

GREEK AND ROMAN EPIC SCENES ON THE PORTLAND VASE*

THE subject, or subjects, of the scenes on the Portland Vase is an old problem which has teased art historians for long enough. There have been fairly long periods when the interpretation seemed to be generally agreed, or when scholars' ingenuity waned, and the last suggestion reigned unchallenged for some time.¹ There have also been short periods when the vase evoked avid scholarly activity, as for instance 1957–68.²

For a recent debate one should consult the article by B. Ashmole, and the reply to it made by D. Haynes (*JHS* 1967 and 1968).³ In both editions of his British Museum booklet, *The Portland Vase* (1964 and 1975) Haynes gives an amusing appendix, listing 'other interpretations', which from 1642 to 1967 amounted to twenty-three more or less different theories.⁴ If one adds to these the articles by Brown and Clairmont published subsequently in *AJA* (1968, 1970, 1972)⁵ and a recent paper by Evelyn Harrison in a German *Festschrift* (1976),⁶ then the vase has knocked up more than its quarter century of rival interpretations. It is no wonder that many modern general works state simply that the scenes have not been satisfactorily interpreted, but that one of the sides may represent a sea goddess.

In summary it may be said that previous theories have taken one of two main paths. They have *either* linked the scene with a Greek legend, *or* have sought in the vase a reference to contemporary Roman history, albeit a history dressed up in a Hellenic and classicising style. There has similarly been a division of views as to whether the two sides represent one unitary story, or two separate scenes punctuated by the handles. I hope that I can show that two separate scenes are represented but that they have an overall thematic link. Secondly I wish to suggest that Greek legend or Roman history are not to be seen as alternatives but that a juxtaposition of established Greek and newly developed Roman legend may have been intended.

Before launching into yet another interpretation, it may be well to make a few general points. First, I believe that the scenes represented on either side of the vase are separate—thematically as well as stylistically. This impression I share with the majority of earlier scholars, and, of more recent ones, with Erika Simon, H. Möbius, B. Ashmole and E. B. Harrison, against L. Polacco, F. L. Bastet and D. Haynes.⁷ Each scene makes a complete three-figure grouping, except that the small flying figure of Eros makes one side technically four figures; each scene's unity is emphasised by the inward-facing profiles of the outer figures, standing in one instance and seated in the other.

* I am very grateful to Dr E. L. Harrison for his encouragement in the development of this interpretation and for his careful reading of an earlier draft, which removed a number of unclear passages from the text.

¹ E.g. the theory of Winkelmann that side A represented the meeting of Peleus and Thetis. J. J. Winkelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* ii (Vienna 1776) 861 ff. The complete identification of the scene was made by Millingen, some fifty years later, with the suggestion that the bearded god is Neptune: J. Millingen, *Trans. Royal Soc. of Lit.* i. 2 (1828) 1 ff.

² E. Simon, *Die Portlandvase* (Mainz 1957); L. Polacco, *Athenaeum* n.s. xxxviii (1958) 123–41; H. Möbius, *Gnomon* xxxvi (1964) 637; *id.*, 'Die Reliefs der Portlandvase und das antike Dreifigurbild', *Abh. München* lxi (1965), reviewed by Haynes, *Gnomon* xxxviii (1966) 730–2; H. Biesantz, *Werkzeitschrift Jenaer Glaswerk* cxi (1965) 6–13; F. L. Bastet, *Bulletin antieke Beschaving* xli (1966); *id.*, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* xviii (1967) 1–29. Möbius' view that the scenes presented tales from the Theseus cycle was favourably received by Becatti, *Arch. Class.* xix (1967) 207–13.

³ B. Ashmole, 'A new interpretation of the Portland Vase' in *JHS* lxxxvii (1967) 1–17; D. Haynes, 'The Portland Vase again' in *JHS* lxxxviii (1968) 58–72.

⁴ D. Haynes, *The Portland Vase*² (1975) 27–32. For a similar list to 1957, see Simon, *op. cit.* 77.

