77–78.

¹⁸ The interpretation of the youthful figure as that of Eumolpos is by L. Weidauer, "Poseidon und Eumolpos auf einer Pelike aus Policoro," *AntK* 12 (1969) 91–93. I believe the interpretation to be fully acceptable.

¹⁹ Greifenhagen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.17) 11 n.3, who could not have known Weidauer's paper when he wrote, describes the reverse as: ". . . Athena auf dem von einer Göttin (Iris oder Nike) gelenkten Viergespann." This description does respect the general iconographic

with several contestants, it would seem to me that the female figure accompanying Athena is given enhanced significance.

We have to turn to our unfortunately very fragmentary play in search for the identity of this figure. As pointed out earlier, Euripides' *Erechtheus* reveals nicely in dramatic terms a second clash between Poseidon and Athena, which is like some aftermath to their big struggle. In the Lucanian vase-painting the gods' rôle is conceived by way of *prolepsis*. Eumolpos is not dead yet, Poseidon's shaking the earth with his trident and Athena's coming to the rescue of Attica lie in the future. If we consider an earlier stage of the drama, we would expect beside Eumolpos the representation of Erechtheus as his direct foe. We have the former but not the latter. The concept of antithesis expressed in the juxtaposition of Poseidon and Athena on the obverse and the reverse respectively urges us to look for a suitable candidate and counterpart for Eumolpos.

The only figure that is a match for Eumolpos (since we lack Erechtheus) is Erechtheus' daughter, who had to be sacrificed. Only through her sacrifice was Erechtheus granted success and victory against the invaders. I should like, therefore, to see in the youthful female figure in the chariot Erechtheus' daughter as she herself bridles the team of horses and as she rides into the field to die her sacrificial death before the actual battle begins. It is Athena's chariot upon which Erechtheus' daughter stands, thus emphasizing the closeness of fate which unites the patron goddess of Athens with the family of Erechtheus. Athena herself holds shield and lance; the weapons and her stance suggest that she is ready for battle. Poseidon and Eumolpos ride determinedly into battle, the god more so than his son, who, fearfully bows his head slightly but derives strength by holding his left hand on his father's shoulder. One can hardly imagine a more poignant antithesis when comparing both sides of the vase. Depicted with the freedom which is that of the creative artist, we can nevertheless feel intensely the conflict which Euripides has brought onto stage in his *Erechtheus*.

The vase from Policoro was painted some ten to twenty years after the first performance of Euripides' *Erechtheus* at the City Dionysia in 422 B.C. Productions of the same play in Magna Graecia date probably

setting but disregards the lack of wings in the figure accompanying Athena which, for Weidauer, was the very reason for excluding the possibility that Iris or Nike was represented here.

from the second but last decade of the fifth century. If the interpretation of the vase-painting, and especially the reverse of the pelike, holds ground, the vase could be mentioned as another *terminus ante* for the writing of the play of Euripides. But this is not so important, considering that other *termini* lie much closer to the year 422. Our vase-paintings, however, are of first-rate importance with regard to the problem of contemporary illustration in the visual arts of a literary subject matter, which is one of the most fascinating topics in the study of Greek civilisation.

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY
August, 1971

Postscript

This essay had already been sent to press when Max Treu's article, "Der Euripideische Erechtheus als Zeugnis seiner Zeit," *Chiron* 1 (1971) 115–31, became available to me. According to Treu (pp.130f), *Erechtheus* contains "zwei historische Zeugnisse von unbestreitbarem Quellenwert." (1) From fr.53.29ff, in which he sees a reference to Kleon, Treu concludes that mention of this statesman would probably be made before rather than after his death, which occurred in 422 B.C., thus dating the first performance of the play to 423. (2) Treu argues from the passage in which Athena orders the building of a shrine for Erechtheus (passage quoted *supra* p.490) that the play here gives us "die Anspielung auf den Beginn der Bautätigkeit am Erechtheion—vor 421 wohl gemerkt . . ." The present writer has interpreted the passage differently and feels, after reading Treu, that the *imminent* inception of the building of the Erechtheion remains in point and is emphatically supported by Athena's speech. Treu was not acquainted with Calder's article nor with the vase-painting from Policoro.

