

Greek Myth as Metaphor in the Chora of Egypt

GREEK MYTH, ALMOST ENTIRELY ABSENT IN THE VISUAL REPERTOIRE OF tombs in Hellenized Alexandria, is found with surprising frequency in mortuary monuments in two regions beyond Alexandria – at Leontopolis, in the Delta, and at Tuna el-Gebel. At Tuna el-Gebel, house-tombs demonstrate a sophisticated use of myth as an eschatological metaphor, and, concurrently, a small number of Jewish grave monuments from Leontopolis accommodate a Greek mode of exposition and Greek mythological references while simultaneously engaging Jewish ideas of the afterlife. Though the single Leontopolis tombstone that explicitly incorporates Greek narrative focuses on the myth of Persephone – a metaphor frequently employed in the ancient world to mediate death – the myths referenced in tombs at Tuna el-Gebel are – for the most part – unknown not only in Alexandrian mortuary context, but elsewhere in tombs in the wider Hellenistic world. In similar contrast, whereas gravestones from Leontopolis indicate the intersection of Greek and Jewish thought in Graeco-Roman Egypt, the relevant tombs at Tuna el-Gebel not only participate in the experience of being Greek in the generally egyptianized countryside, but far surpass tombs in Alexandria in proclaiming the Greek origin and Greek intellectual sensibility of their occupants and patrons.

LEONTOPOLIS

About thirty-five kilometers north of Cairo in the ancient nome of Heliopolis, the site of Leontopolis (modern Tel el-Yehoudieh) includes a Jewish fortified city dating from the second century BCE through the second century CE.⁵⁴⁸ It was built upon land granted by Ptolemy VI Philometer (180–164 and 163–145 BCE) to Onias IV – a hereditary high priest of Jerusalem who was forced to flee the city and who emigrated to Egypt – to erect a Jewish temple, and thus the city was styled ‘the land of Onias.’ Jewish gravestones preserved in the cemetery at Leontopolis, inscribed in Greek, rely on Greek funerary formulas and employ Greek myth to address a blessed

afterlife, as they simultaneously express the Jewish community’s own evolving eschatological goals.

Biblical references and other speculative documents aside,⁵⁴⁹ Jews are known in Egypt at least early as the sixth century BCE, and by the fifth century they are found manning a garrison and building a temple on the Nile island of Elephantine at Aswan.⁵⁵⁰ The greatest Jewish immigration into Egypt occurred, however, in the Ptolemaic period, beginning especially after the battle of Gaza in 312 BCE with Ptolemy I’s conquest of Syria and Judea.⁵⁵¹ Jews, who were afforded the privileges of Hellenes under the Ptolemies, prospered in Egypt, adopting the Greek language and Greek literary forms, while retaining their

own religious institutions.⁵⁵² Serving as soldiers and in other capacities in the Ptolemaic administration and as tradesmen, they fully integrated into the communities of which they were a part. In Alexandria,⁵⁵³ where the Pentateuch was translated from Hebrew to Greek, at least one of the four domestic quarters was predominantly inhabited by Jews.⁵⁵⁴ If Diana Delia's estimation of the Jewish population in Alexandria in the Roman period is correct (which would account for about one-third of the total population estimated for the city),⁵⁵⁵ it would afford Alexandria primacy as the city with the largest Jewish population in the Graeco-Roman world.⁵⁵⁶ In addition to Alexandria and Leontopolis, other cities in the Delta as well as in the chora also boasted a Jewish population,⁵⁵⁷ but Leontopolis was the 'land of Onias,' a predominantly Jewish establishment, and the one that preserves the largest corpus of gravestones that incorporate, in their epitaphs, Greek literary style, as well as the Greek conception of the afterlife.⁵⁵⁸

The Tombstones

The epitaphs on the grave markers from Leontopolis, which constitute the second largest collection of inscriptions from the ancient Jewish Diaspora,⁵⁵⁹ are collected by William Horbury and David Noy, who provide commentary and give the earlier publication history of the stones,⁵⁶⁰ including the appearance of four of them in Bernard's *Inscriptions métriques de l'Égypte gréco-romaine*.⁵⁶¹ Grave markers take the form of simple, usually undecorated, stelai. These stelai are occasionally carved in low relief with a triangular pediment capped, again occasionally, with acroteria, either central and lateral or only at the peak. In Greece, with few exceptions,⁵⁶² acroteria initially mark buildings set within sacred spaces and, then, from the fourth century BCE on, grave stelai. Nevertheless, though their appearance on grave stelai in Greece might suggest that the deceased are considered at one with the gods, by the time of their inclusion on the Leontopolis stelai, acroteria (and the triangular pediment, as well) might merely have just been another mark of Greekness.

The more than eighty extant gravestones from Leontopolis⁵⁶³ date from the mid-second century BCE through the second century CE. All are inscribed only in Greek,⁵⁶⁴ and all follow Greek mortuary formulas. The most cursory include only the singularly relevant information – the name of the deceased, and possibly her or his age and patronymic; slightly longer ones include the date of death,

often giving both the Egyptian month and the Ptolemaic or Roman regnal year, though excluding the name of the ruler. In yet longer inscriptions, the stones may speak, exhorting the passerby to weep for the departed, who is most often described as "the excellent one," "a good friend," and one who "has done nothing to harm anyone."

In concordance with the gravestones employing a Greek visual model and a Greek literary mode, a small number also use Greek metaphor to encapsulate conceptions of the afterlife implicit in early Judaism.⁵⁶⁵ Three of these, for instance, give the destination of the deceased as Hades:

I am Jesus. My father was Phameis, passerby; and at this ago of sixty I went down to Hades. All of you weep together for him who suddenly passed to the deep place of the ages, to dwell in darkness. And you, Dositheus, bewail me; for it is laid upon you to pour forth bitter tears over my tomb. You are my child, for I departed childless. Weep, all together, for the hapless Jesus.⁵⁶⁶

The second:

The stele bears witness. – 'Who are you that lie in the dark tomb? Tell me of your country and your father.' 'Arsinoe, daughter of Aline and Theodosius, and the land which nourished us is called the land of Onias.' 'How old were you when you slipped into the shadowy region of Lethe?' 'At twenty years old I went to the mournful place of the dead.' 'Were you joined in marriage?' 'I was.' 'Did you leave him a child?' 'Childless I went to the house of Hades.' 'May the earth, the guardian of the dead, be light upon you.' 'And for you stranger, may it bear fruitful crops.' In the 16th year, Payni 21.⁵⁶⁷

Arsinoe's epitaph is as Greek as her name. "There is nothing [but the reference to 'the land of Onias'],” writes Horbury, "that would identify the epitaph as clearly Jewish."⁵⁶⁸ Though numerous Greek epitaphs avoid the name of Hades, substituting instead the *thalamos* of Persephone for both males⁵⁶⁹ and females,⁵⁷⁰ the 'house of Hades' ([εἰς] Ἄϊδαο δόμους, here in its Doric form) is nevertheless a term frequently used in Greek epitaphs.⁵⁷¹ Similarly, in this epitaph, the hope that "the earth, the guardian of the dead, be light upon you" (or, in the following, "may you find the earth light upon you for all time") is a Greek sentiment embodied, for example, in epitaphs from Crete and Rome.⁵⁷² Lethe, the place of forgetfulness, a synonym for Hades, is also found in Greek

epitaphs, including others from Egypt,⁵⁷³ but the concept is also at home in Jewish eschatological thought.⁵⁷⁴

The third:

When he had already accomplished a span of fifty-three years, the all-subduer⁵⁷⁵ himself carried him off to Hades. O sandy earth, how notable a body you cover: that which had the soul of Abram⁵⁷⁶, most fortunate of men. For he was not without honour in the city, but was crowned in his wisdom with a communal magistracy over all the people.

‘For you were honoured by holding a city magistracy in two places, fulfilling the double expense with gracious liberality. Until you hid yourself in the grave all things that befitted you were yours, dear soul, and we, a family of good children, increase them.’

‘But you, passer-by, beholding the grave of a good man, depart with these favourable words for him: “May you find the earth light upon you for all time.”’⁵⁷⁷

Though the language, the form, and the metaphor in these epitaphs are Greek, the sentiment expressed is consonant with a strand of Jewish eschatological thought in the centuries to either side of the turn of the millennium. Hades, for example, is synonymous with She’ol (the biblical term for the Underworld), the Jewish place of the dead, which, as here, was considered “the deep place for the ages,” a place of “darkness,” a “shadowy region,” and a “mournful place,” to which all the dead were delivered⁵⁷⁸ – much like the Hades encountered in the *Odyssey* (*Od.* XI). This concept of the land of the dead is found in the earlier biblical tradition,⁵⁷⁹ in the Septuagint, translated into Greek in Alexandria in the early Ptolemaic period,⁵⁸⁰ and in the early-second-century BCE *Wisdom of Ben Sira* (the Latin *Ecclesiasticus*),⁵⁸¹ translated into Greek also in Alexandria by Ben Sira’s grandson in the last decades of the second century. The term may be used in the epitaphs metaphorically, but its use is entirely consonant with the Greek language in which it is composed, as well as with the eschatological expectations of the Jewish Arsinoe for whom it was written. Its use underscores the similarities of the Jewish and Greek realm of the dead in both Jewish and Greek traditional eschatology before the advent of the Greek philosophers such as Plato, Empedocles, Pythagoras, and others permitted alternative, more sanguine views of the afterlife and before this alternate view was also embraced by the Jewish community of the Diaspora.

For in the last centuries of the first millennium BCE and the first centuries of the next, with the development of a view of individual retribution after death (concordant with the Egyptian view of individual responsibility as evidenced in the ‘negative confession,’ but independent of it, and with the contemporaneous Greek possibilities for the negotiation of the afterlife), the concept of She’ol changed. Enoch (*1 Enoch* 22) divides She’ol into four regions, providing the righteous (*1 Enoch* 22.9) with a spring in one of its divisions. Simultaneously, the idea of life after death for the virtuous, seen variously as the resurrection of the body or the immortality of the soul (or some combination of the two), developed.⁵⁸²

The following two epitaphs from Leontopolis speak to the concept of life after death. In Greece, the possibility of a celestial afterlife can be traced at least as far back as the early fifth century BCE, when the Boeotian poet Pindar (*Olympian* II.25–30) places Dionysios’ mother Semele among the gods. Sophocles (*Frag.* 837 Radt) declares that “Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen [the Eleusinian mystery] rites and thus enter Hades: for them alone there is life, for the others all is misery,”⁵⁸³ and Plato (*Phaedo* 69C) has heard that initiates into the Eleusinian mysteries are rewarded with a place among the gods.⁵⁸⁴ The epitaph of a second Arsinoe places the immortality of the soul in Jewish context at Leontopolis:

This is the grave of Arsinoe, wayfarer. Stand near and weep for her, unfortunate in all things, whose fate was adverse and terrible. For I was bereaved of my mother when I was a little girl; and when the flower of youth dressed me as a bride, my father joined me in marriage with Phabeis, and Fate led me to the end of life in the travail-pain of my first-born child. My allotted span was small, but great charm bloomed upon the beauty of my spirit. Now this grave hides in its bosom my chastely natured body, but my soul has flown to the holy ones. A lament for Arsinoe. In the 25th year, Mecheir 2.⁵⁸⁵

The concept of the immortality of the soul was current in Greek thought at least as early as the fifth century:⁵⁸⁶ a war memorial from 432 BCE in Athens records that the souls of the fallen had been received by the *aither*,⁵⁸⁷ and slightly later, Plato⁵⁸⁸ expands on the concept. In Jewish tradition, a “soul flown to the holy ones” emerges only beginning in the mid- to late-Second Temple period (third to first centuries BCE), a time when the idea of the immortality of the soul vies with that of resurrection of the body on a day of judgement.⁵⁸⁹

The immortality of the soul is implied in *The Book of Jubilees* (XXIII.31), probably written in Jerusalem and usually dated to the second century BCE,⁵⁹⁰ which declares that “their bodies will rest in earth and their spirits will have much joy”⁵⁹¹ (though, elsewhere, *Jubilees*, consistent with thought recorded elsewhere during the period, clearly distinguishes between the rewards meted out to the righteous and the wicked).⁵⁹² But the general acceptance of the Platonic idea of the immortality of the soul is found primarily in the Jewish intersection with Greeks in the Diaspora: the Wisdom of Solomon (3.4; 4.20–5:23), possibly written in Alexandria, reveals “[t]he centrality of its Platonic teaching of the immortality of the soul.”⁵⁹³ The Alexandrian Jew Philo (ca. 20/10 BCE–45 CE),⁵⁹⁴ in accord with his times, follows Plato in his view of the immortality of the soul, which, as in the epitaph of Arsinoe, “returns to its home in God.”⁵⁹⁵ Arsinoe’s epitaph, which speaks to the soul’s immortality, influenced as it is by Greek philosophy, accords well with Jewish thought in the Diaspora, on the one hand, as it also encapsulates a Greek Hellenistic ideal, on the other.