⁵ C. Clairmont, *AJA* lxxii (1968) 280–1; E. Brown, *AJA* lxxiv (1970) 189; *AJA* lxxvi (1972) 379–91. Brown takes over some of Ashmole's suggestions, notably Achilles and Helen on side B, but then takes the goddess to be a personification of Skyros, and the scene on side A to represent Achilles being encouraged by Thetis in the palace of Lycomedes on Skyros. But the identifications of the bearded personage as Lycomedes and the stately goddess-figure as Skyros seem highly implausible.

⁶ Evelyn B. Harrison, 'The Portland Vase: thinking it over' in *Essays in Memoriam Otto Brendel* (Mainz 1976) 131–42.

⁷ Recently Harrison has stressed the separateness of the composition of the two sides within a larger unity; following Möbius she argues that Theseus appears on both sides, with Ariadne holding a torch on what is normally thought to be side B and with Amphitrite and Poseidon on side A (see n. 6). This theory, however, robs side A of its clear erotic content, leaving out of account the Eros with raised torch, and waters down the meaning of the dipped torch in the hand of the lady on side B to a mere symbol of 'going to sleep' (p. 132).

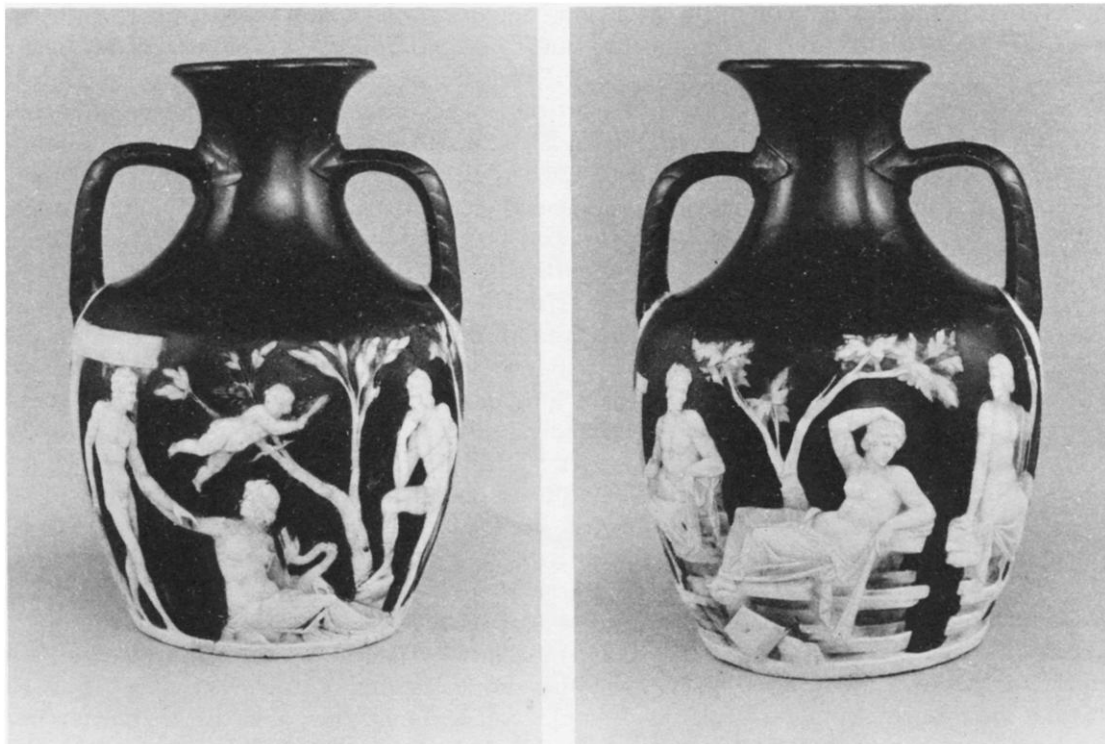


FIG. 1. (From D. Haynes, *The Portland Vase*: courtesy, British Museum.)

There is an almost antithetical element in the two scenes: in the one a bearded god appears to be brooding on the hesitant arrival of a young lover; in the other a goddess of regal aspect is observing a lover who is probably on the point of rising hesitantly to depart. The masks at the base of the handles, whether heads of Oceanus (Ashmole), or more likely Pan (Haynes), also serve to punctuate one scene from the other; what is more, one of the scenes takes place in a rocky (or island) place, the other probably inside a palace or a sanctuary with a low ground line.

The second general point which I should like to make is that a fine work of the Augustan period may well refer, perhaps through the legends, to Roman affairs and even to the Julian ruling house. That much would be in keeping with Julio-Claudian works of silver-ware, and with others in cameo technique, for example sardonyx cameos of Tiberian, Claudian and Neronian date.⁸ One may concede to Simon and Polacco that allusion to Roman history would not be out of place on a work of this type and date.

The third principle on which interpretations must rest is a reasonable explanation of the most obvious attributes and appearance of the figures. One problem has always been that while some may be in poses which are suggestive of one deity, hero or heroine, they are not exclusive to that one figure. That said, it should be pointed out that the two central female figures do have the two most obvious attributes; the one (C: see FIG 2, p. 23) holds a friendly sea-monster (*kētos*) in her lap,⁹ and the other (F) holds a reversed torch in her left hand. It is, I think, no accident that Winckelmann's interpretation of the scene with the figure holding the sea-monster was so successful, for it explained satisfactorily her identity as the central feature in it. This interpretation was accepted by Ashmole and also, in a modified form, by Haynes, whose theory required Thetis

⁸ For stylistic observations on the date, see Simon *op. cit.* 41–51. At 72–3 she proposes that the Portland Vase and the onyx vase in St Maurice go closely together in the decade 30–20 B.C., with the latter dating soon after the death of Marcellus in 23 B.C. See also Polacco *loc. cit.* 23 ff., for the 'historical' interpretation of the scenes.

⁹ D. Haynes in *JHS* 1968, 58 ff., proved conclusively that the beast is not a serpent, but a *kētos*, sea-monster;

hence a symbol of a sea-goddess, as I think, most reasonably Thetis, not her mother or grandmother. That the sea-monster is an attribute of Thetis as sea-goddess, not a symbol of her Protean changes while struggling with Peleus, was first noticed by J. Overbeck, *Die Bildwerke zum Thebanischen und Troischen Heldenkreis* (1857) 204, no. 49.

herself to be on the other side of the vase; as a consequence he makes this person a relative of Thetis, either Doris, Tethys, or Amphitrite. But the central figure (C) is most probably Thetis herself, as the iconography strongly suggests. She is by far the most popular sea-goddess in Graeco-Roman art. If it is *her* nuptials which are the subject of the scene, it is almost unthinkable that, while her mother or grandmother, although less known, was given a sea-monster as symbol, she herself should be given no marine attribute when she appears on the other side. If the lady in the centre of this side is Thetis, this confirms that it is Peleus (B) approaching her from the left. On the right (D) is probably Poseidon, who had wooed Thetis, but had, like Zeus, been put off by the prophecy that her son would become stronger than his father.¹⁰

It seems to me, then, that the group has perfectly suitable poses and attributes to illustrate Peleus' wooing of Thetis, which proved successful through default on the part of Poseidon and Zeus. In answer to Haynes' objections that Peleus is not looking at Thetis, nor grasping at her arm passionately, one might say that this is not the 'grappling with Thetis scene' but the prelude to marriage on Mt Pelion, or at Pharsalus, presumably inside a palace, as the columns and entablature behind the hero suggest. Peleus is looking, understandably with some trepidation, at Poseidon (or perhaps Zeus). Thetis herself holds the sea-monster not as a sign that she is changing into a sea-snake to escape him, but as a simple signal that she is Thetis, the sea-goddess. She looks at Peleus, supports and encourages him because he is a mere mortal, duly awed and, as the position of his left leg suggests, retreating slightly to the rear. Perhaps this movement may help to explain the drapery of his cloak trailing behind him: it may have been dropped and partially picked up again. The tip-toed walk is probably not the 'Epiphanieschritt' of a god but the awed reaction of a mortal in the presence of gods. The Eros who flies above has stopped over Thetis' head as a sign that it is she who is the object of Peleus' love and no other. To Haynes' objection that Eros is not concerned with the figure below him one can only say that without reversing the torch, a most unlucky omen, Eros could hardly have pointed the torch at her. Rather, he holds his bow and raises a propitious torch over a most momentous marriage.

