

УДК 7.032(39)

ББК 63.3(0)32

DOI 10.18688/aa2313-1-11

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## Reliefs of the *Phaedrus Bema* in the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens: Reflections on Original Destination and Sources of Inspiration

It is well known that Greek theater has its origins in the Dionysiac cult. The presence of Dionysus in the theatrical space has always been marked by the existence of an altar (*thymele*) at some point on the orchestra and, in certain cases, by the location of the god's sanctuary or a temple nearby. From its introduction in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C., the monumental theatrical decoration may have contained references to the Dionysiac world and dramatic activity. Thus, the figures of Maenads, Satyrs, and *Sileni* were frequently used as architectural supports, mostly in the theaters of Sicily, but also in Greece, since the Hellenistic or even Late Classical period [42, pp. 35–36; 9, pp. 145–147]<sup>1</sup>. With the establishment of the Roman tradition of monumental stage buildings, sculptural decoration began to include not only individual figures, but also narrative cycles dedicated to Dionysus. The presence of figurative relief friezes telling a “story” seems to be a characteristic feature of Roman theater [8, p. 148].

The proposed case study explores how this Dionysiac narrative manifests itself in the oldest of the Greek theaters located on the south slope of the Athenian Acropolis. Having existed since Archaic times as an integral part of the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus, it was newly decorated and ornamented in the Imperial times.

The monument under discussion features a series of relief slabs which were discovered in 1862. The issues of their dating, style, origins, and subject have been touched upon in various works on the theater [40, pp. 26–36; 12, pp. 83–96; 14, pp. 4–55; 44, pp. 222–223; 1, pp. 223–226; 34, pp. 257–265]<sup>2</sup>. In 1935, Reinhard Herbig introduced the first complete publication of the reliefs [19, pp. 36–59]. His detailed analysis was later supplemented by Mary Sturgeon's important 1977 article [43, pp. 31–53]. A major contribution to the study of the reliefs has been made by Georgios I. Despintis: on the basis of earlier assumptions, he attributed several fragments to the Dionysiac series from the theater, including those preserved in museum collections outside Athens [6; 8]<sup>3</sup>. Valentina di Napoli also paid considerable attention to the reliefs in a recent book on the theaters of the Achaia province [9].

At present, however, there are still some uncertainties about the original position and

<sup>1</sup> The friezes with masks are also known starting with the earliest example coming from Pergamon theatre [9, p. 148].

<sup>2</sup> The reliefs were also discussed in early publications on sculpture by I. Svoronos [44, pp. 223–225, 233–237] and S. Reinach [37, pp. 44–45]. On iconography of certain subjects by A. B. Cook [6, pp. 708–710] and J. Travlos [45, pp. 537–539]. For a detailed bibliography, see G. Despintis [7, pp. 80–81].

<sup>3</sup> This book deals with a fragmentary preserved Athenian frieze which reveals similarities with the relief slabs from the theatre of Dionysus. The publication contains extensive references to the latter and the issues related to them.

function of these reliefs. The structure to which they belong is known as the *Bema of Phaidros* (βῆμα του Φαίδρου) or *Phaedrus Bema*. It gets its name from a dedicatory inscription, which informs us that the Archon of Athens, Phaidros, son of Zoilos, dedicated this beautiful structure, called βῆμα θεήτρον, to Dionysus (IG II<sup>2</sup> 5021)<sup>4</sup>. Although the word βῆμα itself has different meanings (including altar, elevation, orator's pulpit)<sup>5</sup> in our context it should be understood as the stage of the Roman *scaena*, analogous to the Latin *pulpitum*. This Phaidros's dedication, associated with the later rebuilding of the theater, is dated by some scholars to c. 400 A. D. [8, p. 168]. However, Alison Franz's suggestion that the reconstruction of the theater and its stage, damaged during the Herulian invasion of 267 A. D., could have taken place between 300 and 345 A. D., most likely under Constantine [15, p. 38], seems to us very plausible. The period of Constantine's reign, when the cult of Dionysus and other pagan cults were still institutionally accepted, created a favorable atmosphere for the construction of the *Bema*. The latter incorporated reliefs that must surely have originated from some other structure. The dating proposed for these reliefs ranged between the 130s and mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D., suggesting the late Hadrianic or early Antonine period [19, pp. 57–59]. According G. I. Despinis, the *Bema* reliefs should be dated from 140 to 150 A. D. [7, pp. 118–121].