The final epitaph of note from Leontopolis differs from the others since it explicitly references the narrative of the Greek myth of Persephone:

Weep for me, stranger, a maiden (παρθ[έ]ν[ος]) ripe for marriage, who formerly shone in a great house. For, together with my bridal garments, I, untimely, have received this hateful tomb as my bridal chamber. For when the noise of revellers at my . . . was going to make my father’s house resound, suddenly Hades came and snatched me away, like a rose in a garden nurtured by fresh rain. And, I, stranger, who twenty years . . .⁵⁹⁶

The concept of the unmarried young woman assimilated to Persephone (Kore) is a Greek trope found in funerary epigrams in the *Palatine Anthology*,⁵⁹⁷ and as early as the mid-sixth century in the Attic epitaph of Phrasikleia:⁵⁹⁸ “I am the marker of Phrasikleia. I shall be called Kore forever, the gods allotting me this name instead of marriage.” And Plato’s affirmation that initiates into the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter and Kore were set among the gods adheres to the metaphor inherent in the myth. Though the myth of Persephone is almost a cliché in the Roman Imperial period (it is the single Greek myth figured in tombs of Alexandria [see Chapter Two], and it is figured, too, at Tuna el-Gebel [see later in this chapter]), its very frequency underscores its expected efficacy. In the epitaph from Leontopolis, although the

reference to eternal life among the gods adheres to Jewish philosophical thought in the later Second Temple period, the embodiment of eternal life in the person of Persephone indicates a complete understanding of Greek myth within the Delta enclave of Diaspora Jews during the Graeco-Roman period.

TUNA EL-GEBEL

Whereas the epitaphs at Leontopolis rely on Greek metaphor to explicate Jewish eschatological thought current in the Second Temple period, a group of monuments at Tuna el-Gebel are explicit in their use of Greek metaphor to elucidate a vision of the afterlife that is predominantly – though not necessarily entirely – Greek.

Despite the Egyptian centerpiece of its cemetery – the tomb of Petosiris that drew pilgrims to the metropolis of Hermopolis Magna – many tombs in the southern cemetery of Tuna el-Gebel resonate with a heritage exceedingly Greek. In his final publication of the tombs at the site, Paul Perdrizet differentiates between ‘temple-tombs’ and ‘house-tombs,’ and this differentiation bears, in general, some culturally specific markers, although these markers may be temporal as well. Though temple-tombs are products of both the Ptolemaic and the Roman period, all house-tombs can be dated to the Roman period.⁵⁹⁹ Temple-tombs are stone built⁶⁰⁰ and have generally egyptianizing facades that replicate those of Egyptian Late Period or Ptolemaic temples (or, even closer to home, that of the tomb of Petosiris) on a much lesser scale. House-tombs, however, are constructed of lightly stuccoed limestone or whitewashed mudbrick,⁶⁰¹ and their facades show few Egyptian architectural elements. Temple-tombs rarely bear any painted decoration, and few temple-tombs show any connection with the Greek presence at Hermopolis Magna save the rare (and slight) inscription or architectural element,⁶⁰² though Temple-tomb 6 (which is almost entirely destroyed) preserved an inscription on its facade that reads, “[Tomb of] Ask(l)epiades, son of Exakon, as well as of Herodes and of Exakon, his sons,”⁶⁰³ suggesting it as the tomb of a Greek family or, at least, of one bearing Greek names. House-tombs, on the contrary, most often preserve some painting, and that painted decoration often follows Greek style and is replete with Greek ornament or subject matter.

It is thus almost entirely among the Perdrizet-defined house-tombs that Greek imagery and texts emerge. These tombs are multiroom buildings. They normally contain



3.1. Tuna el-Gebel, a Street of House Tombs with Exterior Staircases (Projekt “Tuna el-Gebel,” Institut für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, B016)

two or three rooms, usually vaulted, on the main floor and often include a second story with a suite of rooms accessible by an exterior staircase as well (Fig. 3.1).⁶⁰⁴ One of the rooms on the ground floor – the farther one if the two are aligned – is usually fitted with a niche on its back wall for a brick-built or wooden kline.

The Tomb of Isidora

The tomb of Isidora (Fig. 3.2) is probably the single best-known, most-remarked, and most completely reconstructed tomb in the necropolis, excluding that of Petosiris. Unlike the other tombs discussed here, however, the tomb of Isidora is famous not for its painted images, but for two inscriptions painted to either side of the doorway leading into its burial room. The tomb is a well-preserved, two-story house with its entrance at the west. In contrast to its reconstruction, which presents an egyptianizing temple facade, the building was probably originally conceived in Greek prostyle.⁶⁰⁵ Its ground

floor was divided into two vaulted rooms, with the rear ground-floor room containing a niche. The exterior stair, the platform, and the altar in front of the tomb are restorations, but enough remained to indicate that the stairs existed, that the altar, constructed of mud brick and plastered,⁶⁰⁶ was on-axis in the middle of the central intercolumniation, and that the rooms on the first floor were vaulted like those of the floor below.⁶⁰⁷

The side walls of the first room on the ground floor are punctuated by three arched niches, one on the south wall and two on the north. Orthostats – treated similarly to those in other Tuna el-Gebel house-tombs – painted to imitate black marble, breccia, gray granite, and porphyry and decorated with rondels also painted to imitate marble and porphyry flaunt more expensive and more royal ‘stone’ than those in Alexandrian tombs. Above the orthostats, the north wall was decorated with three-petaled roses and leafy stalks,⁶⁰⁸ recalling the *Rosalia*, the Roman Feast of the Roses, in which roses were scattered on tombs. Their simulacra in tombs, as Jocelyn Toynbee adds, “perpetuated, as it were, all the year round the offerings of actual roses” at the grave site.⁶⁰⁹ Against the south wall, on a wooden kline lay the mummy of a man wrapped in a cloth shroud with its feet to the west and its head to the east.⁶¹⁰

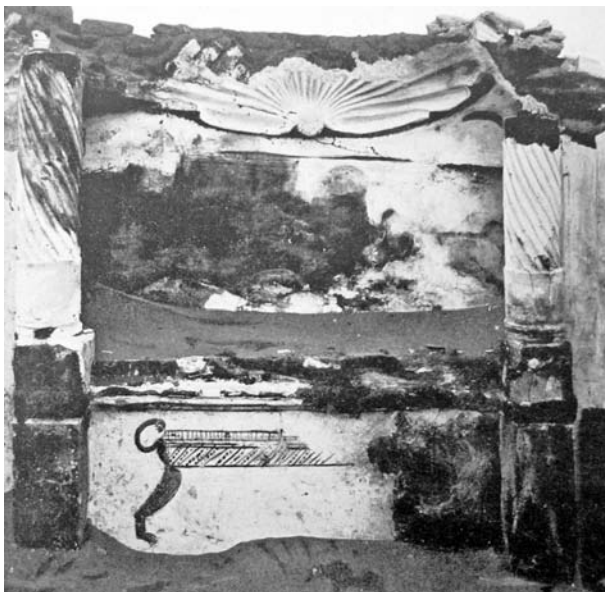
The doorway that leads to the second room is framed by pilasters with leafy capitals, and on the wall to the left and right of the doorway are the two epigrams that accord the tomb its celebrity. Between the left epigram and the doorway is sketched a funerary chapel with a roof in the form of a pyramidion,⁶¹¹ and the walls to either side of the door are decorated with laurel trees replete with flowers and stylized leaves.⁶¹²

The second chamber is referred to in one of the inscriptions as the *θάλαμος* – a woman’s chamber, inner room, or bridal chamber, and, as previously noted, a euphemism for the house of Hades. Against the room’s back wall was a second kline – this one built of brick (Fig. 3.3).⁶¹³ On the lower facade of the bed was painted a small table that Perdrizet and Sami Gabra take as a lion-bed,⁶¹⁴ but despite its stylized lion’s tail and feet, its narrow shape is closer to the table normally placed alongside a kline known from Greek vase paintings and banqueting reliefs, and preserved, for example, in the Alexandrian tomb Moustapha Pasha 2.⁶¹⁵ Thus, as elements in the epitaphs will prove bilingual, so is the bedside table. The ceiling of the niche created by the projecting bed is conceived as a huge *Tridacna* shell, carved in relief and stuccoed white, similar to the ones that create



3.2. Tuna el-Gebel, the Tomb of Isidora (Author Photo)

3.3. Tuna el-Gebel, Kline in the Tomb of Isidora (after Gabra 1941: pl. XXXII)



the ceilings of the exedrae and hover over the entrance to the Main Tomb in the Great Catacomb at Kom el-Shoqafa.⁶¹⁶ In the tomb of Isidora, set on high podiums painted to imitate porphyry – ⁶¹⁷ the rare, royal stone – spiral columns frame the front of the niche.⁶¹⁸

On the banquette, the mummy of Isidora lay on its back, its head to the south and feet to the north. Summarily prepared, it was nevertheless clad in a splendid cartonnage covered with egyptianizing scenes, and it wore a gold ring set with a small emerald on the little finger of its left hand. Coins from the time of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius found among the detritus in the tomb suggest that the burial dates no earlier than the second quarter of the second century CE.⁶¹⁹

Mummification, originally of course an Egyptian practice, was adopted by Greek inhabitants of Egypt at least as early as the early period of Roman rule and, though mummies are rarely found in Alexandria, individuals who would self-identify as Greek – and Isidora is a Greek name – borrowed this form for the disposition of the corpse in the chora.⁶²⁰ Thus, in the chora, the confluence of Greek and Egyptian burial customs and

iconography is unsurprising. Remarkable instead are the two epitaphs: the first refers to a myth found in a version unknown elsewhere; the second reframes and extends the metaphor inherent in the first. Taken together, they have engendered discussion querying the divinization of Isidora and the relation of this putative deification to Greek and Egyptian religion.