If the love of Peleus and Thetis is the subject of one side, and the two sides are distinct, what then is on the other? Ashmole suggested the wedding of Achilles and Helen on the 'Isles of the Blessed', supposing that the rocks are the islands. This has the merit of explaining the differentiated landscape. But Haynes has already shown the implausibility of this identification: Achilles should not be sitting next to his grave stele (in the Troad) if he is in the 'Isles of the Blessed', nor should Aphrodite be seated nearby, nor is there any good reason why Helen should be holding a reversed torch, except as a general sign that the scene is in the next world. Yet, if anyone should not hold such a sign of mourning to mark her transference to the Other World, it is Helen who, according to the story, spent her time with Achilles in feasting and drinking. This figure (F) must be a less fortunate lady than Helen. Nor is it safe to adduce the 'plane tree' as a symbol of Helen, the tree goddess (*pace* Ashmole), since it has with equal firmness been identified as a 'fig tree' (Simon).¹¹

I suggest that on this side of the vase the lady (F) with the reversed torch is none other than Punic Dido; on the left (E) is Aeneas seated and looking back towards her over his shoulder, and on the right (G) is Venus, or perhaps rather Juno (*pronuba Juno*), holding her staff and presiding over what she regards as a marriage. This is, then, an illustration of Vergil's *Aeneid* (iv 114–28, 160–70). The episode is the famous encounter in the hillside grove (*nemus*) above Carthage, the consummation of Dido's and Aeneas' love contrived by Venus and Juno, with Juno's actual presence. The goddess is actually looking not at the central figure but at the 'Aeneas' figure, for his

¹⁰ For the major role of Zeus in the legend see Catullus lxiv 24–30. Ashmole takes the bearded god to be Poseidon (*JHS* 1967, 26) and quotes for the general pose the type of Poseidon in Helbig, *Führer* ii 25, no. 1188. This is based on an original by Lysippus, see Johnson, *Lysippus* 24; M. Bieber, *Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age* (1955) fig. 148. Ashmole admits that the god D, if Poseidon, would have to be a variant with no trident, and in a moody pose (*op. cit.* 6–7). Some of the early antiquarians (e.g. de Montfaucon in 1722 and Venuti in 1756) took the bearded

figure to be Jupiter, or Zeus.

¹¹ Ashmole, *op. cit.* 13–14; Simon, *op. cit.* 22 ff.; Haynes, *op. cit.* 15. Identification of the tree species was a major element in the interpretations offered by Simon and Polacco, who thought that the rather uneven tree near bearded figure D must be the *figus Ruminialis* in Rome, that the larger tree over the reclining woman F was a more healthy fig, that the tree spreading above figure C was a laurel, and the bush near Aphrodite (G) was a myrtle.

is to be the next significant action—to leave Dido. The significance of the background detail might now become clear. The rocks represent the mountains on which the love-tryst occurred; the trees are the *nemus* in which the hunting expedition took place (iv 118). The fallen capital below the feet of 'Dido' may well be a hint that here is a rustic grove, or even a hint at the interrupted building of Carthage, although the 'Blue Vase' from Pompeii and a cameo of the same technique and style also have this fallen capital motif, which has been taken to be a workshop signature.¹² In general, however, the scenery is all that we could wish for a rustic shrine or *nemus* presented in typical classical fashion.

Two objections might spring to mind. The figure on the left is not the normal Aeneas, a bearded man mature enough to have a youth, Ascanius, as his son. But some representations do depict Aeneas himself as youthful and beardless, among these some dating from the first century A.D. at Pompeii.¹³ Vergil expressly tells us that on this occasion Aeneas' mother, Venus, had endowed him with godlike beauty to win Dido's love (*Aen.* i 588–95); and that Aeneas goes out

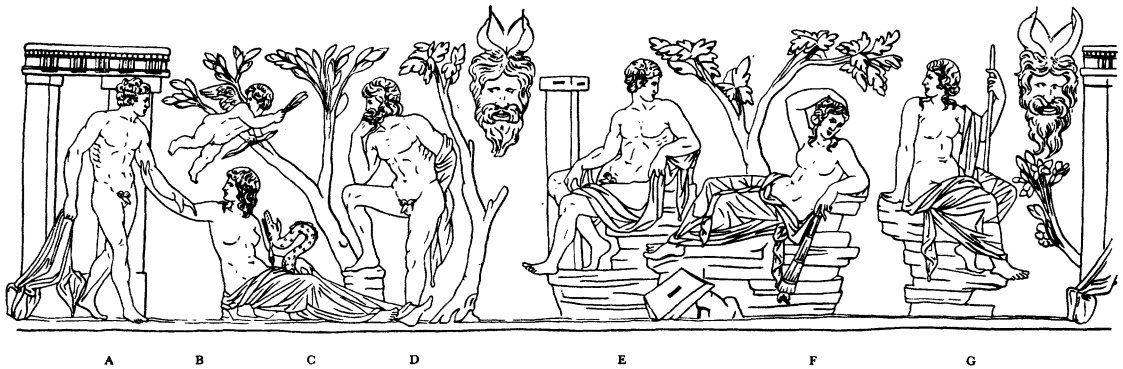


FIG. 2. The Portland Vase. (Courtesy, British Museum.)

hunting, shining in beauty like Apollo (iv 140–4). Here the figure is shown as 'Apollo-like', with his back already turned to leave his love, but his head looking back. Simon has already astutely pointed out that he is seated only lightly, not firmly, as is Aphrodite opposite. She drew the conclusion that this is Hermes (the eternal messenger), but he could very well represent a reluctantly departing Aeneas swathed divinely in Apolline beauty.¹⁴

The second possible objection concerns the landscape on this side. The tree overhanging Dido is probably a fig, hinting, as is usual, at a wild and rustic place, but it could be a plane tree; it unfortunately seems not to be a date-palm pointing to the *Phoenissa*, Dido. Further, there is no trace of an overhanging cave, as occurs on some reliefs of the first century A.D. But in reply one can say that some illustrations in Virgilian manuscripts, and the mosaics with Dido scenes from

¹² Simon, *op. cit.* pl. 21 (Blue Vase); pl. 20 f (Sardonyx cameo in Naples). On the Blue Vase and on the cameo the fallen capital has no detectable significance, but it may have become a workshop signature after its first use on the Portland Vase. For the interrupted building of Carthage, which was held up during the dalliance of Aeneas and Dido, see *Aen.* iv 86–9.

¹³ *Cod. Vat.* 3225, no. xvi and 3867 fig. 106. For a youthful 'Apolline' Aeneas on Pompeian wall-paintings see G. K. Galinsky, *Aeneas, Sicily and Rome* (Princeton 1969) pls 23 (wounded Aeneas, with a 10 or 11 year old Ascanius); 24 (youthful Aeneas and Polyphemus); 26 (Aeneas and Dido in dalliance); 27 (Aeneas saving his aged father from Troy, with a young Ascanius wearing Phrygian cap).

¹⁴ Haynes treated this figure E as a typical onlooker, but had some difficulty in the matter of which god to identify him with. First he suggested Ares, later Hermes (as a paired match-maker with Aphrodite (G) on the right

of the central figure). Simon treats the whole scene as contemporary Roman imperial mythology, and points to the similarity of the head of the Julian god *Vediovis/Veiouis*, or Apollo, on coins of Octavian after Actium, to this profile head on the Portland Vase (*op. cit.* 24–5). Although the identification of *Apollo/Vediovis* is hardly to be accepted, the 'Apolline' features for the youthful god-like figure are probably no accident. Both would be represented as ideal 'ancestors' of Julius and Augustus; see also the *Gemma Augustea* in Vienna (Simon pl. 12) and the head of Augustus on a gem in the BM (Gem 3577). Ashmole took the seated figure with head turned back to be a type characteristic of Achilles, but it is inappropriately used here, since the head turns back towards E (in longing?), not away in rejection (*op. cit.* 9–10). The pose might easily have been adapted to Aeneas who is regularly depicted as looking back, usually to Troy during the flight (Galinsky, 'Pius Aeneas', *op. cit.* n. 13, 3–61).

Low Ham, have a broad-leaved species of tree in the *nemus* and an absence of a visible cave. I believe that the rock piles, which have an artificial look, may be the artist's shorthand for the furniture of a mountain *nemus*,¹⁵ just as the pillar and fallen capital are a sort of symbol of rusticity in general.

The figure of which this interpretation makes the most sense is the reclining figure with the torch held downwards. Her identification with Dido seems to explain all the poses and attributes. Dido, once the fire of love was kindled, became all aflame (*Aen.* iv 66–70); Ovid tells us that she burned like a waxed torch (Ovid, *Her.* vii 23). Not only that, her love was ill-starred; it led to her suicide. Normally such a torch is held by Eros, but it is very appropriate that Dido should hold it here as a symbol of her suicide, which took place on a pyre erected while she was alive (*Aen.* iv 663 f.). That there was torch imagery in the iconography of Dido is proved by the mosaic at Low Ham where two torches are held by Cupids, one on either side of Venus, one aloft to symbolise the successful nuptials with Lavinia and the foundation of Lavinium, and one reversed for Dido's love and the burning of the palace at Carthage.¹⁶ It is also true, as Dr E. L. Harrison has pointed out to me, that Aeneas meets Dido once more—in the underworld. There she is described as having her eyes turned away and downcast to the floor—an image that may well have been taken up by the artist of the Portland Vase to be used in this scene from an earlier stage of Aeneas' career.¹⁷

If one looks through the *Heroides* of Ovid for heroines, distressed in love and dying from it, the list is not long. Most of the ladies survived, or shared their fates with their husband or lover. Of Greek heroines only Ariadne, deserted by Theseus, has previously occurred to scholars as a possible candidate.¹⁸ Yet, in view of her later happiness with Dionysus, the reversed torch is no more appropriate to her than to Helen. But among Ovid's list of deserted ladies there shines out Dido, of whom no one in Augustan Rome could be ignorant. The implications for the meaning of the Portland Vase are wider if the interpretation is correct. Peleus and Thetis and their wedding (side A) led to the 'Apples of Strife', the Judgement of Paris, the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War—all part of Zeus' plan to prune the over-heavy weight of men on the earth. The ill-starred love of Dido (side B) is presented by Vergil as the *leitmotif* of the first half of the *Aeneid* and the harbinger of woes to Rome and Carthage. Their mutual enmity derived from Dido's curse, and the destruction of Carthage was the result. Both sides of the vase would then represent the origins of the most baneful world-wars in ancient legend and history; and if the bearded god on the one side were Zeus, not Poseidon, and the goddess on the other were Juno of Carthage and

¹⁵ Such layer-like rocks certainly hint at a rustic scene, although not provably in all cases a *spelunca*. They occur slightly less stylised on a relief from an altar at Carthage depicting ?Tellus: see *CAH* Plates iv 120. Dr G. Waywell in a letter to me dated 12th October, 1976 offered a list of references to layered rock scenery hinting at a rustic *nemus*, instancing Schreiber, *Die hellenistischen Reliefbilder* (1889–94) pls II, IX, XII and XXII; Jean Sampson, *PBSR* xlii (1974) 27 ff.

¹⁶ For the scenes from the *Aeneid* on the mosaic at Low Ham, see D. J. Smith, 'The mosaic pavements', in *The Roman Villa in Britain*, ed. A. L. F. Rivet (1969) pl. 3.5 opposite p. 112; J.M.C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (1963) 203–5, no. 200; W. Dorigo, *Late Roman Painting* (1971) 204. It must be admitted that Aeneas is bearded on all the scenes at Low Ham, to differentiate him from his beardless son, the youth Ascanius. But the Portland Vase is much earlier, nearer to the *Aeneid* and more subtle in its interpretation; it could well, in true Augustan fashion, represent the hero in Apolline guise.

¹⁷ *Aen.* vi 450–75 esp. 'illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat'.

¹⁸ The reclining pose of F has been likened to Ariadne awakened by Dionysus, or to Endymion approached by Luna on Pompeian wall-paintings, and, perhaps closest of all, to Rhea Silvia awakened by Mars in reliefs carved on a

sarcophagus and an altar in Rome: Simon *op. cit.* pls 7–9. But the difference in our scene is that the sleeping heroine has a lowered torch. In view of the usual significance of a reversed torch in ancient art (death) it can hardly (*pace* Haynes) simply be used for illumination. The upright torch held by Eros on side A certainly refers to a marriage. Möbius and Harrison are the two scholars who take the scenes to be from the Theseus cycle (nn. 2 and 5).

¹⁹ While it would add point to the theory if the bearded god D is Zeus and the goddess G is Juno, the main suggestion that E and F are Aeneas and Dido remains possible even if the gods are Poseidon and Venus. The latter, like Juno, was responsible for the love episode in the cave above Carthage. While the semi-nudity of the figure may suit better the character of Aphrodite, the staff borne so majestically by the goddess may hint rather at Juno. Further, Juno was the patroness of matrons and of childbirth even at Rome. At Carthage as Tanit and Juno Caelestis, she may well have been no stranger to nudity, let alone such respectable semi-nudity as is represented on the vase. For Juno in majesty with long staff at the judgement of Paris, see the Pompeian wall-painting illustrated by Robert Schilling, *La religion romaine de Venus depuis les origines jusqu'au temps d'Auguste* (Paris 1954) pl. XXI.

not Venus, there would be added point to the scenes.¹⁹ But Poseidon and Venus will do well enough as the attendant deities even for this enlarged interpretation.

Finally, of course, the love of Aeneas and Dido came to nothing because of the destiny of Aeneas and Ascanius in Italy. The other name of Ascanius was Iulus, mythical ancestor of the Julian *gens*. Hence the Portland Vase, once, it has often been supposed, an imperial personal possession, would have a direct relevance to Augustus and the Julians in his family. On grounds of style most scholars date the vase to the Augustan period. No opinion that I have come across precludes its having been made shortly after the publication of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Haynes, for instance, is inclined to date it to the time of Augustus and Tiberius, and Simon would date it 'soon after 30 B.C.'. ²⁰

One final point may be of relevance. Into the bottom of the Portland Vase was inserted, at some time subsequent to its first manufacture, a glass roundel to form its base. It is thought that the vase's original shape was much more elegant—akin to the fourth century B.C. *amphoriskos* shape. The technique of the base (white on blue glass) is the same as the rest of the vase, although the glass is of a lighter blue; and it is possible, though not certain, that the insertion is an ancient one, made before the final deposition in the burial. This roundel has decoration in the shape of a youth in a Phrygian cap, wearing a sleeved garment and shaded by a (?plane) tree.²¹ Haynes regards the youth as 'undoubtedly Paris' but believes his relevance to the main theme to be fortuitous. It may be so, but Paris forms a link between the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and the Fall of Troy, hence between side A and side B, which on the identifications proposed above represents the wanderings of Aeneas to Africa consequent on the fall of Troy. Whoever cut down the vase may have realised the relevance of the base. Alternatively, the Phrygian boy could be the youth Iulus, aetiological ancestor of the Julian race. Can one imagine the noble owners of Augustan date lifting the Portland Vase to see the true, and to them very relevant heroic scenes of love, depicted on the sides? The whole vase might thus have been an early imperial essay in adapting Hellenic legend to relate to Rome's past, and specially to Rome's Augustan present. Whether one can go so far in speculation I do not know, but the vase invites it. At all events, I should like to repeat the main proposition that figure E is Aeneas himself clothed in Apolline beauty, that the goddess on the right (G) is either Venus, or Juno, queen of gods and patroness of marriage, and that figure F, the least satisfactorily explained hitherto, is Dido 'carrying a torch for Aeneas'.

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²⁰ Haynes, *Portland Vase* 24; Simon, *op. cit.* 45–51.

²¹ Haynes, *op. cit.* pl. IXa, XVI; Simon, *op. cit.* pl. Ve.