The original destination of the reliefs is a crucial question. Ioannis N. Svoronos put forward a hypothesis of their initial location on the altar which stood in the adjoining sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus [44, pp. 223–225]. Herbig rejected this opinion and assumed that the relief panels were mounted “at a certain height” on the theatre's *scaenae frons*, i. e., at a distance from the viewer [19, p. 59]<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, the attribution of the reliefs to an altar has been repeatedly discussed, and, in the early 2000s, this hypothesis was further developed by G. Despinis<sup>7</sup>. It is noteworthy that in the latest reconstruction of the theater's Roman stage, proposed by Christina Papastamati von Moock [32, p. 135, fig. 1], the reliefs of the *Bema* did not find their place, which indicates doubts about this matter among scholars.

Nevertheless, the attribution of these reliefs to the *scaena*, which had two Roman phases of construction — Neronic and Hadrianic [32, p. 129] — still seems very possible. V. di Napoli made a very convincing argument for the belonging of the frieze to the theater space and its original location on the lower podium of the *scaenae frons* [8, p. 149]. M. Sturgeon, in turn, was inclined to believe that the reliefs were originally placed on the *pulpitum* of the Hadrianic *scaena* [44, pp. 44–52]. Based on the preceding opinions, we will try to offer some further arguments in favor of their conceptual fitting into the decorative program of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century A. D. *scaena*.

The extant reliefs have already been described and analyzed in detail in terms of their subject matter [14, pp. 4–55; 19, pp. 57–59; 9, pp. 149–150, 213–217], therefore, providing brief descriptions with additional remarks will be enough.

<sup>4</sup> This inscription is preserved on the top flight of the stairs from the orchestra to the stage. “σοὶ τὸδε καλὸν ἔτευξε, Φιλόργιε, βῆμα θεήτρον Φαίδρος Ζωίλου βιοδώτορος Ἀτθίδος ἀρχός.” (For you, lover of the sacred rites, this beautiful stage has been built by Phaidros, son of Zoilos, archon of life-giving Athens) [15, p. 34].

<sup>5</sup> Pollux, in his *Onomasticon*, describing the parts of the theatre, defines it as “ἡ καὶ ἡ θυμέλη, εἴτε βῆμα τι οὐσα εἴτε βωμός” (Pollux. *Onom.* IV, 123).

<sup>6</sup> It seems that we are free to reject this possibility because according to the current reconstruction of the *scaenae frons* made by Ch. Papastamati von Moock [32, p. 135], the second story podium is not tall enough to accommodate the reliefs.

<sup>7</sup> See for the discussion and a detailed bibliography [7, pp. 80–81, n. 107–109].

The *Phaedrus Bema* included four relief slabs, alternating with niches (between the second and third slabs, the figure of a squatting silenus was placed) (Ill. 27). All of the depicted figures lack heads, apparently the result of later vandalism rather than the reconstruction of the *scaena*. Some relief fragments (including heads) were attributed to the *Bema* by Despinis [7, pp. 76–91, fig. 63–78]. Of the entire *pulpitum* decoration only a part has survived — the one on the right of the stairs leading from the orchestra to the stage (another figure of Silenus has been preserved to the left of the staircase, but no reliefs).

Although the initial sequence of slabs remains unknown and much of it has been now lost, their current order on the surviving right side has its own compositional and narrative logic.

The first slab represents the birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus, or rather the transfer of the newborn god to Hermes. The iconography clearly points to the three main characters: Hermes, Zeus, and the infant Dionysus himself. This central group is flanked by two youths with shields who are supposed to be Corybantes — the divine beings similar to Curetes<sup>8</sup>. The role of Corybantes and Curetes is basically the same in the birth of two divine infants — Dionysus and Zeus, respectively. They protect the newborn deity by dancing and making noises (striking shields or cymbals) to suppress the cries that can betray the god. Their iconography implies a composition with two (sometimes three) deities depicted as militant youths flanking the scene with the baby<sup>9</sup>. However, according to our knowledge these protectors never appear in the subject of Dionysus' birth or his handover to Hermes. In this respect, the Athenian relief is unique. Probably, this motif was introduced in order to emphasize the continuity between Dionysus and his divine father, and the resemblance between their retinues. One may recall Strabo's words that Curetes of Zeus were the same as Dionysus' Satyrs (X.11–12).

Half-naked Zeus is seated on a rock as if on a throne, with his right hand apparently resting on a sceptre and his left hand lowered. Some scholars see here a reference to the cult statue of Olympian Zeus made by Phidias, or to the seated (?) Zeus on the eastern pediment of the Parthenon where the birth of another deity — Athena, from the head of Zeus — was represented [43, pp. 33–34, ref. 5]. Given the location of the theater, it seems logical to assume the second association, more relevant to the Athenian spectators<sup>10</sup>. This resemblance can be explained by the similarities of subjects: in both cases, the place of action is Olympus, and the scene itself is the coming to life of a new deity born by Zeus. Nevertheless, a colossal chryselephantine statue in the Athenian Olympeion (with its resemblance to Phidias' Zeus) also should be taken into account (Paus. I.18.6).

The subject of the second plate is quite convincingly interpreted as the arrival of Dionysus in Attica and the meeting of the god with his adept Icarius. The events of the myth are described in fairly late sources (Apollod. III.14.7). When Dionysus and Demeter arrive in Attica, Demeter is hosted in Eleusis by the King Celeus, and Dionysus — by Icarius. Dionysus gives

<sup>8</sup> Curetes are Cretan deities in Rhea's retinue. Corybantes, on the other hand, belong to the retinue of Cybele and Attis. Euripides directly compares them in relation to Zeus and Dionysus (Bacchae XI.120.30; Luc. Sat. 8; Nonn.Dion. IX.160).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the scene from a Campana relief, British Museum, Inv. 1891,0626.1.

<sup>10</sup> The central group of the Parthenon pediment have not survived and its reconstruction causes difficulties. Actually, we don't know whether Zeus was standing or seating (in the most scenes of the birth he is depicted enthroned) [20, pp. 178–179]. That Zeus was seated is suggested by the Neo-Attic relief of so-called "Puteal de la Moncloa" (National Archaeological Museum, Madrid), which is supposed to be inspired by the Parthenon east pediment [22, p. 88, fig. 72]. The figure of enthroned Zeus in the relief from Madrid is very similar to the "Bema" depiction in the pose and gestures.

him a vine and teaches Icarius wine-making. Having mastered the skill, Icarius tries to share this gift with other mortals, but eventually dies, killed by drunken shepherds. The daughter of Icarius, Erigone, finds her father's grave with the help of his faithful dog, Maera. After mourning her father, Erigone hangs herself from sadness over his grave. Hyginus says that the dog also "killed itself, making a tomb sacrifice" (Hyg. Astr. II.4.4).

Traditionally, the meeting of Dionysus and Icarius is represented as a scene of *theoxenia* — Dionysus comes to Icarius' house to participate in his feast. Icarius is normally depicted reclining on a *klinē* and welcoming the god [26, No. 85–858] (Another frequently depicted episode, mainly in mosaics, is the murder of Icarius by the shepherds). In the *Bema*, Dionysus and Icarius are depicted standing symmetrically on two sides of an altar. Behind Dionysus, there is a vine — his gift to mortals — and the altar indicates the ritual nature of the action. The female figure to the left of Icarius may be his daughter Erigone. The figure on the right is difficult to interpret, we agree with those who see him as a Satyr in the *aposkopoeuin* iconography [43, p. 38., ref. 28]. The tragic episodes of the myth are omitted, the details of the narrative are also missing: all the characters, including Icarius, Erigone, and even Maera the dog, appear unharmed and included in the solemn ritual action. Representative overtones are emphasized throughout the scene — the main theme is the establishment of the Dionysiac cult in Attica.

Icarius was the eponymous hero of the deme of Icaria in the northeast Attica — one of the ancient centers of Dionysiac religion. The statue of bearded Dionysus sitting on the throne comes from the sanctuary of Icaria which existed since 6<sup>th</sup> century B. C. [3, fig. 170]. The deme is also associated with the birth of drama and the art of theater itself. A famous native of Icaria was Thespis, the "inventor" of tragedy, who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B. C. It is worth noting that next to Icarius, the frieze depicts not only his dog, but also another animal — a goat (*τράγος*). Hyginus, citing Eratosthenes, tells the story of how Icarius killed a goat, made a wineskin out of it, and made his friends dance around it: "That is why Eratosthenes says: at the feet of Icarius, they first danced around a goat" (Hyg. Astr. II.4; Erat. Erig. fr. 20–22 Powell). Perhaps the reliefs were intended to remind about the origin of the tragedy and those times when a goat was the prize for competing performers of dithyrambos. According to the Parian chronicle, Thespis received this particular award [47, pp. 251–254]. Thus, the choice of myth and its presentation suggest an appeal to the archaic origins of the Dionysiac cult and to the history of dramatic performances in Attica.

The next two slabs cause some difficulties in terms of interpretation. The last figure of the third panel (on the left) is cut off. The remaining ones practically do not interact with each other. A naked young man, possibly Dionysus, is depicted in the center and to his left — the figure of Tyche or Eirene (which derives from the Eirene of Kephisosodos), as indicated by the cornucopia [43, pp. 39–42]. On the right, there is another woman who throws back her cloak in the characteristic gesture of *anakalypsis*. This gesture indicates that she is the "bride" of the god. This role may have been assigned to Ariadne or, in the context of the Attic ritual tradition, to Basilinna — the wife of the highest cultic magistrate of Athens.

The central figure of this slab finds a striking parallel with the relief kept in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston [8, p. 173. fig. 10]. Here Dionysus can be unmistakably identified by his panther skin and *kantharos*. The female figure in front of him with a goatskin thrown over her shoulders may be a Maenad or Erigone. Both figures remind strongly the personages from the *Bema* in terms of style, iconography, and size. We are in complete agreement with Despinis's view that this relief originally belonged to the *Bema* and was placed to the left of the staircase [8, pp. 174–175].

If the figure depicted on the third slab is indeed Basilinna, then the scene contains a clear reference to the important Athenian festival in honor of Dionysus — *Anthesteria*, the second day of which was marked by a sacred wedding between the *Arkhhon Basileus* (ἀρχων βασιλεύς), who played the role of Dionysus, and Basilinna, the wife of the archon, associated with Ariadne. Such an interpretation is very possible, given the existing connection between the *Anthesteria* and the myth of Icarius and Erigone. During the *Anthesteria*, to commemorate the suicide of Erigone (Hyg. Astr. II.2.4.5), an annual ritual was performed in Athens — the festival of swinging, *Aiora* [31, pp. 113–115].

On the closing slab of the frieze, the last character on the right, seated on the throne, should be Dionysus (Ill. 28). The shape and luxurious decoration of the throne resemble the honorary chair of the priest of Dionysus Eleuthereus, installed in the *proedria* [46, fig. 684]. Next to Dionysus, there are three standing figures: Eirene or Tyche with a cornucopia, a certain hero, who was, once identified as Theseus by his attribute, and again a female figure making the gesture of ἀνακαλυψις (that is, the alleged Basilinna). Theseus probably appears here as a representative and personification of the Athenian demos, while Tyche might act as the patroness of the city. Together, they pay homage to Dionysus [34, p. 262].

Looking over the entire composition of the *Bema*, one can note that the dignified figure of seated Zeus is symmetrically balanced by the enthroned Dionysus. It gives an impression of interaction — a continuity of power between the ruler of Olympus and his son, the master of the theater. The image of enthroned Dionysus had to play an important role in the space of the Athenian theatre. The adjoined sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus enclosed two temples. In the archaic one, the ancient *xoanon* of Dionysus was kept, which probably was a seated figure, judging from Athenian imperial coins [40, p. 307]<sup>11</sup>. During the Greater or City Dionysia, the image of Dionysus was taken from this old temple and carried in a procession through Kerameikos to another temple of Dionysus near the Academia (Paus. I.20.3; I.29.2). Upon returning, the statue was set up in the orchestra of the theater (IG II<sup>2</sup> 1006). If about the archaic *xoanon* we cannot be sure, the second chryselephantine statue of Dionysus — a colossal cult image created by Alcamenes, a student of Phidias, for the Classical temple — definitely depicted a seated god. This Dionysus, judging from the image on the coins, was ichnographically close to the Pheidian Zeus and only differed from the Olympian statue in attributes and size [41, pp. 314–316]. Thus, the two figures of the enthroned deities in the frieze contained references to the cult images important in the area of the theater. These accents might have had not only theological, but also political grounds in the context of the Athenian realities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The images of both Zeus and Dionysus honored by other deities and heroes should be important in connection with the personality of Hadrian, the patron of Athens and Athenian theater, who personally presided over the City Dionysia in 125 A. D. [4, p. 100]. As we know, Hadrian bore the title of *Neos Dionysos* as a patron of the Sacred Thymelic Synod [13, p. 104] and promoted the cult of Zeus in Athens by completing the Olympieion. Therefore, the images of the two enthroned deities could bear connotations of Imperial power and authority.

Such political, religious, and ideological messages resonate with the sculptural setting of the Hadrianic *scaenae frons*. A certain similarity in the choice of pictorial formulas should be also emphasized. Almost all figures of the *Bema* reproduce well-known statuary types, mostly

<sup>11</sup> According to Pausanias it was a wood statue (τὸ ξόανον), brought from Athens to Eleutherai by Pegasus (Paus. I.38.8).

Late Classical ones (or their later derivatives). At the same time, four of the five female figures — two “Tychai” and two “Basilinnai” — resemble the Erechtheion Caryatids by their postures and architectonic appearance as visual supports. This echoing of the Erechtheion sculptures continued in the decoration of the *scaenae frons*, which included figures of Tragedy and Comedy in the form of Caryatids dressed in Attic *peploi* (Ill. 29) [32, pp. 131–136]. Their attributes allowed the ancient viewer to identify them: the masks, now lost, and the special stage shoes — *kothoroi* — they wore.

Such references to the Caryatid porch must have been significant in the eyes of the Athenian audience. The legendary history of Athens was sealed in the cults of Erechtheion. Along with Athena, kings and heroes of Attica were venerated there (Kekrops, the first king of Athens, his daughter Pandrosa, Erechtheus, and Boutes) [20, p. 200]. The reliefs of the *Bema*, which depict the arrival of Dionysus in Attica in the legendary times of King Pandion, commemorate this history as well. Interestingly enough, the fourth slab, directly above enthroned Dionysus, depicts a rocky slope and a colonnade — most likely the columns of the Parthenon [44, p. 42]. This landscape again refers to the Acropolis and at the same time provides an exact topographic indication of the scene — the theater of Dionysus itself. Dionysus comes to his theater and sits on the throne, just as the priest of his cult takes his chair in the *proedria*. The site is blessed by the presence of a deity — this idea is specified by the narrative introduced in the sculptural decoration. The same artistic strategy was actually used in the decoration of the Classical buildings of Acropolis. As it is known, the Parthenon’s western pediment represented the dispute between Athena and Poseidon — the divine contest which was meant to take place precisely on the Acropolis, as it was indicated by different “signs” (*martyria*) concentrated around Erechtheion [22, p. 122].

In addition to the Caryatids, the sculptural set of the *scaenae frons* included the figures of three types of Sileni-Atlantes. Two pairs of large and colossal scale were restored on the second and first stories of the *scaenae frons*, respectively [32, p. 135]. Moreover, some of them are not the Sileni themselves, but actors dressed as Sileni wearing tight goatskin tunics and tight-fitting shaggy pantaloons — a characteristic actor’s costume — but having “real” Sileni faces, not masks (Ill. 29). It seems that such type of representation, which allowed the boundaries between myth and its dramatic representation to be blurred, goes back to Hellenistic (or even Classical<sup>12</sup>) Dionysiac groups which functioned as votive or cult images of a specific kind.

Three well-preserved Hellenistic sculptures that form such a group come from Delos. The structure which they belonged (so called “niche G”) was interpreted as a small “chapel” of Dionysus (Stibadeion)<sup>13</sup> which itself was a part of the choragic Monument of Karystios. One of the figures placed on a low podium in the center represents Dionysus<sup>14</sup> seated on a luxurious armchair. The other two, standing half-draped Papposileni actors, flanked the central image of the sitting god (Ill. 30).

Two other monuments with the sculptural setting similar in concept to the Delian group were discovered in Dionysion of Thasos. They are normally defined as choragic dedications

<sup>12</sup> If indeed the statue of “Silenos-actor” with the infant Dionysus on his shoulder found in the area of Athenian theatre copies the original of 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C. as has been suggested [9, pp. 106–107].

<sup>13</sup> It was found in 1907 in the area dedicated to Dionysus, probably since the archaic period which bordered on the temenos of Leto [33, p. 129; 29, pp. 194–210].

<sup>14</sup> Its interpretation as “theatric” Apollo — the main god of the island, given by J. Marcade does not seem very convincing [29, pp. 184–187].

[18, p. 92], although the more specific cultic function (as Stibadeion) has also been suggested for the north-eastern one [33, pp. 127–157]. The bigger and better-preserved monument was a U-shaped room with the porch of four Doric columns. On the curved base inside the structure, there is a statue of Dionysus surrounded by other figures of the smaller scale (only those on the right side survived) — the allegorical representations of Comedy and Tragedy, the Dithyrambos and Nycterinos. The base bears inscriptions with the names of famous “stars” of the stage — actors and musicians — of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C. who were associated with the personified genres of the sculptural group [18, pp. 93, 254–257]. From the second dedication, only two statues, Dionysus and one female figure, have survived.

Actually, the same atmosphere and reference to dramatic action we find both in Athenian theater’s *scaenae frons* and in the reliefs of the *Bema*. In the stage façade, the personifications of Tragedy and Comedy and Sileni of different types (including Sileni-actors) were integrated into a complex hierarchical structure, which might have contained references to the Athenian synod of *technitai* patronized by Hadrian himself [4, pp. 100–103]. The formers were seen as the bearers and guardians of the theatrical tradition. If indeed the statue of Hadrian was placed above the *porta regia* as V. di Napoli suggests [9, p. 215], this location would have strongly emphasized Hadrian’s role as *Neos Dionysos* and the patron of the theater. We find the emperor’s image in this location in the Hadrianic stage façade of the Corinthian theatre, flanked by Sileni-actors on the third story. As M. Sturgeon noted, “this location mimics Dionysus’ position in the Karystios Monument on Delos, which itself was probably modelled on a 4<sup>th</sup>-century B. C. Athenian choragic monument” [42, p. 58]. In her opinion, the similarity with the ex-voto monument can be explained by the construction of the *scaenae frons* as a form of civic patronage. In the Corinthian stage, the accent is made on the imperial group and theme of triumph, which is explained by Corinth’s important position as the provincial capital of Achaia. In the theater in Athens, the main theme seems to be the history of drama and the Dionysiac cult itself.

The same circle of ideas and images is clearly seen in the *Phaedrus Bema*. The characters of the reliefs are provided with the attributes of actors. Zeus in the first slab wears high platform shoes, which is a variant of *κοθορνοί*. *Kothornoí*-type shoes are also worn by Dionysus in the scene with Ikarios [43, pp. 32–33, 37]. The goat (*τράγος*) appears in the same relief specifically as an indication of tragedy and dithyrambos. The similarity of some figures to the aforementioned Hellenistic ex-voto groups is particularly noteworthy. The enthroned Dionysus in the *Bema* is closely paralleled by the deity of the Delian Stibadeion, as was noted by Picard [33, p. 152, n. 3]. In both cases, the god sits on an armchair in the *proedria*, as if appearing in his theater like a ruler surrounded by his attendants. The female character (“Tyche”) of the third slab of the *Bema* is nearly identical to the figure from the second Thasian monument in posture and garments composed of a heavy peplos (in the manner of the Erechtheion Caryatides) and the himation, leaving the left breast uncovered [18, p. 257, fig. 194].

In addition to votive monuments, other possible sources of inspiration should be mentioned. The reliefs of the *Bema*, significant in their details and assuming a certain sequential reading of the scenes, were something new in the representation of Dionysus in the theatrical space<sup>15</sup>. This innovation could have been inspired by the other types of decoration that dealt

<sup>15</sup> If placed on the *pulpitum*, these figures were brought forward to the viewer, to the most prominent position. However, the question of how the *orchestra* was supposed to be used in Hadrianic time seems to be important in this regard. We know that gladiatorial fights were held in the theatre in the time of Nero [10,

with the narrative reliefs. For example, they could evoke associations with the bases of celebrated Athenian cult statues of the Classical period [26, pp. 111–144]. In these monumental pedestals, various subjects related to the theme of divine birth (Pandora on the base of Athena Parthenos, Erikhthonios on the pedestal of the cult group in the Hephaisteion) were depicted. It seems that the eclectic character of the figurative types used in the *Bema* does not allow us to speak of direct imitation of the Classical Phidian-type statue bases, but the way of the representation of the story — as an assembly of gods and heroes as observers, almost inactive — appears to be close.

Even greater proximity is revealed with Classical votive reliefs. The 4<sup>th</sup>-century B. C. Attic relief found at Mondragone (Campania), which represent Eleusinian deities, including Dionysus,<sup>16</sup> is particularly noteworthy. The group of three figures on the right is strikingly similar to the second relief of the *Bema*. These figures were interpreted as Hermes (or Eubouleus) and Dionysus (or Iacchus) flanking an enthroned god — Eleusinian Hades (or Zeus) [27, p. 110, ref. 10–13]<sup>17</sup>. Their postures and types are strongly reminiscent of Dionysus and Icarus of the *Bema*. The spirit of the composition, which was supposed to depict episodes from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter [27, p. 110, ref. 10–13] transformed into “quiet inaction”, is again paralleled by the reliefs from the Athenian theater.

As for prototypes, it is important to bear in mind the existence of other very similar Hadrianic reliefs, called “group A” by G. Despinis, and attributed to the altar of Dionysus in Lenaion. This relief (where Eleusinian deities are present along with Dionysus [8, p. 168, 177] seems to be a model for at least some slabs of the *Bema*. As G. Despinis believes, both friezes were intended for the decoration of similar altars in the sanctuaries of Dionysus Lenaios and Dionysus Eleuthereus, respectively [8, pp. 187–189]. Nevertheless, the similarities between them do not necessarily mean they had the same function and were created for identical structures. The differences in thickness of the slabs speak in favor of different destinations.

### Conclusion

Similarities in the concept and sources of inspiration of the *Phaedrus Bema* and the theater's *scaenae frons* prompt us to consider them as parts of a single artistic unit — the Hadrianic *scaena*. The basic idea to represent Dionysus as the ruler of the theater receiving homage from his attendants — personified genres, Sileni-actors, and theatrical celebrities — seems to come from the Hellenistic Dionysiac dedications and “cultic niches” with sculptural groups. Nevertheless, these motives were monumentalized and embedded in a new hierarchical system of images, with their clear imperial overtones and reference to Hadrian's patronage.

There are basically two possibilities for accommodating the *Bema* reliefs within the Athenian *scaena*. They could be originally placed on the podium under the lower colonnade. As it was already noted, V. di Napoli made a good case for their original location on the lower podium of the *scaenae frons*. If this is the case, this would demonstrate a continuous adherence to the tradition of placing friezes on the podia since the Augustan-Tiberian times. [9, p. 148;

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pp. 350–351]. At a certain point, also *venatio* and even *naumachia* were staged at the *orchestra*, which does not seem very compatible with such “serious” Dionysiac representations in the same space. However, this kind of performances seems to have emerged later, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A. D., when it was widely practiced in the theatric space.

<sup>16</sup> The relief was an Attic offering to the Eleusinian deities, transported to Italy the war booty or an object specially commissioned and dedicated in Campania by Eleusinian initiates.

<sup>17</sup> For more detailed analysis of the Mondragone relief see D. Bonanome [4].



17, pp. 132–140]. At the same time, they seem to inspire Dionysiac cycles of the later *scaenae frons* decoration in the theaters of Asia Minor (in Perge, Side, and Nysa) [24; 25; 30]. The style of the *Bema* reliefs is thought to be slightly later than Hadrianic (between 140–150 A. D.) This can be explained by the fact that they were the last to be made and installed among the other sculptures of the stage in the post-Hadrianic time [9, pp. 149–150].

Nevertheless, it seems that we cannot rule out the second possibility — that they may have adorned the *pulpitum* of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century *scaena*, as M. Sturgeon has suggested [43, pp. 44–52]. Unlike most friezes on podia, which present quite dynamic scenes (for example, mythological *machia* in the theater of Corinth) the figures of the *Bema* interact little with each other. Even the Corybantes are depicted in a frontal and static position — they are not involved in the dance, as it is characteristic for their iconography. The statue-like figures of the frieze, presented in a calm contrapposto, have pronounced tectonic qualities. From a rhythmic and compositional point of view, they represent a kind of anthropomorphic analogy of the colonnade, with almost equal “intercolumnia”. The particular architectonic character of the composition and the treatment of the figures as visual supports make them very suitable for *pulpitum* decoration, where purely architectural elements were also used [9, p. 153].

As we have seen, the Hadrianic *scaenae frons* of the Athenian theater shared common characteristics with the ex-voto/cultic monuments from Delos and Thasos, featuring the same set of personages. In the same spirit, the decoration of classical cult bases or slightly earlier reliefs intended for an altar (if indeed the Despinis’ “Group A” belonged to an altar) can be seen as an appropriate source of inspiration or direct model for the *pulpitum* (or podium) decoration. Thus, the very special *scaena* which masked the ancient sanctuary behind it could be transformed into a kind of huge “exhibition-niche” with wide-reaching cultic and votive connotations.

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**Title.** Reliefs of the *Phaedrus Bema* in the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens: Reflections on Original Destination and Sources of Inspiration

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**Abstract.** This publication deals with a wide range of issues relating to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century relief cycle which is partly preserved in a later monument known as the *Phaedrus Bema*. The authors support the hypothesis that the frieze was originally a part of the stage building of the Athenian theatre and provide further arguments in favor of this statement. Four surviving slabs depict significant events from the life of Dionysus. At the same time, the frieze contains clear references to local cults, city topography, and religious festivals, thus revealing the origins of drama and Dionysiac religion in Attica. The particular emphasis on the motif of the enthroned deity in the *Bema* reliefs is noteworthy and should be linked to the sacred practices and cult imagery of the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus adjacent to the theatre. Apart from theological reasons, these accents may also have had political grounds in connection with the personality of Hadrian, who was titled *Neos Dionysos* as a patron of the Sacred Thymelic Synod. Such political, religious, and ideological messages of the *Bema* resonate with the sculptural setting of the Hadrianic *scaenae frons*, which prompts authors to consider them as parts of a single artistic unit. The connection can also be seen in the sources of inspiration. Both the reliefs and the *scaena* demonstrate an orientation towards a variety of iconographic and stylistic sources, monuments of different types. But in both cases, the basic idea — to represent Dionysus as the ruler of the theater receiving homage from his attendants (personified genres, Sileni-actors, and theatrical celebrities) — seems to go back to Hellenistic Dionysiac dedications and “cult niches” with sculptural groups, such as those found on Delos and Thasos. Nevertheless, these motives were monumentalized and embedded in a new hierarchical system of images with their clear imperial overtones and reference to Hadrian’s patronage.

**Keywords:** Dionysus, theater, *scaenae frons*, *bema*, Silenus, *technitai*, honorific monuments, Athens, Dionysian cycle

**Название статьи.** Рельефы «Бемы Федра» театра Диониса в Афинах. К вопросу о первоначальном назначении и источниках вдохновения

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**Аннотация.** В данной публикации рассматривается широкий круг вопросов, связанных с циклом афинских рельефов II в., который частично сохранился в составе более позднего памятника, известного как «Бема Федра» (βῆμα του Φαίδρου). Авторы поддерживают гипотезу о том, что фриз первоначально был частью здания сцены афинского театра, и приводят дополнительные аргументы в пользу этой гипотезы. На сохранившихся четырех плитах представлены события из жизни Диониса, начиная с рождения божества и передачи его Гермесу. Вместе с тем, фриз содержит отсылки к местным культам, топографии города и религиозным праздникам, благодаря чему раскрывается тема истоков аттической драмы и религии Диониса. Привлекает внимание особый акцент на мотиве восседающего на троне божества в рельефах «Бемы», очевидно, связанный с сакральными практиками и культовыми образами примыкающего к театру святилища Диониса Элевтерия. Помимо теологических, эти акценты могли иметь и политические основания в связи с личностью Адриана, который носил титул Новый Дионис как покровитель Синода афинских технитов. Подобные политические, религиозные и идеологические послылы, содержащиеся во фризе, перекликаются со скульптурным оформлением адриановской *scaenae frons*, что позволяет рассматривать их как части единого художественного целого. Связь прослеживается и в отношении возможных источников вдохновения. Рельефы, так же, как и скульптуры сцены, демонстрируют ориентацию на разнообразные иконографические и стилистические источники, памятники различных типов. Однако, в обоих случаях основная идея — изобразить Диониса как владыку театра, принимающего почести от своих служителей, судя по всему, восходит к эллинистическим дионисийским посвящениям и «культовым нишам» со скульптурными группами, подобным тем, что были найдены на Делосе и Фасосе. Однако, эти мотивы были монументализированы и встроены в новую иерархическую систему образов с ее явными имперскими коннотациями и отсылками к императорскому патронажу.

**Ключевые слова:** Дионис, театр, Афины, техниты, силен, посвятельный монумент, дионисийский цикл



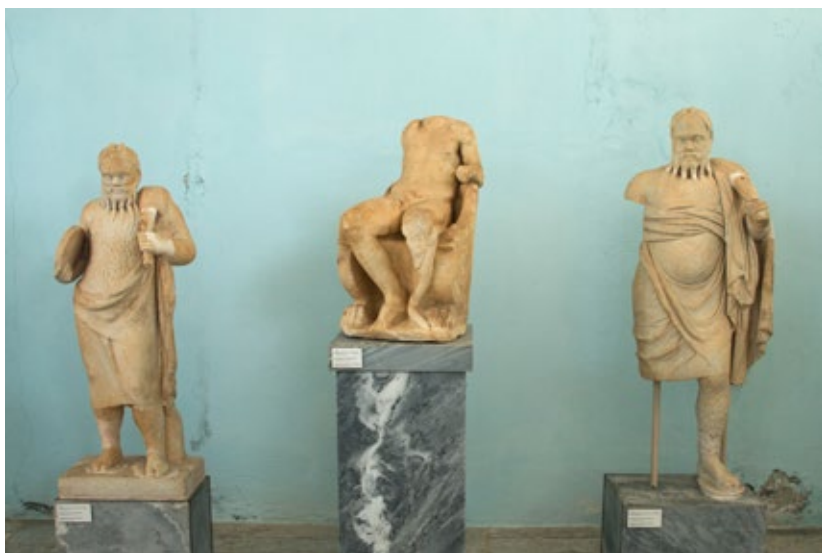
III. 27. "Phaedrus Bema" at the theatre of Dionysus in Athens. Photo: Ekaterina Mikhailova, 2021



III. 28. "Phaedrus Bema" at the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, 4<sup>th</sup> slab. Photo: Mark Cartwright, 2015



Ill. 29. Silenus and Personification of Tragedy or Comedy from the scaenae frons. Theater of Dionysus at Athens. Photo: Arina Korzun, 2021



Ill. 30. Dionysus enthroned between two statues of sileni. Archaeological Museum of Delos, inv. A04123, A4121, A04122. Photo: Zdenek Kratochvil, 2019