The epitaph written in Greek to the left of the door reads:

In truth, it was the nymphs, daughters of the water, Isidora, who built the [women's or bridal] chamber [θήλαμος] for you, Isidora. Nilo, the eldest of the daughters of the Nile, began by fashioning a shell such as the river holds in its depths; such one might see, a marvelous thing, in her father's palace. And Krenaia, mate of Hylas who was snatched away, built the columns on both sides, like the grotto where she herself kept Hylas, who carried the water jar, in her arms' embrace. And the Oreades, having chosen the site, founded a sanctuary, that you might have nothing less than the best.⁶²¹

The one to the right of the door:

No longer shall I come to make sacrifice with lamentation, daughter, now I have learned that you have become a goddess. With libations and vows praise Isidora, who as a *numphê* [marriageable maiden] was snatched away by the Nymphs. Greetings, child! Nymph is your name, and the Horai pour you their own libations throughout the year: Winter brings white milk, the rich flower of the olive, and crowns you with the delicate narcissus flower. Spring sends the produce of the industrious honeybee and the rose from its bud, flower beloved of Eros. Summer heat brings the fruit from the vat of Bakchos and a crown of grapes for you, having tied back the clusters from the branches. These things are for you. All will be performed here annually, as is the custom for the immortals. Therefore, daughter, no longer with lamentations shall I come to make sacrifices.⁶²²

The first epitaph sets out the framework to which the second epitaph appeals to assert the divinization of the deceased young girl.

The story of Hylas, drawn down into the depths of a spring by a nymph (or nymphs) overcome (as was his lover, Herakles) by the lad's inordinate beauty, was popular in the Hellenistic and Roman world in both text and image. It is found in wall paintings and floor mosaics in Roman Europe and North Africa, in stucco and stone

reliefs, and in domestic and mortuary context. Not surprisingly, given Hylas' watery end, the subject often finds itself as imagery in baths.⁶²³ Theocritus (*Idyll* XIII) and Apollonius Rhodius (*Arg.* I.1171–1357) give the earliest and the most detailed story of Hylas' abduction by a nymph (or nymphs), and by the first half of the first century BCE, Vergil (*Eclogue* II.45–50 and *Georgics* III.6), like the later writer of Isidora's epitaph, is comfortable enough with his audience's recognition to refer elliptically to the story.⁶²⁴

The seeming demise of a male protagonist, Hylas, in a poem dedicated to a female is in keeping with the lack of gender specificity noted elsewhere.⁶²⁵ The myth of Persephone is employed in tombs of both male and female dead,⁶²⁶ and poses, too, of sculpted figures are interchangeable between the genders as is noted later in this chapter. Nevertheless, the choice of the story of Hylas is remarkable in the context of multicultural Graeco-Roman Egypt.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, F. L. Griffith⁶²⁷ called attention to the reference in Herodotus (II.90) that states that Egyptians believe that those drowned in the Nile (or slain by crocodiles) are buried in a "sacred coffin" and the body considered "more than human." M. A. Murray⁶²⁸ continued the discussion with a survey of water, human sacrifice, and drowning in cultures worldwide and from antiquity to the early-twentieth-century present, adducing, among many other examples, the story of Hylas as reported by Theocritus (*Idyll* XIII)⁶²⁹ and connecting the search for the body of Hylas (Apollonius Rhodius, *Arg.* I.1240–1272) with that of the search for the body parts of Osiris.⁶³⁰ Paul Graindor⁶³¹ advanced the discussion by introducing the epitaphs of Isidora that had just been uncovered and concluded (followed by Jean Hani in 1974⁶³² and others) that Isidora drowned in the Nile and was deified,⁶³³ adding that the reference to the myth of Hylas confirms the interpretation.

Heracles' mourning for his young love aside, the view in antiquity agrees that Hylas lived on as a hero. Theocritus (*Idyll* XIII.73), who composed poetry in the Alexandrian court under Ptolemy II, distinguishes him as "numbered among the blessed" (μακάρων ἀριθμείται).⁶³⁴ Closer temporally, though more greatly removed geographically, are local Phrygian (or Mysian) hero cults of Hylas recorded by Strabo (12.4.3), who wrote in the first century CE, and Antoninus Liberalis (*Metamorphoses* 26.5), who wrote in the second half of the second century CE.

László Kákosy⁶³⁵ concedes that whereas it is “not sufficiently clear whether [Isidora] met her death by drowning, which would imply an apotheosis in itself[,] the allusion to the myth of Hylas . . . offers a hint . . . in this direction,”⁶³⁶ and Andrzej Wypustek essentially accepts Isidora’s drowning as a given.⁶³⁷

Bernand and others disagree, arguing that the abduction by nymphs is but a trope for a youthful life cut short.⁶³⁸ A. D. Nock,⁶³⁹ who believes that being snatched by nymphs (and Nereids) is a common metaphor for a blessed afterlife, adds that ἔγνων in the second epitaph means “I have learned by revelation,” indicating that Isidora’s father did not associate her cause of death with Isidora’s divinity, and other epigrams that speak to the deceased’s state as a goddess, either explicitly or by implication, bolster this view.⁶⁴⁰ It is further worth considering that the play on the word ‘nymph’ (marriageable maiden) in the second epitaph, culminating in the phrase “nymph is your name,” is reminiscent of the similar conceit in the mid-sixth century BCE Attic epitaph of Phrasikleia, previously mentioned, in which the deceased maiden, who wears a necklace of pomegranates, was to “be called Kore [unmarried maiden or Persephone] forever.”⁶⁴¹ Though Isidora’s heroization (or even divinization, if it is not merely a parent’s hyperbole) seems without doubt, the cause of Isidora’s death must remain inconclusive. Greater interest, and more certainty, lies in the layered meanings the poems evoke and the integration of concordant Greek and Egyptian religious systems that underlie them, noted by nearly all scholars that have addressed the epithets.⁶⁴²

Certainly remarkable, though having remained generally unremarked, is the interweaving of the tomb’s physical elements into the myth.⁶⁴³ The poet calls up the plan of the two-room tomb and the form of its arcosolium with its shell-like ceiling and its supporting columns to fill out the metaphor in the first epitaph, yet none of these elements is discrete to the tomb of Isidora: most Roman-period tombs in the chora are two-room tombs; the shell-like semidome – the conch – is ubiquitous in Roman architecture, and the supporting columns find a place in many other kline niches. The term *thamos*, here used as a metaphor for the burial chamber,⁶⁴⁴ is used to connote the bridal chamber in numerous epitaphs for young women who have died unwed, and the term is then set antithetically to the tomb,⁶⁴⁵ as a metaphor for “the grave instead of marriage” (as recorded by Werner Peek⁶⁴⁶), and that is certainly the subtext here. These interweavings of otherwise commonplace Greek elements into the two

epitaphs suggest that Bernand, Nock, and others are correct to query the specificity of the event underlying its creation.

To the similarities of the ‘deaths’ of Hylas and Osiris, most often conjoined, and to other intersections of religious ritual and thought previously brought to bear,⁶⁴⁷ I should like to recall the sacrifice (θύω) mentioned in the first line of the second epitaph.⁶⁴⁸ As advanced in Chapter One, funerary sacrifices, though known, are rare in Greece and even in the Hellenistic period are limited to heroes,⁶⁴⁹ in Egypt, however, funerary sacrifice is a fixture in the funerary cult.⁶⁵⁰ Upon learning that his daughter is “immortal,” Isidora’s father declares that he intends to *continue* the yearly sacrifice performed for his daughter, dispensing now only with mourning that might accompany the rite. The Greek poem confirms that the sacrifice that has been and will continue to be performed for Isidora – originally unconnected as it is with Isidora’s status as hero – is a sacrifice with roots in Egypt.

Egyptian elements remain strong in the second epitaph. For example, the poet has the three seasons perform offerings to Isidora, but, as noted by Bernand,⁶⁵¹ seasons even in Ptolemaic Egypt were four. The three seasons named in the epitaph (despite two being associated with Greek mythical/religious figures) correspond to ancient Egyptian convention. The Egyptian year was divided into “*akhet*, the inundation season, *peret*, the growing season, and *shemu*, the harvest season,”⁶⁵² and the “representation of the seasons through the agricultural cycle constituted a well-established theme in funerary decoration,”⁶⁵³ which, as noted in Chapter Two, Humphreys has proposed indicates an unchanging state that echoes the timelessness of the existence of the dead.⁶⁵⁴

The offerings bestowed in these three seasons replicate those (the poet says) executed for immortals. Bernand notes that Greeks offered oil and milk at the Nymphalia and that the two liquids were also offered to the dead; and narcissus blooms, he observes, are a suitable offering both to nymphs and to those who die young.⁶⁵⁵ Hani, who considers that all the elements in the poem may be traced to Egyptian ritual and cult, does not address the narcissus, but notes, citing *P. Oxy.* 1211, that Egyptians offer milk, honey, and oil at the festival of the Nile on 30 Payni.⁶⁵⁶ The offerings indicate the similarity in Greek and Egyptian funerary ritual and the difficulty in untangling the two, as well as supporting the confluence of Greek myth and Egyptian ritual. Even if Isidora’s death by drowning is discounted as the reason for her heroization,

Egyptian elements still find a credible place in the Greek texts.

The poems are an amalgam of concepts, and their execution is in the tradition of the tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel and other tombs in the chora, the tombs in Alexandria, and the epitaphs at Leontopolis. As elsewhere in Graeco-Roman Egypt, cultural artifacts are extracted and, unchanged, are set paratactically constructing a bilingual bricolage or a case of metaphorical code-switching. As in the imagery of tomb programs elsewhere in Graeco-Roman Egypt, the eschatological vocabulary and the eschatological value of the discourse are extended by invoking a bilingual form of expression.

House Tombs with Painted Decoration at Tuna el-Gebel

Nevertheless, in contrast to the epitaphs from the tomb of Isidora and the gravestones from Leontopolis, and in greatest contrast to the visual bricolage exhibited elsewhere in the chora as well as in Alexandria, a small number of tombs at Tuna el-Gebel stand apart in assuming a purely Greek mode of representation. These tombs rely on Greek religious paraphernalia, Greek style, and Greek myth alone to convey their eschatological message. Images encountered in these tombs verge on the unique, and their exceptional occurrence at Tuna el-Gebel begs explanation.

Tombs with Dionysiac Imagery

Imagery directly addressing Greek cult is found in at least three house-tombs at Tuna el-Gebel – House-tombs 4, 11, and 14 – unfortunately none of which is well preserved. The tombs form a closed group: all contain images that are connected with the cult of Dionysos, and none preserves a narrative.

House-tombs 11 and 14 are both two-room tombs. House-tomb 11, discovered in 1933 in the south sector of the site, preserves on the back wall of an arcosolium Dionysiac motifs – a thyrsus, masks, and the face of a maenad.⁶⁵⁷ House-tomb 14, set to the west of the tomb of Petosiris,⁶⁵⁸ was, upon excavation, better preserved. Painted to the left of the door that led to the burial room (which held a wooden coffin whose mummy had been dumped on the ground by robbers⁶⁵⁹) was a thyrsus tied with a large ribbon, and painted on the back wall of the

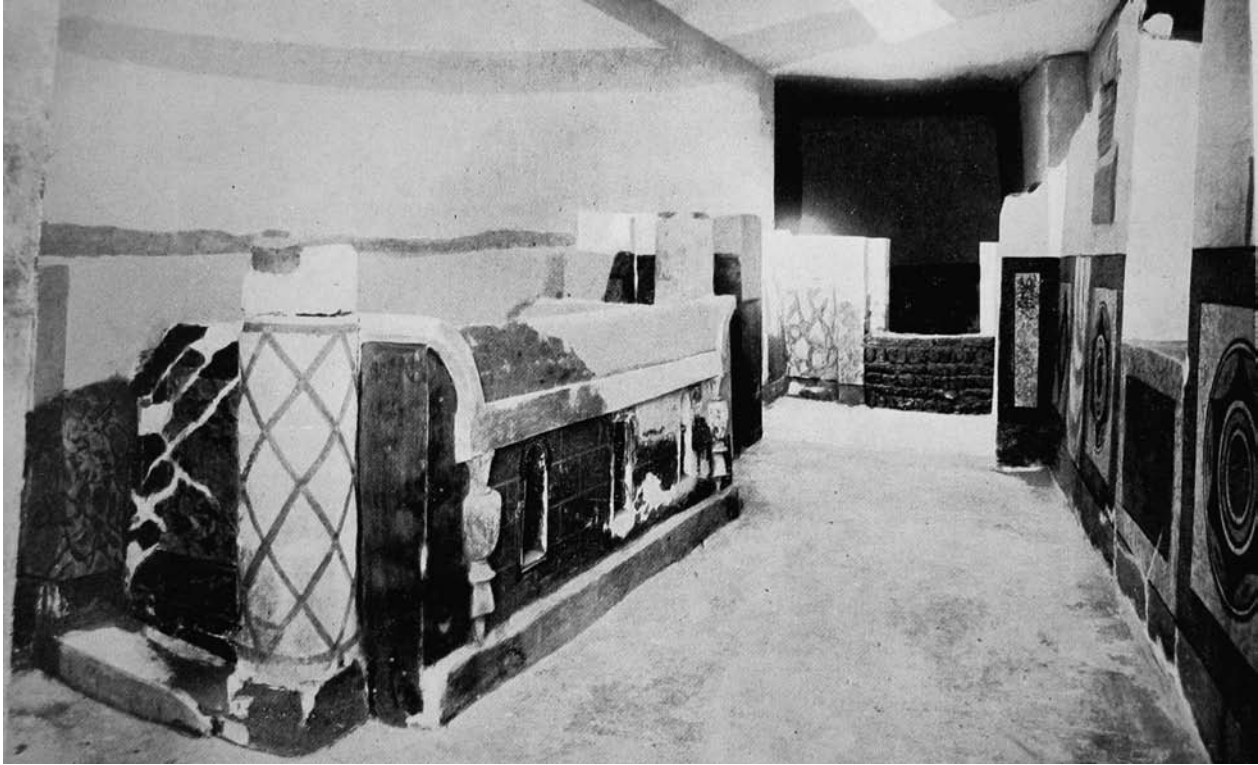
room was a large vine with red boughs replete with green foliage.⁶⁶⁰

House-tomb 4, the best preserved tomb with Dionysiac imagery, was termed the House of the Dionysiac Krater by its excavators. It is a larger building than the others and seemingly far more opulent, with its rooms arranged in an unusually elongated plan.⁶⁶¹ In the first burial room an arcosolium constructed on the west wall holds a sumptuously appointed kline (Fig. 3.4).⁶⁶² The kline is articulated with plastically defined legs painted yellow to replicate wood, a colored and painted mattress cover,⁶⁶³ and a ‘bier-cloth’ painted red with yellow lines to simulate brick. To either side, at the front plane of the kline, white columns with red netting were poised to support the front of the arcosolium.

The main frieze of the wall facing the arcosolium – above orthostates painted to resemble regal porphyry and marble and alabaster – was decorated with Dionysiac imagery (see Fig. 3.4 and Fig. 3.5).⁶⁶⁴ A very large, cylindrical basket or *cista mystica*, is elevated on a base around which a dark-gray serpent, spitting downward, coils itself.⁶⁶⁵ At its left, also set on a base, a footless bell krater almost half a meter high is painted yellow to signify gold or gilding. Its opening is covered with a fine, fringed-edged, beige-colored cloth, which must have been intended to prevent flies from contaminating the liquid. Framing the basket and the krater are two large thyrsos, their tops pointed downward.⁶⁶⁶

Thyrsos and *cistae mysticae* are regular elements of Dionysiac mysteries,⁶⁶⁷ and the motifs in all three tombs with Dionysiac imagery speak to the cult and its ritual. Although it is impossible to sustain Perdrizet’s suspicion that the deceased in House-tomb 4 was a *hierophant* in the mystery cult,⁶⁶⁸ it is significant that the Dionysiac imagery is painted on the wall facing the kline and that this is the only wall in the house-tomb that bears figurative imagery.

Dionysos, a favorite deity of the Ptolemies who traced their lineage to the god, nevertheless had a chthonic presence in the chora, with epigraphic evidence supporting mysteries having been performed to him in Egypt as early as the early Ptolemaic period. An edict of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–205 BCE), which directs persons who initiate to Dionysos to sail to Alexandria in order to register,⁶⁶⁹ and an Orphic/Dionysiac papyrus from Gurôb,⁶⁷⁰ dated to the mid-third century BCE, which preserves a roughly written *hieros logos* that may have been used as



3.4. Tuna el-Gebel, House of Dionysos, the Kline and the Decoration of the Opposite Wall (after Gabra 1941: pl. XXXVII)

a vehicle for initiation by one of these “religious practitioners,”⁶⁷¹ indicate an early mystery cult of the deity. The loculus slab from Alexandria that depicts the realm of Hades with the figure of Dionysos in its foreground – discussed in Chapter Two⁶⁷² – lends credence to the cult in Alexandria, and the tomb paintings from Tuna el-Gebel provide evidence for a continuation of the cult into Roman times.

Tombs with Greek Myth Narratives

Conspicuously more remarkable, however, than the cult paraphernalia painted on tomb walls at Tuna el-Gebel are the narratives in the house-tombs that employ Greek myth for their subject. Like the paintings of Dionysiac cult implements, these narrative scenes bear an eschatological meaning, but they also incorporate an intention that extends beyond the metaphysical and that provides their social context. These tombs are notable for two reasons: first, within the context of mortuary monuments in all of Egypt, they are almost unique in choosing to depict Greek myth at all; and, second, they depict aspects or iconographical details of the myth rare (or even unique) in either Graeco-Roman Egypt or elsewhere in the ancient

Mediterranean world. Thus both the choice of myth and the specificity of visualization require consideration to situate the images within their eschatological context in the ancient world as well as within their social context in Graeco-Roman Egypt.

The Tomb of the Abduction of Persephone

Among the mythological paintings from tombs at Tuna el-Gebel, the one from House-tomb 3 of the abduction of Persephone is the best known and its subject the most conventional. It shows the only mythological subject from the site that appears with any frequency elsewhere in Greek and Roman mortuary imagery or, for that matter, in Greek and Roman art, and its normalcy occasions its reproduction and reference when its subject is mentioned elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite these commonalities with other representations, the Tuna el-Gebel image contains details that render it unique among its counterparts.

The tomb that includes the painting has been dated at some time before the second century CE on the basis of its architectural resemblance to the tomb of Isidora and the orthography of its inscription.⁶⁷³ Like the great



3.5. Tuna el-Gebel, House of Dionysos, the Wall Decoration (German Archaeological Institute, Cairo F-10018)

majority of tombs at Tuna el-Gebel, it consists of two rooms, both of which bore decoration when excavated.⁶⁷⁴ The first room is architecturally embellished with painted orthostats topped by a red and black band. According to an epigram painted on the back wall of a niche set into the middle of the right wall, the tomb held the remains of two brothers:

... I have written the inscription in Ionian, so that you might see it, I, the son of Phantias and of Hermias, his brother. But I am going to tell you their names and mine. They were renowned, in fact, among men, both of them, Eudaimon, together with his brother Menelaos. I shared in their renown, and I resemble my fathers. My name is

Didymos; among men I am also called . . . *ton*. Yes, on the entrance chamber I have written the inscription.⁶⁷⁵

The second chamber, as also frequently seen at Tuna el-Gebel, focuses on a funerary niche. This niche holds a brick-built kline, less sumptuous than that in the House of the Dionysiac Krater, and one that utilizes a very different conceit. Simple legs are inscribed on a structure otherwise painted to appear as if built from brick with dark lines to define the mortar, at once elaborating upon itself and other brick-built banquettes at Tuna el-Gebel in an extraordinarily postmodern fashion. The kline niche is flanked by two columns painted to simulate green, variegated marble that support a vaulted roof.⁶⁷⁶ Painted on

the back wall of the niche, about a half-meter above the funerary bed, is the abduction of Persephone by Hades. Almost upon discovery, much of the painting separated from the wall and broke into fragments, but fortunately it had first been photographed and copied in watercolor by Youssef Khafaga (Pl. XI).⁶⁷⁷

The Tuna el-Gebel *Abduction of Persephone* is at once a canonical image of the scene and simultaneously unique. Led by Hermes and accompanied by Eros, the quadriga of Hades, centered within the image, dominates the composition as it wheels from left to right. Hermes, a kerykeion in his left hand, and nude but for a chlamys over his left shoulder,⁶⁷⁸ leads the way into the cavern of the underworld realm. Behind him, the horses of the quadriga, painted a dark brown or black,⁶⁷⁹ leap forward, their forelegs raised and their hind legs pushing off from the ground, in the pose that the team assumes in almost all Roman depictions of the scene. Hades, dressed in a deep yellow himation that falls off his right shoulder to bare his chest, acts as charioteer, the reins held loosely in his hand: the team clearly knows where it is bound. With his other hand at her waist, Hermes holds Persephone, who wears the saffron-colored (κροκίνοσ) garment of the bride, her arms upraised in distress and her mantle streaming out behind her. Behind the chariot flies (or runs) Eros, pointing at the scene, his bow strung but his arrow not yet readied to be loosed. Despite Persephone's distress, following Ovid (*Metamorphoses* V. 362–396), the scene is to be read as one charged by Hades' love.

With the diagonals inscribed by the chariot pole, the outstretched arms of Kore and the position of her body, and the elliptical shape assumed by the chariot's wheels, the scene endorses the illusionary depth created by the use of three-quarter view observed in more visually successful versions of the scene. Nevertheless the space that the scene inhabits is distinct from these, and the reliefs on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum constitute the best comparison for the arrangement of its components. As in these reliefs, the center of the action in the painting breaks the front plane of the image, projecting out into the viewer's space, while the left and right sides of the narrative recede into the near distance. The artist of the Persephone painting, however, has little of the innate skill that marks the carvers of the reliefs, though the figure of Hermes, passing into the cavern, is eerily reminiscent of Titus' soldiers receding through the arch depicted in the Spoils scene. If the tomb is correctly dated somewhat before the second century, the similarity of the painting's compositional technique to that of the

relief on the arch, erected in 81 CE, might not be entirely fortuitous.⁶⁸⁰

Among the mythological scenes at Tuna el-Gebel, only the scene with the abduction of Persephone lacks a full complement of inscriptions, bearing out Roger Ling's observation that most mythological scenes in the Levant and Egypt need inscriptions to aid their identification. "[I]t almost seems," he says, "the artists felt that the subjects were unfamiliar to their clients."⁶⁸¹ In the Roman East, as well as in Egypt, the abduction of Persephone must have been familiar enough to obviate the need for labels. Unlabeled, it is seen painted on the wall of the tomb near Tyre dated to the third quarter of the second century CE,⁶⁸² which contains the image of Tantalus noted in Chapter Two, and on the facade of a rock-cut sarcophagus in a tomb near Massyaf in Syria dated to the second half of the second century CE or as late as the third.⁶⁸³ In both Levantine tombs, figures in other mythological narratives are labeled. In Alexandria, as has been noted, Persephone's abduction is the sole Greek mythological scene yet discovered, appearing twice, and again with characters untagged.

The Tuna el-Gebel representation of the myth is unique among extant visual treatments of the episode in delineating an underground cavern as the chariot's destination, though another unusual representation on the sarcophagus in the tomb near Massyaf shows Ge (Earth) lifting her hand to guide Hermes to his destination under the earth.⁶⁸⁴ Aside from their undeniably clumsy style, the images from Tuna el-Gebel and Massyaf share few similarities, but one detail is especially noteworthy: the figure of Hades in the Massyaf painting is nimbused,⁶⁸⁵ and, though the observation has been queried, the one in the Tuna el-Gebel painting has also been correspondingly described.⁶⁸⁶

Greeks inherited the concept the halo of light either from the Ancient Near East or Egypt, employing it first for deities, but by the fourth century BCE, according to Plutarch (*Alex.* 63.4), Alexander could be seen preceded by an apparition of light. By the Roman period the power and authority of divine beings were visualized by affording them a blue or white nimbus with yellow being reserved for astral deities.⁶⁸⁷ Nevertheless, in the abduction of Persephone, a nimbused Hades is rarely encountered.⁶⁸⁸

In the Greek and Roman world, from among the possibilities of representation that the Persephone myth presents, the scene of the maiden's abduction is the one most frequently found in sepulchral context.⁶⁸⁹ It is the

iconic image that conjures up the extended story and the pivotal moment that activates the *raison d'être* of its funerary presence. As the motif is not gender specific – established by the epitaph inscribed on the Tuna el-Gebel tomb and by evidence from other tombs –⁶⁹⁰ neither is the seminal moment necessary to picture.⁶⁹¹ Her abduction permits Persephone to become the Greek trope for death and resurrection, as the Alexandrian Persephone tombs confirm: her abduction quite literally sets the wheels in motion. Like the other painted images at Tuna el-Gebel, the *Abduction of Persephone* participates metaphorically for an audience educated in the Greek literary tradition.

The Tomb of the Trojan Horse

Unlike the often-replicated and well-understood theme of the abduction of Persephone, the painting from House-tomb 23 inserts itself among the enigmatic paintings from Tuna el-Gebel whose meaning and inclusion in funerary context implore explanation (Pl. XII).⁶⁹² The painting was badly damaged when discovered, and even the watercolorist who attempted to reproduce the image had trouble re-creating the credibility of the wooden horse.⁶⁹³ Nevertheless, the original excavation photograph⁶⁹⁴ and the actual fragment preserved in Cairo⁶⁹⁵ permit the horse's wheels (not mentioned by Perdrizet) greater clarity,⁶⁹⁶ and the entire composition seems to follow one that is well known: the horse at the left of the image and a scene of banqueting Trojans to the right – the latter also clearer in the original than in the watercolor copy.

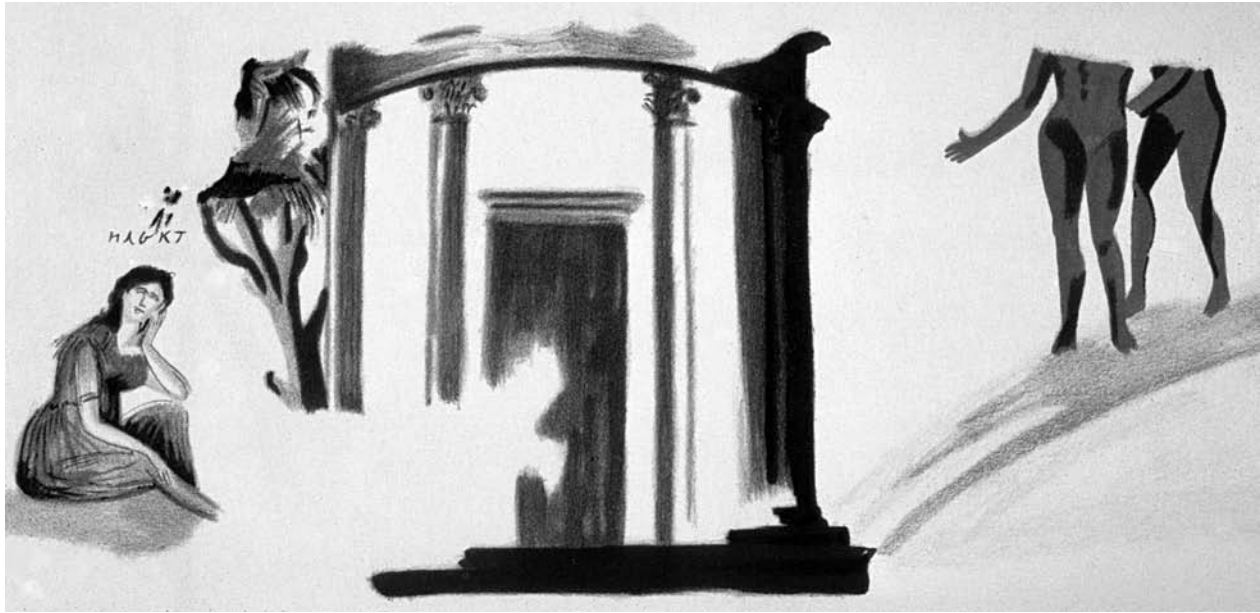
The subject is rare in Greek and Roman representation, but its appearance elsewhere in funerary context further supports the identification by Perdrizet. A similar, though longer, scene is found on an Etruscan funerary urn, probably dating to the first century BCE;⁶⁹⁷ and another long scene, which, however, excludes the banqueting Trojans, is seen on a Roman sarcophagus lid at Oxford.⁶⁹⁸ A second Roman example on the vault of a funerary chamber, now destroyed, on the Villa Corsini in Rome showed the horse and included Cassandra attempting to restrain a Trojan woman.⁶⁹⁹ The extract of the scene on a relief amphora in Mykonos, dated to the second quarter of the seventh century BCE and found in a tomb,⁷⁰⁰ however, is probably the best known image.

Homer mentions the Greek plot to breach Trojan defenses with a wooden horse in the *Odyssey* (4.271–289; 8.499–515), as do the authors of the *Little Iliad* (I) and the *Iliou Persis* (who begins his account with the

horse), but the earliest extended account is in Virgil's *Aeneid* (II.13–267). Nowhere in the extant early textual accounts, however, are the details as clear as those seen in early representations. The most ancient extant visualization is on a Boeotian fibula, dated ca. 700 BCE;⁷⁰¹ it indicates the horse as mechanical by its wheels and as the wooden horse by squares that must indicate the 'windows,' which, slightly later, characterize the mechanism. The slightly later relief amphora in Mykonos shows the horse in a rigid pose, similar to the Tuna el-Gebel horse, but employs hatching to visit attention to the wheels supporting its hooves. The Mykonos horse, like the one on the Boeotian fibula, further clarifies its heredity through the windows that punctuate its body and neck and, in its case, in which heads of Greek warriors are illuminated, as are their extended arms bearing weaponry or armor.⁷⁰²

The banquet, seen at the right of the Tuna el-Gebel painting, is apparently a later visual addition to the scene.⁷⁰³ The first-century BCE Etruscan urn is perhaps the earliest object to include this episode, which is later seen on a wooden shield preserved from Dura Europus⁷⁰⁴ and in a vignette in the Vatican Virgil.⁷⁰⁵ The wide distribution of the motif suggests, as proposed by L. Bouke van der Meer,⁷⁰⁶ that a Hellenistic manuscript painting underlay the image, and it is to this tradition that the Tuna el-Gebel painting belongs.

The myth is fitting in sepulchral context. Based on its explication in the *Iliou Persis*, and especially after its lengthy account provided in the *Aeneid*, the myth that is encapsulated in the image of the Trojan Horse could easily be employed to exemplify death at its most poignant: the demise of Laocoon, priest of Apollo at Troy, who had argued against trusting the motives of "Greeks bearing gifts,"⁷⁰⁷ the destruction of the once-proud city, and all that ensued from the defeat: the deaths of elites – epitomized by Polyxena, Astyanax, and Priam and his sons – and of thousands of others; the abduction of Cassandra and other Trojan women; and the exodus of the living from the land. The image of the Trojan Horse, as the pivotal image for the disastrous end of the war, acts much as that of Persephone's abduction does in exemplifying the entire myth. The wooden horse augured the end to a civilization, and – aside from the elegiac connotations – the Greek inhabitants of Hermopolis Magna, living as second-class citizens under Roman rule, must have found great satisfaction in the depiction of a myth describing Trojan defeat since, through Aeneas, Trojans were ancestral to Rome. On a deeper level, however,



3.6. Tuna el-Gebel, House-tomb 16, Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon (after Gabra 1954: pl. 17 [Upper Left])

the myth of the Trojan Horse, incorporating, as it does, the theme of ignorance setting in motion the tragedy that ensues in its wake, accords with subjects painted in House-tomb 16 at Tuna el-Gebel, and that similarity may herald the more profound reason for its inclusion in funerary context.

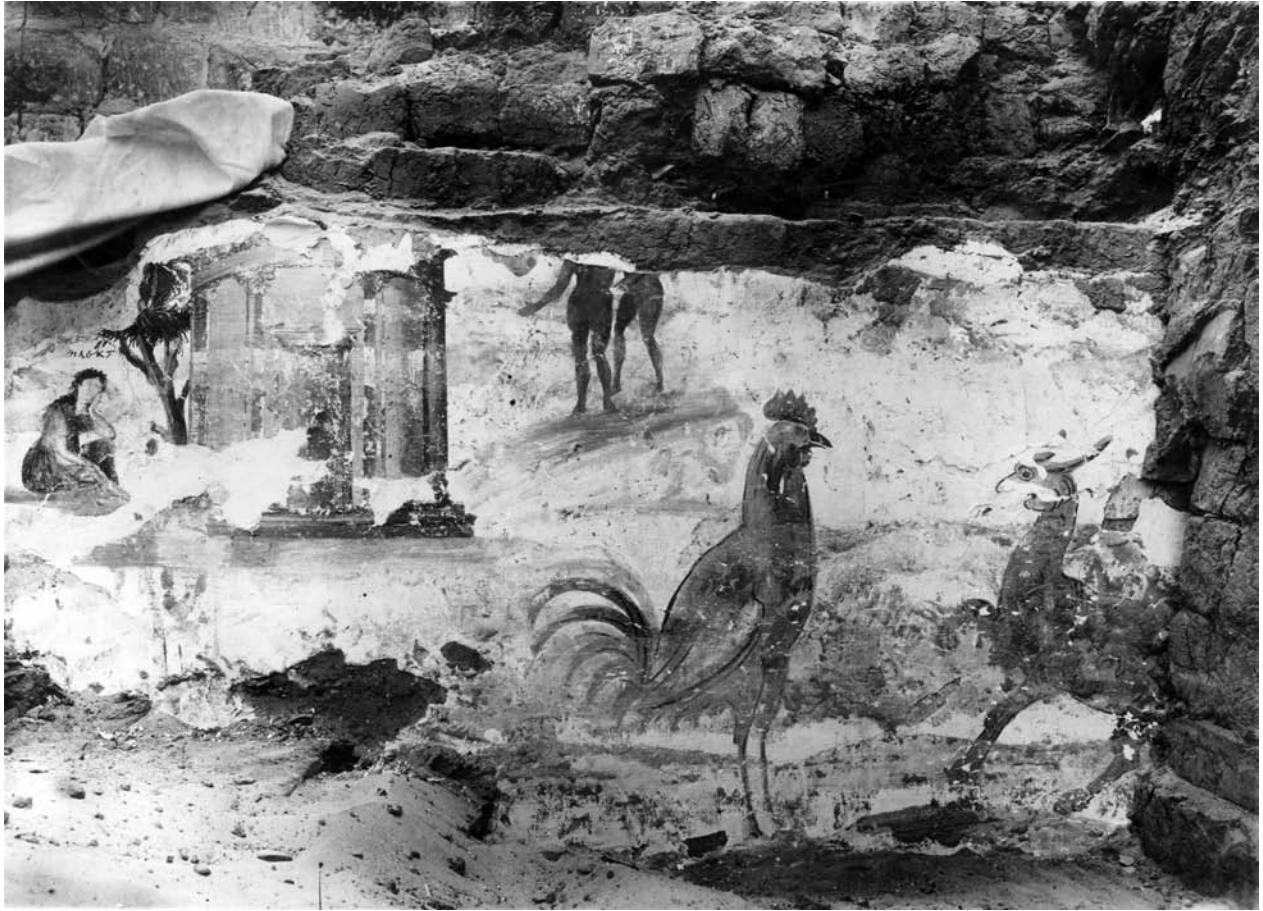
The Tomb of the Oresteia and of Oedipus

House-tomb 16 boasts the largest collection of Greek myths at Tuna el-Gebel and the most remarkable. Another two-story mortuary building, it supposedly had been decorated on both the interior and the exterior with paintings,⁷⁰⁸ which must have comprised an enormous ensemble but of which only fragments existed upon its excavation in February 1934.⁷⁰⁹ The tomb preserves an almost complete painting of the myth of Oedipus and fragments that indicate the possibility of an Orestes cycle: one fragment of painted stucco, found in an upper-floor room,⁷¹⁰ retains the letters ΑΓΑΜ – the beginning of the name of Orestes' father Agamemnon – and, on another fragment, the name Orestes is inscribed beside the head of a young man.⁷¹¹ More complete among the fragments from this putative Orestes cycle is the painting from the ground floor of the tomb.

Centered by a prostyle Corinthian tholos,⁷¹² the scene is focused on Electra (Fig. 3.6),⁷¹³ and though Orestes cycles are frequent on Roman sarcophagi,⁷¹⁴ the part of the story that concerns his sister is usually absent.⁷¹⁵

In the Tuna el-Gebel painting, the mourning Electra (inscribed ΗΛΕΚΤ) sits at the left, clothed in black. At the right, from a distance and on a curved expanse indicative of a slope, two nude males approach, both of whom are preserved only in their lower halves. Assuredly they are Electra's brother, Orestes, and his companion, Pylades. The image may originally have been imagined as a vignettted sacral landscape, though all that now remains is the indication of the hill down which Orestes and Pylades descend and a tree to the left of the tholos, which, finding a visual counterpart in a funerary urn from Olbia,⁷¹⁶ is undoubtedly intended as the tomb of Agamemnon, the father of the siblings. Seemingly out of place, just to the right and painted lower on the wall, a large, sanguine cock confronts a fierce griffin, both painted to a scale far greater than the mythological scene and thrusting it to the middleground of the wall (Fig. 3.7).

This confrontation finds parallels. House-tomb 20 (see Chapter Four) shows two pairs of confronted cocks, one pair of which dispute over a garland.⁷¹⁷ Maggie Popkin has argued for roosters on Panathenaic amphorae embodying protection,⁷¹⁸ and cocks are seen inhabiting the underworld in South Italy, where they may well play that role⁷¹⁹ – a role undoubtedly transferred to the walls of tombs at Tuna el-Gebel. For their part, griffins in the Late Classical period guard the gold – the treasure beneath the earth – from Arimasps in the north,⁷²⁰



3.7. Tuna el-Gebel, House-tomb 16, Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon and Cocks (IFAO NU 2000–4902)

and their fierceness and their Roman-period association with Dionysos and Nemesis⁷²¹ afford griffins a role in the sepulchral realm.⁷²² These connections – as those of the sepulchral and protective cocks – may well explain their introduction here.

Though Perdrizet believes that the mythological image of Electra mourning at the tomb of her father stems from Aeschylus' tragedy the *Choephoroi* (458 BCE), the image adheres neither to Aeschylus' text nor to other images that use the play as their inspiration.⁷²³ The *Choephoroi* opens with Orestes and Pylades at the tomb of Agamemnon (*Choeph.* 4–5); Orestes prays to Hermes Chthonios, dedicates a lock of hair (6–7), then draws aside as Electra and her slave women approach. Here, though, with the seated Electra and approaching youths, the painting describes the antithesis of that encounter. Concurrently, the Tuna el-Gebel image differs from the scheme of the *Electra* of both Sophocles and Euripides. In Sophocles' *Electra* (1113–1170), the meeting takes place in front

of a palace: Orestes and Pylades approach Electra, the former carrying a golden urn allegedly containing his own cremation, and Electra laments his apparent death until Orestes reveals himself.⁷²⁴ In the *Electra* of Euripides (215–219), the reunion takes place in front of Electra's house. The Tuna el-Gebel image fits none of the fifth-century BCE tragedians' accounts.

The reunion of sister and brother in front of the tomb of their father Agamemnon is found frequently on fourth-century BCE South Italian vases, where it is likely that the scene, as here, had a funerary function.⁷²⁵ Images on these vases rarely show the crucial moment of recognition embedded in the text of fifth-century dramas, preferring most often, however, a symmetrical composition with the mourning Electra seated at the grave site flanked by the two young men.⁷²⁶ Yet the Tuna el-Gebel image circumvents these earlier visual models too.⁷²⁷

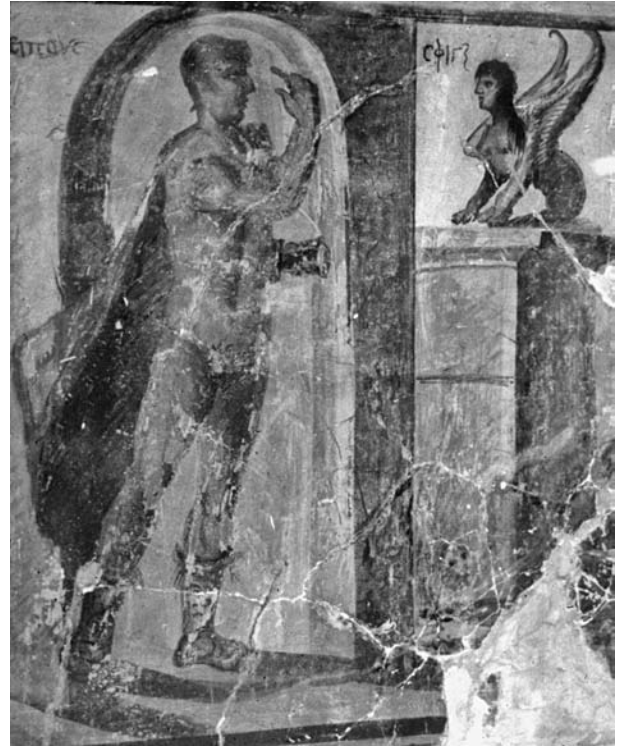
Though it is plausible that the fragmentary figure of Orestes bore the golden urn, and thus it is Sophocles'

version of the meeting at the palace that the painter had in mind or, equally plausible, that he imagined Euripides' *Electra* in front of her house, even though the building is temple or tomb shaped,⁷²⁸ it is most likely that he knew only the general schema of the story and that in his painting he alludes to no specific text at all.

The House-tomb 16 Orestes cycle (if we can postulate even more images than are actually extant) revolves around grievous acts, but speaks ultimately to redemption. Without knowing the specific scenes that were depicted and their spacial relation to one another on the walls, it is difficult to derive any definitive meaning from their choice. Nevertheless, the most complete painting, the one that joins Electra and Orestes at the tomb of their father, recognizes the intense emotional effect the meeting evoked – the death of Agamemnon deeply lamented by his two children – and the image might be considered analogous to mysteries that elicited from its initiates a similar profound emotional experience, as argued by Richard Seaford for Sophocles' play.⁷²⁹

Despite the presumed complexity of the putative Orestes cycle, however, the most important and most tantalizing find preserved from House-tomb 16 is the painting discovered in a room on the upper floor of the house.⁷³⁰ The painting comprises a frieze illustrating key moments in the life of Oedipus, and it remains the most complete, most complex, most original, and probably the largest Greek-style painting preserved from Tuna el-Gebel and perhaps from all Egypt (Pl. XIII).⁷³¹ The painting is unique, not only among extant examples from Egypt, but also among extant visual representations of the myth from any time and any place in antiquity. It combines the major scenes that visually identify the story of Oedipus and three personifications, two of which are rarely seen elsewhere (and, in those cases, iconographically distant from their Tuna el-Gebel representation) and a third that is unique to the Tuna el-Gebel painting. The painting finds few parallels for any of its components, and the affinities it does find carry a meaning far removed from those encountered in the Tuna el-Gebel image.

The frieze is bounded by a triple line in blue, yellow, and black delineating it as a system complete within itself: it is meant to be read as a picture hung on the wall of the mortuary house. Conceived as a tripartite composition, it presents two scenes from the life of Oedipus bracketing the personifications that add both texture and meaning to the composition. At the left, Oedipus confronts the sphinx, while at the right, he slays his birth-father, Laios.



3.8. Tuna el-Gebel, House-tomb 16, Oedipus and the Sphinx (Author Photo)

Between these two episodes, the personification of the Boeotian city of Thebes, reclining against a rocky outcrop that indicates Mount Kithairon where Laios had exposed the infant Oedipus,⁷³² is centered in the panel. To her right and slightly in front of her lounges the male personification Zetema (Inquiry or Search), and, to her left, the female personification Agnoia (Ignorance) recoils from the murder at the right end of the panel. All the characters, including the sphinx and the nymph personifying Thebes, are designated by inscription, reminding us of Ling's observation that mythological scenes in the Levant and Egypt necessitated inscriptions,⁷³³ though, in this case, the obscurity of two of the personifications and the unique forms all three assume would have confounded even mainland Greeks. Seemingly a continuous narrative, the artist (if we accept a normal reading being left to right) chose to invert the chronological order of the two scenes from Oedipus' life: the death of Laios is at the right end of the panel, and Oedipus' mastery of the sphinx's question is at the left.

Oedipus, nude but for calf-high boots and chlamys and with the baldric of his sword sheath slung over his left shoulder, leans toward the sphinx (see Pl. XIII and Fig. 3.8). His left hand grasps the hilt of the sword; his right

arm is raised.⁷³⁴ The sphinx is a Greek sphinx. Female and winged, she sits back on her haunches with her forelegs locked as she crouches on a wide rectilinear base. In most extant images of the scene – both Greek and Roman – the sphinx dominates the composition: either she is placed on a high column, pillar, or promontory, gazing down at the pitiable mortal she expects to dispatch, or, if seated at the same level as Oedipus, she is usually pictured as preternaturally large.⁷³⁵ Yet the Tuna el-Gebel sphinx is painted as unusually small, seemingly far out of proportion to the podium on which she sits, and, instead of the proud, upright pose Greek sphinxes normally assume, she draws back. Despite the human skulls that lie about beneath her support,⁷³⁶ both her scale and her posture suggest she has been intimidated by Oedipus: she is quite literally taken aback. For unlike the greatest number of interpretations of the scene, which show Oedipus – hand at chin – pondering the sphinx’s question, the Tuna el-Gebel artist has chosen the revelatory moment of the encounter.⁷³⁷ Oedipus raises his right hand and points to himself. As Karl Lehmann notes, Oedipus has solved the riddle posed by the sphinx and indicates himself as Man.⁷³⁸

The setting of this third of the painting is outside the walls of Boeotian Thebes, marked by a stone, arched gateway. Perdrizet, who adduces the theater for all aspects of the representation, identifies “the door under or in front of which Oedipus stands as he responds to the sphinx” as theatrical,⁷³⁹ but since doors and doorways are not normally arched, it is unlikely that his identification is correct. Lehmann,⁷⁴⁰ more imaginatively, identifies the gateway as the door to the Elysian Fields but, though Lehmann’s interpretation is seductive given the funerary context of the picture, no evidence can be brought to bear to support his thesis. Certainly, since the inquisition of the sphinx occurs outside the city walls of Thebes, and since arches often mark the entrance to a (Roman) city, it is most plausible that a city gate is the intended meaning for the arched opening.

The central third of the composition depicts the personifications Thebe and Zetema (see Pl. XIII and Figs. 3.9 and 3.10). Zetema, seated with his legs to his left, looks back to his right, his gaze connecting him to the scene of Oedipus and the sphinx. Thebe, seated in a mirrored pose, gazes to her left toward the murder of Laios.

The Tuna el-Gebel painting depicts the only known example of the personification of Zetema (Inquiry or Search).⁷⁴¹ Greek personifications normally follow the gender of the aspect they personify: Thanatos (Death),



3.9. Tuna el-Gebel, House-tomb 16, Zetema and Thebe (Author Photo)

for example, is male, whereas Thebe, as most city personifications – to accord with the gender of the Greek noun for city (ἡ πόλις) – is female.⁷⁴² Zetema (τὸ ζήτημα), however, is neuter, so, unless a tradition existed of which no examples remain, the artist was free to choose either gender for his personification. He chose male. This choice of gender might have been arbitrary, or it might reflect the antithetical relationship of Zetema and Agnoia explored at the conclusion of this section. In either case, Zetema is shown as a seated, half-draped youth with a himation wrapped about his lower body, who looks toward Oedipus.

Lehmann identifies Zetema as assuming the pose of Narcissus, based presumably on the image best known from the Pompeian Domus Lucretii Frontonis⁷⁴³ (seeing Zetema, too, gazing at his reflection in the lacuna that remains below), and draws a connection between the two youths,⁷⁴⁴ but this interpretation is impossible to endorse. First, though Zetema is a young, half-draped male relaxing languorously, his head turned back



3.10. Tuna el-Gebel, House-tomb 16, Oedipus Painting, the Right Side (Author Photo)

toward his supporting arm like Narcissus in the painting from Pompeii, he merely assumes the open pose that best exhibits the bodies of young, seductive males and one that is therefore employed for a number of mortal and semimortal mythic youths – Kyparissos, for example, who is a narrative doublet of Narcissus, known from his mention by Ovid;⁷⁴⁵ Hippolytos;⁷⁴⁶ Endymion;⁷⁴⁷ Ganymede (who assumes a variant pose of Endymion);⁷⁴⁸ and Adonis⁷⁴⁹ – as well as for generic youths.⁷⁵⁰ Nor is the pose exclusive to attractive youths: it is also employed for females,⁷⁵¹ female deities,⁷⁵² and nymphs,⁷⁵³ so any meaningful iconographic connection of Zetema with Narcissus is impossible to sustain.⁷⁵⁴ Second, the pose for the self-absorbed Narcissus finds a number of variations, as does that of the other characters that assume like poses,⁷⁵⁵ and these variations deny any pose assuming a specific identification. Third, the actual painting from Tuna el-Gebel (unlike the watercolor rendering of it) shows that although Zetema's head is inclined, his gaze is directed toward Oedipus.⁷⁵⁶ Fourth, the nymph Thebe in the Tuna el-Gebel painting is one of the nymphs that assumes the precise mirror image of the 'Narcissus pose.' And fifth, and most important, other figures (including, here, Thebe) also find their models in well-known works without necessarily carrying the meaning of these

figures.⁷⁵⁷ And this seems to be the way models work in antiquity. The painting in Bissing's tomb from 1897, discussed in Chapter Five, uses the same model for a 'portrait' of the deceased as that employed for Moses in the synagogue at Dura Europus in Syria, and not even the greatest imaginative stretch can easily link the two characters portrayed. In the Oedipus painting, as elsewhere, model and meaning do not necessarily coincide.⁷⁵⁸

To Zetema's left sits Thebe, in her mirror-image pose of Zetema. Framed by Mount Kithairon, she marks the midpoint of the painting. Thebe is the nymph who lent her name to the city Laios ruled and in which Oedipus was born and that he was to rule. Thus, whereas Search or Inquiry regards Oedipus' encounter with the sphinx, Thebe turns her gaze toward the confrontation between her former and her future king.

Topographical personifications were well established by the time of the Tuna el-Gebel painting. In literature, localities, like deities, were early given human form, and, although no Xenophanes mocked their similarity to humankind,⁷⁵⁹ one only has to consider the 'Homeric Hymns' to Apollo (30–47) for the anthropomorphized lands that "trembled" and "were afraid" when Leto begged them to permit her touching down to give birth to her twins and to recall Telphousa (244–276),

whom Apollo encountered when he sought a spot for his sanctuary. Given this literary inclination toward personification and the added impetus provided by the many Greek cities that boasted illustrious founders who themselves incorporated well-known mythical form, it is surprising that personifications of cities and other geographical features can be identified with certainty in visual form beginning only in the Early Classical period.

The Boeotian city of Thebes is among the earlier preserved visualizations of topical personifications,⁷⁶⁰ though in no other extant monument is the female figure paired with Oedipus. The Tuna el-Gebel Thebe wears only a himation wrapped at her hips and supports the stem of a large bud with her right hand⁷⁶¹ in a depiction that is unique. She does not find her visual model in the fully draped female figure that had early personified the city,⁷⁶² nor in Hellenistic images of the personification,⁷⁶³ nor in Imperial images known from Boeotian coins.⁷⁶⁴ Instead, her depiction is either based on a much copied statue of a generic nymph,⁷⁶⁵ or, alternatively, it is intentionally constructed to mirror Zetema, to whom Thebe bears a close, though gender-bent, resemblance. In either case, like Zetema, the figure of Thebe in the Tuna el-Gebel painting takes its form from an image unconnected with the meaning it carries, and like Zetema, by inscription, she imposes her identity upon that form. As with all personifications in the painting, the form itself does not convey the meaning.

The third personification, Agnoia (Ignorance) (see Pl. XIII and Fig. 3.10), is one rarely depicted visually and one that may have surfaced relatively late. Lucian (*Calumniae non temere credendum* 4), writing in the second century CE, credits Apelles (whose date is problematic) with including Agnoia in his painting *Calumny* but, in his ekphrasis, Lucian makes it clear that the figure is not labeled and that the identification is his own.⁷⁶⁶ The earliest certain occurrence of Agnoia is in a play by Menander (ca. 342–291 BCE; the date of the play uncertain), as Perdrizet points out,⁷⁶⁷ who had the personification recite the prologue in his *Perikeiromene* (*The Girl with Her Hair Cut Short*),⁷⁶⁸ and surviving papyri that preserve texts of Menander's plays testify to the admiration of his works by Greek speakers in Egypt. Later, multiple Agnoias are met in the philosophical landscape of the 'Plaque of Kebes' (27.4), written probably in the first century CE.⁷⁶⁹ Nevertheless, despite Lucian's familiarity with the personification, any lasting influence that Apelles or Menander or 'Kebes' might have had on the introduction of Agnoia seems slight, since the Tuna el-Gebel

painting is one of only two certain extant visual examples of the personification, and the second, a standing frontal female figure drawn on a papyrus,⁷⁷⁰ bears no formal resemblance to the Tuna el-Gebel image, despite its identifying inscription.⁷⁷¹

Oedipus' encounter with the sphinx is a frequent subject in funerary context, but the death of Laios, seen at the far right of the panel (see Pl. XIII and Fig. 3.10), is a scene rarely represented,⁷⁷² and an extended narrative of the Oedipus tale, as seen at Tuna el-Gebel, is even more unusual. A rare extant example of the death of Laios paired with Oedipus and the sphinx appears on a sarcophagus lid in the Vatican dated ca. 220 CE.⁷⁷³ The disposition of the two scenes parallels that of the Tuna el-Gebel painting, with the sphinx encounter at the left and the death of Laios (whom Oedipus wrests from his chariot to slay) at the right, but instead of depicting the personifications found in the Tuna el-Gebel painting, the central scenes on the sarcophagus lid are given over to the childhood of Oedipus.⁷⁷⁴

In literature, the fullest version of the encounter of Oedipus with Laios is related by Apollodorus (III.V.7), active in the second century BCE. He records that when Oedipus and Laios, each in a chariot, met at a narrow spot in the road, Laios' herald ordered Oedipus to move aside. When Oedipus refused, the herald killed one of Oedipus' horses, and an enraged Oedipus then dispatched both the herald and King Laios. As on the Vatican sarcophagus lid, the moment chosen in the few extant visualizations (and, among those, in which the moment is clear enough to interpret) is the one at which Oedipus drags Laios from his chariot before he delivers the fatal blow. The Tuna el-Gebel painter, idiosyncratically, chooses a later moment. Here Laios, garbed in white chiton (?) and thick brown himation, has sunk to his knees, facing three-quarters toward the viewer. He spreads out his hands in supplication as Oedipus grabs him by the hair with one hand and, with the other, sinks his short sword into the body of his father. The outstretched legs and arms of Oedipus, his chlamys billowing behind him, and the diagonal shadow that emphasizes the thrust of his feet conspire to contrast the virile ephebe with the submissive older man. Though he positions himself as far from Laios as his short weapon permits,⁷⁷⁵ at this horrific moment Oedipus is nevertheless seen as heroic. The horizontal created by Oedipus' arm and the vertical line created by his sword mirror the form of the stele in front of which Laios sinks, which must represent the stele that will mark his grave.⁷⁷⁶ The stele also connects the figure of Agnoia

with the Oedipus and Laios group, since Agnoia stands directly in front of the stele as she raises her arms, recoiling from the scene.⁷⁷⁷

No one has satisfactorily explained the meaning of the Oedipus painting in its mortuary context. Perdrizet⁷⁷⁸ takes the owner of the house-tomb as a Sophist who desired a moral in the decoration for his tomb, whereas Ida Baldassarre, who faithfully follows Lehmann's description of the painting, presents a fragmented and convoluted interpretation. She argues that the painting illustrates neither the myth of Oedipus nor any play based on that myth, but instead is a philosophical-religious elucidation of the myth, in which "the search itself, the recognition itself, the *zetein*, is interrupted by the disaster of ignorance."⁷⁷⁹ She notes that "in Neoplatonic thought of late antiquity, the story of Narcissus will become, in fact, an allegory for the search for truth carried finally to its extreme consequence."⁷⁸⁰ Her explanation of the painting's meaning is clearly tortuous. How Narcissus is perceived in late antiquity is irrelevant to the painting since the painting, on the one hand, does not illustrate the myth of Narcissus and, on the other, is not of Late Antique date. It is unquestionably a painting of episodes in the life of Oedipus, and its meaning has to be derived with that materiality in mind.

Jean-Marc Moret disputes any philosophical similarity of Zetema to Narcissus, arguing that "the contemplative act [had], in each context, an entirely different signification,"⁷⁸¹ and he correctly stresses the symmetrical composition as a key component to the meaning of the scene. He draws attention to the "centripetal action" of the two narrative scenes emanating from the centrality of Thebe and thus locates the city as the focal point of the action, but he takes this signification no further.⁷⁸² Moret's visual analysis is compelling, although his conclusion does not fit the context of the image: a focus on Boeotian Thebes seems an unlikely reason for the scene to appear at Tuna el-Gebel. Yet if Thebe – sited beneath Mount Kithairon and acting as its identifier – is viewed metaphorically to reference the infancy of Oedipus, complementing the epebe who has solved the riddle and the old man Laios about to meet his death, the tripartite composition can be seen to reiterate the riddle's three stages in the life of Man. The composition then reinforces not only Oedipus' solution to the sphinx's puzzle, but the breadth of human life, itself appropriate to a funerary monument. It connects the painting to the only other extant monument that includes the episodes of both the sphinx and the death of Laios, the sarcophagus lid in the Vatican adduced earlier that

shows scenes from the childhood of Oedipus bridging the two events.⁷⁸³ The centrality of Thebe, referencing the exposure of the infant on the slopes of Mount Kithairon that precipitated the two flanking events, becomes pivotal to the signification of the image (endorsing the centripetal composition identified by Moret), as it too recalls the innocence of Oedipus in all that was to come.

Viewing Thebe as a metaphor helps explain the composition of the painting and provides a clue to its meaning, but to mine the eschatological import of the picture, it seems fruitful to interrogate the character of Oedipus, who is, after all, the subject of the work.

Most recent scholars who have addressed Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* agree that in the resolution of the narrative, the playwright transforms Oedipus from an outcast into a hero.⁷⁸⁴ The play ends, in the words of Peter J. Ahrendorf,⁷⁸⁵ with "the hopeful tale of the apotheosis of Oedipus":

But in what manner
Oedipus perished, no one of mortal men
Could tell but Theseus. It was not lightning,
Bearing its fire from Zeus, that took him off;
No hurricane was blowing.
But some attendant from the train of Heaven
Came for him; or else the underworld
Opened in love the unlit door of earth.
For he was taken without lamentation,
Illness and suffering; indeed his end
Was wonderful if mortal's ever was.⁷⁸⁶

Within his discussion, Ahrendorf also comments upon the character of Oedipus: arguing that Oedipus exhibits a singularly strong interest in the afterlife,⁷⁸⁷ Ahrendorf further identifies Oedipus as a monster-slayer in the lineage of Herakles and Perseus, but incisively notes that what differentiates Oedipus from the other monster-slayers is that his victory is intellectual.⁷⁸⁸

Other scholars take Oedipus-as-hero even more substantively. Lowell Edmunds holds that Oedipus – who had cults at Eteonos near Thebes, at Sparta, and in Attica – can be identified as a chthonic hero,⁷⁸⁹ and, with even greater specificity, Claude Calame,⁷⁹⁰ Andreas Markantonatos,⁷⁹¹ and Adrian Kelly⁷⁹² connect Colonus with Eleusis, equating the death of Oedipus with that of an initiate into the Eleusinian cult,⁷⁹³ a connection earlier suggested by Seaford in relation to both Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Aeschylus' *Oedipus*.⁷⁹⁴

The visualization of the personifications of Zetema and Agnoia cannot merely have been intended to embellish

the narrative scenes that flank them: their rarity alone precludes that possibility. Moret notes that in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* the verb "to search" (ζητεῖν) is connected only with the murder of Laios, never with the sphinx,⁷⁹⁵ which underscores (were further evidence necessary) that the labeled personification in the Tuna el-Gebel painting must carry more extensive significance than its relation to the untangling of the riddle. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (109–110), Creon says: "In this land," [Apollo] said, "That which is sought (τὸ . . . ζητούμενον), is found; that which is overlooked escapes." This phrase, coupled with the other connections set out earlier, suggest that in the painting "that which is sought," that is, Zetema, personifies a fruitful afterlife. As Oedipus, through his intellect, triumphs over the sphinx that augurs death, so the initiate achieves a similar transcendent state through knowledge accrued by initiation into the mysteries.⁷⁹⁶ 'Ignorance,' visualized in the painting as contrapuntal to 'the search,' can also be detached from its literal meaning in the myth: in concordance with Zetema and as his counterweight, Agnoia is death without the knowledge gained through initiation into the mysteries and thus without the hope of achieving a blessed afterlife.

Which mysteries are specifically referenced in the painting is difficult definitively to determine, since the mysteries of Isis, those of Demeter and Kore, and those of Dionysos all had currency in Roman-period Egypt.

Though a celestial aspect to Egyptian Isis has been cited to exist as early as the Pyramid Texts,⁷⁹⁷ little secure epigraphic evidence for the practice of Isiac mysteries emerges from Egypt. Pictorial evidence for the mysteries of Isis originates primarily from tombs in Alexandria, though tombs in the chora preserve visual evidence for Isiac mysteries as well.⁷⁹⁸ In the Roman period, suppliants streamed in increasing numbers to Eleusis in Attica for initiation, and, based on its name, the Alexandrian suburb of Eleusis has also been invoked as a site for the cult of Demeter and Persephone.⁷⁹⁹ Paintings of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, found both in Alexandria and at Tuna el-Gebel, attest either to a purely metaphorical use of the image to reference a blessed afterlife or, more specifically (and, I think, perhaps more likely), to the inhabitants of the tomb as initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries. On the basis of the decoration of other house-tombs at Tuna el-Gebel, however, the mysteries of Dionysos find the most traction. The painted decoration from the house-tombs at Tuna el-Gebel that

include Dionysiac cult implements permits House-tomb 16, in which the Oedipus painting was 'hung,' but which shows no direct evidence for Dionysiac worship, to be – with caution – added to the other monuments that revel in the mysteries of the god.

Regardless of the specific cult addressed, the extraordinary choice of the subject of the Oedipus story and its idiosyncratic and original means of presentation argue for a highly sophisticated clientele at Hermopolis Magna and one that is deeply engaged in furthering its chances of a blessed afterlife. The Oedipus painting from House-tomb 16 remains a major moment in the history of Roman-period painting and an evocative monument in the religious history of Graeco-Roman Egypt.

The Myths and the Mysteries

The Dionysiac imagery at Tuna el-Gebel suggests initiation into mystery cults, and the myths that underscore the vulnerability of those who lack the knowledge gained by initiation also suggest the mysteries as a pathway to salvation. The epitaphs of Isidora and the abduction of Persephone as eschatological markers are self-explanatory, even if their explication necessitated the earlier discussions, but the Oedipus cycle and the image of the Trojan Horse (and possibly the image of Electra, who believing her brother dead, does not at first recognize him) each speak to the tragedy of ignorance and, by extension, the triumph of knowledge. In this way, each metaphorically addresses the fruits of initiation. Plutarch (frag. 178), himself a priest in the Eleusinian Mysteries, notes the changed state of the soul at death, and how it mirrors initiation:

. . . In this world [the soul] is without knowledge, except when it is already at the point of death; but when that time comes, it has an experience like that of men who are undergoing initiation into great mysteries; and so the verbs *teleutân* (die) and *teleisthai* (be initiated), and the actions they denote, have a similarity.⁸⁰⁰

In another context, Seaford⁸⁰¹ notes that "[a] precondition for the effectiveness of mythic initiation is initial agonising ignorance of its blissful outcome (a reason why the cult has to be secret)." The myths of Orestes and Electra, the Trojan Horse, and Oedipus each speak to a traumatic event propelled by ignorance, and the myths of Orestes and Electra and Oedipus (and, from the Greek point of view, the Trojan encounter) resolve the ensuing tragedy with the redemption of the protagonists.

GREEK MYTH AT LEONTOPOLIS AND
TUNA EL-GEBEL

Leontopolis, the land of Onias, was sanctioned by the Ptolemaic administration as a city founded specifically by Jews, and in this predominantly Jewish city, coupled with the comfortable legal standing its population generally enjoyed, Jews flourished. As members of a robust diasporic minority, Jews in Leontopolis, like other Jews in Egypt, were fully integrated into all aspects of the greater polity's life. Serving in the army and as merchants, shopkeepers, farmers, and artisans, they lived in their own city as a religious majority, and within the greater fabric of the polity, they constituted an assimilated minority. Content with their social position and their self-worth, they comfortably adopted (and adapted) Greek language, Greek forms, and Greek visions of the afterlife encased in Greek myth to suit their own eschatological needs.

Greeks who lived in Hermopolis Magna write a different story. Hermopolis Magna was a cosmopolitan city with metropolitan status, which conferred upon its citizens of Hellenic heritage somewhat greater privileges than those enjoyed by most Greeks in Egypt. In Roman-period Egypt, Hermopolitan Hellenes, for example, paid a poll tax at a lower rate than others in the chora. Nevertheless, its Greek population still lacked the status of 'citizen,' which was reserved for Greeks in Alexandria

and in the other 'Greek' cities. Legally differentiated from those in Alexandria, Greeks in Hermopolis Magna were instead grouped with Egyptians.⁸⁰² Thus Greek citizens of Hermopolis Magna – save those few who could claim Alexandrian citizenship because of their primary residence in the capital – endured not only an economic encumbrance, but a lower social status than their compatriots in the capital, and it is likely that this imbalance in social status underlies the use of Greek myth by Greek residents of the metropolis. By socially positioning themselves as Greeks in death and by demonstrating their Greek education, erudition, and sophistication by the extraordinary choice of images painted in their tombs, they strove to distance themselves from Egyptians, the legally determined underclass, and to align themselves with the uppermost social and economic class – that is, with the citizenry of Alexandria – that their lack of Alexandrian citizenship otherwise denied. Thus instead of crossing an iconographical boundary and extending their range of possibilities to visualize their negotiation of the afterlife, as did Greeks in Alexandria and Jews at Leontopolis, Greeks interred at Tuna el-Gebel invented or refashioned images of Greek myth to expedite their journey. Greeks at Hermopolis Magna were as equally concerned with their life on earth as with their afterlife, and they used Greek myth, not only to further their eschatological goals, but also to further their social ambitions.