December, 1971

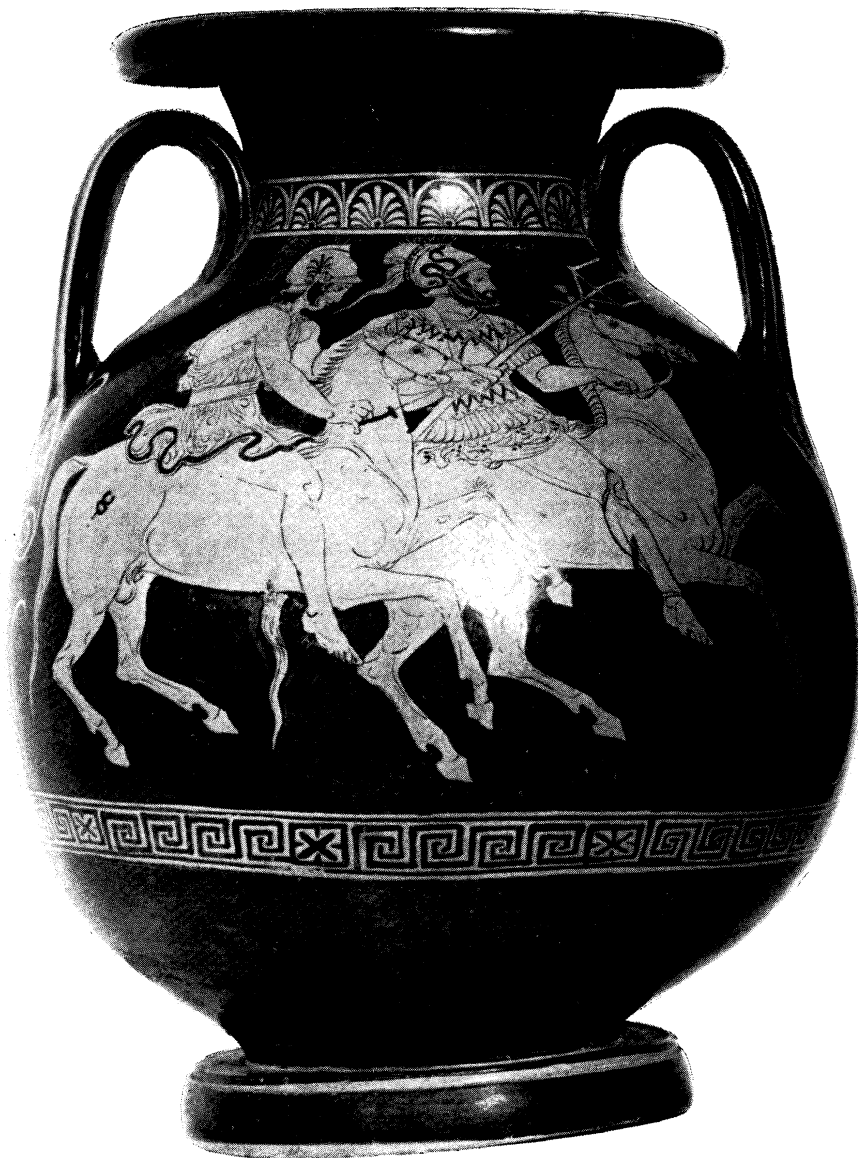
Professor Calder's Reply

Professor Clairmont in his first sentence accepts my dating (after Geisler) to the Dionysia of 422 B.C. He objects to my connexion of the play with the decision to erect the building that men would call the 'Erechtheion'. His reasons are two.

1. "For the end of the fifth century B.C. proof is lacking that a building on the Acropolis of Athens was named the Erechtheion" (p.486).

his casual reconstruction of the action. The claim (p.485) that “only T. B. L. Webster” also suggested 422 B.C. is untrue: see *GRBS* 10 (1969) 149 n.12. There is no need (p.488) for Poseidon to appear in the exodos: see H. van Looy, *Collection Latomus* 114 (1970) 115–22, and K. Matthiesen, *GGA* forthcoming. Clairmont omits two characters from his list (p.489) who probably shared in the action, the Herald and Erectheus’ son, Xuthos (?).

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
November, 1971



PELIKE BY THE POLICORO PAINTER, OBVERSE: EUMOLPOS AND POSEIDON
(Photograph by courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome)