

УДК: 7.032

ББК: 85.103(0)32

А43

DOI: 10.18688/aa177-1-11

Antonio Corso

## Aetion, Artist of the Age of Alexander

Aetion was a renowned painter of pictures who is known thanks to several passages of ancient writers, especially of Cicero, Pliny and Lucian: these three authorities were quite learned in the realm of visual arts [7, pp. 257–263].

The chronologically first surviving testimony about this artist is Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 33–38. In this passage the writer from Arpinum is criticizing the Romans who madly loved works of art by the greatest Greek masters, because they were not free but slaves of their passions:

“You stand gaping spell-bound before a picture of Aetion or a statue of Polyclitus. I pass over the question where you got it from and how you come to have it, but when I see you gazing and marveling and uttering cries of admiration, I judge you to be the slave of any foolishness. ‘Then are not those kinds of things delightful?’ Granted that they are, for we also have trained eyes; but I beg of you, do let the charm that those things are deemed to possess make them serve not as fetters for men but as amusements for children” (transl. Loeb with amendments).

We argue from this passage that in late republican Rome pictures of Aetion were objects of deeply felt admiration. They were collected by private owners but were also disliked by the most traditionalist quarter of the Roman society. It is likely that the admirers of Aetion were the supporters of a transformation of Rome into an absolutistic monarchy, similar to those of the Hellenistic East.

Cicero also remembers Aetion in *Brutus* 70: “What critic who devotes his attention to the lesser arts does not recognize that the statues of Canachus are too rigid to reproduce the truth of nature? The statues of Calamis again are still hard and yet more lifelike than those of Canachus. Even Myron has not yet fully attained naturalness, though one would not hesitate to call his works beautiful. Still more beautiful are the statues of Polycleitus, and indeed in my estimation quite perfect. The same development may be seen in painting. In Zeuxis, Polygnotus, Timanthes, and others, who used only four colors, we praise their outline and drawing; but in Aetion, Nicomachus, Protogenes, Apelles, everything has been brought to perfection. The same thing I take it is true of all the other arts; nothing is brought to perfection on its first invention” (transl. Loeb with an amendment).

We argue from this passage that Aetion was one of the most prominent painters of the age of Alexander and that the art critics who placed the peak of painting in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC recognized the perfection in the oeuvre of a few painters of this period, who included Aetion. Thus our painter was one of the symbols of the age of Alexander.

Pliny records our painter in three passages. In 34.50, he notes that "...In the 107<sup>th</sup> Olympiad Aetion and Therimachus flourished" (transl. Loeb with amendments). Thus in the tradition handed down by Pliny the peak of activity of Aetion was placed in the years 352–349 BC. Since Pliny, in the section of book 34, which includes this passage, is writing about bronze sculpture, this passage implies that Aetion was also a bronze sculptor. In 35.50, he notices that "four colors only were used by the illustrious painters Apelles, Aetion, Melanthius and Nicomachus to execute their immortal works — of whites Melinum; of yellow ochres, Attic; of reds, Pontic Sinopus; of blacks, atramentum — although their pictures were sold for the wealth of a whole town" (transl. Loeb).

We argue from this passage that Aetion was among the tetrachromatic painters — i.e. painters who used only four colors — and that he enjoyed a great success, even from the economic point of view: his pictures were sold at a very high price.

However, the crucial passage devoted by Pliny to Aetion is 35.78. In this passage, the writer from Comum lists the most noteworthy pictures of this painter: "In the 107<sup>th</sup> Olympiad Aetion and Therimachus also attained outstanding distinction. Famous paintings by Aetion are a Father Liber or Dionysus, Tragedy and Comedy and Semiramis the slave girl rising to a throne; and the Old woman carrying torches with a Newly married bride, remarkable for her air of modesty" (transl. Loeb). The order of this catalogue is hierarchic: first of all the image of a deity is mentioned, then two personifications and eventually human themes.

The picture of Dionysus, Tragedy and Comedy, being the only one which had a deity as subject, may have set the peak of this artist at 352–349 BC. Since our artist appears to have worked for the theatrical life, this may have been a dedication in this social context. Since this artist, as we shall see, was of Amphipolis, his interpretation of Dionysus, Comedy and Tragedy may have inspired the early Hellenistic statues of these three subjects dedicated together in the same architectural context in the sanctuary of Dionysus on Thasos and probably made by the same sculptor [5, pp. 119–121 and 305–307]: Dionysus survives only in his head (Ill. 17), while Comedy is preserved without her head (Ill. 17) and Tragedy is lost except for the tragic mask she held in her hand. The statue which is best preserved of these three images, Comedy, wears a girdle below her breasts, is bi-dimensional and her back side does not bear any style. This observation is consistent with the suggestion that these statues were inspired by figures on a picture.

The picture of Semiramis as a slave girl rising to a throne may have been a dedication in Asia Minor which followed the popularity of the legend of the Assyrian queen after its narration by Ktesias of Knidos (*FGrH* 688 F I b). Since it is logical to suppose that this legend became popular first of all at Knidos, homeland to Ktesias, it is not impossible that this picture was set up at Knidos. Moreover, since Semiramis became the emblem of a dissolute behavior which was patronized by Dionysus, and Aetion worked for the social world of the cult of Dionysus, it is not impossible that this picture was also related to a cult place of this god.

The *Old Woman Carrying Torches* may have been the picture of a comic type, thus also related to the theatrical life. Alternatively she may have been a figure of the picture of the wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander which is not mentioned in the description of this masterpiece by Lucian: in that case, the mentions of 'the old woman carrying torches, with a newly married bride, remarkable for her air of modesty' would epitomize the content of the same picture, i.e. of the wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander. In fact there is no doubt that the 'newly married

bride, remarkable for her air of modesty' is Rhoxane, as the description of this picture by Lucian clarifies.

Lucian speaks of Aetion three times. In his essay *De mercede conductis potentium familiaribus* 42, he illustrates a picture representing human life. He writes that "I should gladly have requisitioned an Apelles, or Parrhasius, or Aetion, or Euphranor to point it, but since it is impossible nowadays to find anyone so excellent and so thoroughly master of his craft, I shall show you the picture as best I can" (transl. Loeb). Here Lucian appears to regard Aetion as one of the greatest Late Classical painters, of a high quality which no longer exists: clearly Lucian shares the widespread opinion that the art of painting declined from the Classical period until his own times.

In his pamphlet *Imagines* 7, Lucian describes the beauty of Pantheia, the girl-friend of the emperor Lucius Verus. He says that "the body (*scil.*: of Pantheia) Apelles shall represent after the manner of Pacate, not too white but just suffused with red; and her lips shall be done by Aetion like Rhoxane's" (transl. Loeb with amendments). Here Lucian refers to Aetion's picture with the wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander: in this picture, the lips of the bride were particularly appealing.

Finally, the neosophist of Samosata explains the historical context in which Aetion's *Wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander* was delivered, and describes this *tabula* in his paper *Herodotus sive Aetion* 4–6: "But why need I mention old sophists, historians, and chroniclers when there is the recent story of Aetion the painter who showed off his picture of the Marriage of Rhoxane and Alexander at Olympia? Praxenides, one of the Hellenodikoi there at that time, was delighted with his talent and made Aetion his son-in-law. You may well wonder at the quality of his work that induced a chief judge of the games to give his daughter in marriage to a stranger like Aetion. The picture is actually in Italy; I have seen it myself and can describe it to you. The scene is a very beautiful chamber, and in it there is a bridal couch with Rhoxane, a very lovely maiden, sitting upon it, her eyes cast down in modesty, for Alexander is standing there. There are smiling Erotes: one is standing behind her removing the veil from her head and showing Rhoxane to her husband; another like a true servant is taking the sandal off her foot, already preparing her for bed; a third Eros has hold of Alexander's cloak and is pulling him with all his might towards Rhoxane. The king himself is holding out a garland to the maiden and their best man and helper, Hephaestion, is there with a blazing torch in his hand, leaning on a very handsome youth — I think he is Hymenaeus (his name is not inscribed). On the other side of the picture are more Erotes playing among Alexander's armor: two of them are carrying his spear, pretending to be laborers burdened under a beam; two others are dragging a third, their king no doubt, on the shield, holding it by the handgrips; another has gone inside the corselet, which is lying breast-up on the ground — he seems to be lying in ambush to frighten the others when they drag the shield past him. All this is not needless triviality and a waste of labor. Aetion is calling attention to Alexander's other love — War, implying that in his love of Rhoxane he did not forget his armor. A further point about the picture itself is that it had a real matrimonial significance of quite a different sort — it courted Praxenides' daughter for Aetion! So as a by-product of his Alexander's Wedding he came away with a wife himself and the king for best man. His reward for his marriage of the imagination was a real-life marriage of his own" (transl. Loeb with amendments).

In the following sections, Lucian clarifies that he is delivering his lecture in Macedonia, on the occasion of a renowned festival, which is probably the reason why he gave emphasis to the Macedonian Aetion. Lucian's information allows us to reconstruct the historical context of this masterpiece. Aetion submitted this picture to a competition of painters held at Olympia, in which the Hellanodikoi formed the jury. The judicial assembly of the Hellanodikoi used to meet on the occasions of the Olympic Games, and the wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander took place in 327 BC. Since the first Olympic game after 327 was celebrated in 324, it is likely that Aetion submitted his painting at Olympia to a competition of painters promoted by the Hellanodikoi in 324. Eventually, Aetion married the daughter of the Hellanodikos Praxenides [2].

In 324, Alexander was at the peak of his glory, thus it is understandable that the Macedonian Aetion wanted to please him. The picture must have been dedicated at Olympia, when it was awarded, and got the attention of early Hellenistic art critics: in fact it appears in Aetion's oeuvre given by Pliny who takes his catalogs from the early Hellenistic art critics Xenocrates and Antigonus. Finally, it was brought to Italy. It is likely that the removal happened at the time of Nero, who removed many masterpieces from the Altis. In that case, the picture must have been exposed in the *Domus Aurea*: this hypothesis would be in keeping with Nero's love for Hellenistic absolutistic monarchies. Lucian asserts that he saw this work of art in Italy; thus after Nero it was moved to a public place. We know that Vespasian removed many works of art from the *Domus Aurea* and exposed them especially in the *templum Pacis*: perhaps even this creation was placed there. There Pliny and Lucian could have admired the most renowned picture of Aetion.

The message of this picture is that the victory in war leads to the enjoyment of love and beauty: an optimistic and encomiastic suggestion which must have become topical again at the time of the dedication of the *templum Pacis* by Vespasian, after his victorious *bellum Judaicum* [1, pp. 203–226 and 233–234]. The Erotes and Hymenaeus lead us to the allegoric culture of Late Classical times. Moreover, the Erotes in this picture express the love of the age for deities who represent the satisfaction of basic instincts such as Dionysus, Aphrodite and figures of their retinues.

This picture was the source of inspiration of the painting at Delos, house II B of the quarter of the stadium, with Ares, Aphrodite and the Erotes playing with the weapons of Ares [4, pp. 79–80].

Probably the Olympic record of his victory in the competition of painters of 324 and the consideration of this artist by Xenocrates, art critic of the Sicyonian school, determined the Doric transcription of his name as Aetion, with the A. Of course in Ionic his name must have been Eetion with the initial eta.

Thus, it is likely that two still early Hellenistic epigrams which mention a sculptor named Eetion refer to him. In his 34.50 Pliny implies that he was a sculptor as well. The first of these two epigrams is Theocritus, *Anthologia Graeca* 6.337: "The son of Paean had come to Miletus too, to visit the physician Nikias who every day approaches him with sacrifice, and ordered to be carved for him this statue of perfumed cedar-wood, promising the highest fee for the delicate labor of his hands to Eetion, who put all his skill into the work" (transl. Loeb with an amendment).

Thus, our artist carved a wooden statue of Asclepios commissioned by doctor Nikias and set up in his own private sanctuary in Miletus. Since it is specified that the sculptor got a very high payment and revealed great skills, probably this statue must be dated back to the old age of our artist, when he was already well established and enjoyed the high reputation lavished on him by his picture with the wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander. Thus this statue would be placed after the death of Alexander. The poet Theocritus in this epigram is evoking a statue set up sometime earlier, because he uses verbs in the past.

Finally, another sculpture of Eetion is described by Callimachus, *Anthologia Graeca* 9.336: "I, the hero of Eetion of Amphipolis, stand set up small in the small space in front of the door, with a sinuous snake and only a sword; (Eetion) being angry placed also me as foot warrior near a knight".

Here we have the ethnic of our artist, he was from Amphipolis.

In this epigram, Callimachus describes the figure of a foot soldier near a sinuous snake and holding a sword, beside the knight. This description is appropriate to a relief from Amphipolis now in the Archaeological Museum of Kavala, in which a standing hero is represented near a snake coiling around a tree and holding a sword (Ill. 19) [6, p. 259, no. 197]<sup>1</sup>. It is likely that this slab pertained to the relief frieze on tumulus Kasta which was disposed around the base of the lion [3]. Probably this slab was at the viewer's left of the slab with the Macedonian carrying a large round shield (Ill. 19) and since the latter person was probably Alexander, the hero represented in this slab was probably Hephaestion. Since a fragment from the same frieze represents legs of a horse, there were also horses and knights in the frieze, thus it makes sense that this hero was close to a knight.

If this identification of the scene evoked by Callimachus is correct, we can identify the artist who conceived the relief frieze above tumulus Kasta: Aetion/Eetion. It makes sense that the most renowned artist of Amphipolis was hired to make such an important monument near his native city. Around 320 BC, Aetion must have reached the top of his glory: after his victory in the competition of painters at Olympia and the celebrity enjoyed by his picture of the wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander. This attribution is confirmed by the consideration that the large, round shield carried by Alexander in the frieze is similar to the equally large shield in the above mentioned painting of Delos, which is derived from Aetion's picture of the wedding. Thus, the association of Alexander with a large, round shield may be regarded as Aetion's signature pattern.

This artist may have painted also the painted frieze in room 3 of the tumulus Kasta [3], because this painting was made only with the four colors of the tetrachromatic tradition, which was followed by Aetion, as we have seen in the previously quoted passage from Pliny.

He may have carved also the so-called Caryatids of room 3 of the tumulus Kasta (Ill. 18): the proportions of these figures, which bear short busts and long legs, their girdles below their breasts, finally their folds in the shape of concentric arcs find a close comparison in the above considered statue of Comedy from Thasos, which, as it has been stressed above, derives from Aetion's representation of Comedy. The only surviving head of Sphinx (Ill. 17) from the tumulus Kasta is stylistically very close to the above mentioned head of Dionysus from Thasos, which

<sup>1</sup> The relief is kept at Kavala, The National Archaeological Museum, no. L 433.

was inspired by the Dionysus of Aetion: this observation leads to the attribution even of the Sphinxes of the tumulus Kasta to our artist of Amphipolis.

Thus, we may say that Aetion/Eetion was born at Amphipolis, perhaps around 375 BC, in 352–349 he became well established thanks to his picture of Dionysus, Tragedy and Comedy and, if it is imitated with the statues of these two personifications of Thasos, he must have re-used standard types of the draped female body of the Attic tradition. His pictures of Semiramis and of the old woman may be dated between the late 340s and the early 320s: the first would testify to the popularity of the legend of Ktesias about this Assyrian queen and would be in keeping with the interest for Asian royalty which is obvious in the period of the Asian expedition of Alexander. The *Old Woman* probably testifies for the activity of Aetion for patrons of monuments related to the theatrical life. His victory in the Olympic competition of painters held at Olympia probably in 324 and especially his picture of the wedding of Rhoisane and Alexander gave him glory: this *tabula*, probably set up at Olympia, became a focus of interest in the early Hellenistic art criticism, was echoed with a Delian painting, had been brought to Italy perhaps by Nero and was still admired at the times of Pliny and Lucian. His marriage with the daughter of an important Hellenodikos may have added to his social prestige and to his important connections.

His design of the relief frieze of the tumulus Kasta and of the painted frieze of this architectural complex and his probable carving of the Caryatids and of the Sphinxes reveal his faithfulness to the tetrachromatic tradition and to a bi-dimensional concept of the artistic creation as well as his individual talent and his specialization in representations of female draped bodies.

Finally, his wooden statue of Asclepios for a private patron of Miletus probably pertains to the last phase of his career, toward the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. We know from Cicero that even Roman private collectors owned works of Aetion. We argue from Theocritus and Pliny that he became rich. If we can judge his style from the Comedy and Tragedy of Thasos, from the Delian painting with Erotes and from his oeuvre in and on the tumulus Kasta, he was a typically Ionian artist: concerned with the appearance rather than with the structures of figures. Female draped bodies with their minute folding, representations of beautiful, large weapons, heroes endowed with their glory, landscapes as enchanted lands with trees and divine snakes and Erotes in a nuptial thalamus seal his creations with the magic and shining aura of the beautiful tales.

This must have been the reason for his greatness.

## References

1. Bravi A. *Griechische Kunstwerke im politischen Leben Roms und Konstantinopels*. Berlin, De Gruyter Publ., 2014. 357 p. (in German).
2. Corso A. Sugli Agoni di artisti nella Grecia classica. *Rendiconti dei Lincei*, 2016, no. 27, pp. 115–127 (in Italian).
3. Corso A. The Sculptures of the Tumulus Kasta near Amphipolis. *Journal of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Archaeology*, 2015, no. 2, pp. 197–226.
4. de Meneses U.T.B. Essai de lecture sociologique de la décoration murale des maisons d'habitation hellénistiques à Delos. *Dialoghi di Archeologia*, 1984, no. 2, pp. 77–88 (in French).
5. Grandjean Y.; Salviat Y. *Odigos tis Thasou*. Athens, French School at Athens Publ., 2012. 385 p.
6. Kalaitzi M. *Figured Tombstones from Macedonia*. Oxford, Oxford University Press Publ., 2016. 288 p.
7. Mielsch H.; Lehmann L. Aetion. *Der neue Overbeck*, 2014, vol. 4, pp. 257–263.

**Title.** Aetion, Artist of the Age of Alexander.

**Author.** Antonio Corso — Ph. D., professor, researcher. Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene, Parthenonos 14–16, GR 11742, Athens, Greece. padua\_athens@yahoo.it or antoniocorso@hotmail.com

**Abstract.** The article focuses on the important artist Aetion who flourished in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. This painter and sculptor has never been the specific object of scholarly concern but a detailed study allows an outline of his life as well as to reach an idea of at least a few of his works. He was born at Amphipolis, his main work of his youth may have been his triad of Dionysus, Comedy and Tragedy. This creation may have been copied with the statue of these three subjects from the sanctuary of Dionysus on Thasos, not far away from Amphipolis. The turning moment of his life must have been the year 324 BC, when he took part in the competition of painters held at Olympia, where the Hellanodikoi decided the winner. He won and married the daughter of the president of this powerful college. Moreover, the subject of his winning picture — the *Wedding of Rhoxane and Alexander* — may have introduced Aetion to the royal circle of Macedon. This picture became very famous and may have inspired a wall painting on Delos. Finally, Aetion may have been the artist responsible for sculptures and paintings of tumulus Kasta near Amphipolis, to be dated around 320 BC. The Sphinxes and Karyatids of this tumulus look stylistically very close to Dionysus and Comedy from Thasos. Moreover, the paintings in this tumulus are still the work of a painter who uses only the canonic four colors of the tradition and we know that Aetion was a tetrachromatic. Finally, an epigram describing a figure by this artist fits well the relief on the base of the lion above this tumulus.

**Keywords:** Amphipolis; Thasos; Aetion; Rhoxane; Alexander; Dionysus; tragedy; comedy.

**Название.** Аэтион, художник эпохи Александра.

**Автор.** Корсо Антонио — Ph. D., профессор, специалист-исследователь. Итальянская археологическая школа в Афинах, Парфенонос, 14–16, Афины, Греция, GR 11742. padua\_athens@yahoo.it или antoniocorso@hotmail.com

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена выдающемуся художнику античности, расцвет творчества которого относится к IV в. до н.э. Этот живописец и скульптор никогда прежде не становился объектом пристального научного внимания, тем не менее детальное изучение связанных с его именем материалов позволяет в общих чертах обрисовать его биографию и составить представление хотя бы о нескольких его работах. Он родился в Амфиполе, главной работой раннего периода его творчества стала живописная триада Дионис, Комедия и Трагедия. Не исключено, что именно это произведение легло в основу скульптурного изображения трех этих же персонажей, исполненного для храма Диониса на Фасосе, неподалеку от Амфиполя. Поворотной датой в жизни художника стал 324 г. до н.э., когда он принял участие в состязании живописцев в Олимпии, и судьи элладоники присудили ему победу. Аэтион не только стал победителем, но и женился на дочери главы судейской коллегии. Сюжет картины, принесшей живописцу победу, — свадьба Александра и Роксаны, по всей видимости, послужил ему пропуском в круги, близкие к правящей македонской династии. Работа приобрела широкую известность и, вполне возможно, стала источником вдохновения для создания стеновой росписи на Делосе. В дальнейшем именно Аэтион мог стать автором скульптур и росписей гробницы Каста близ Амфиполя, относящейся примерно к 320 г. до н.э. Фигуры сфинксов и кариатид амфипольской гробницы стилистически близки фигурам Диониса и Комедии из храма на Фасосе. Кроме того, создатель амфипольских росписей, следуя традиции, использовал только четыре канонических цвета, а из письменных источников известно, что Аэтион придерживался тетрахромии. И, наконец, эпиграммы, в которых говорится о фигуре, созданной рукой этого мастера, очень точно описывают изображение на рельефе постамента для статуи льва, воздвигнутой над гробницей.

**Ключевые слова:** Амфиполь; Фасос; Аэтион; Роксана; Александр; Дионис; трагедия; комедия.



Ill. 17. *Left*, head of Sphinx from tumulus Kasta near Amphipolis, around 320 BC, Amphipolis, Archaeological Museum, Storeroom.

*Right*, head of Dionysus from Thasus, late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Thasus, Archaeological Museum



Ill. 18. *Left*, Statue of Comedy from Thasus, late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Thasus, Archaeological Museum.

*Right*, female figural support (so called Karyatid) from tumulus Kasta near Amphipolis, around 320 BC, Amphipolis, *in situ*



Ill. 19. Reconstruction drawing of the south front relief of the base of the lion above tumulus Kasta near Amphipolis (courtesy of Dr. Michalis Lefantzis). Around 320 BC. *Fragment at the left*: Kavala, Archaeological Museum, storeroom. *Fragment in the middle*: Kavala, Archaeological Museum. *Fragment at the right*: Amphipolis, Archaeological Museum