

**The Portland vase:  
new clues towards old solutions**

The number of interpretations of the scenes (or scene, if it is regarded as one continuous one) on the two sides of the Portland Vase had by the end of 1992 reached the impressive total of forty-six.<sup>1</sup> All of these, while involving valuable observations about the figures, their poses and setting, fall a long way short of proof. Most are over-complicated, introducing implausible identifications of figures and scenes. This is true of the most recent attempts by Painter and Whitehouse in the *Journal of Glass Studies*, repeated in the volume on Roman glass<sup>2</sup> jointly edited by one of the same writers, and of a note in *JHS* cxii (1992) by Harrison.<sup>3</sup> It is also true of an earlier article of my own which appeared in *JHS* xcix (1979) where I made what proves to be a misguided interpretation of Side B of the vase.<sup>4</sup>

It is now my contention that it is possible to prove right the identifications of the figures made by two scholars in the past, even though they themselves were only able to suggest varying degrees of plausibility for them. Winckelmann long ago proposed that the scene of Side A is of Peleus' marriage to Thetis, and this has received widespread, though not universal, acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Relatively recently B. Ashmole suggested that Side B represented the marriage of Achilles and Helen on White Island in the Euxine Pontus.<sup>6</sup> This latter proposal was followed by no one except Clairmont in *AJA* of the following year, and was quickly subjected to destructive criticism by Haynes, who had his own interpretation that the marriage of Peleus to Thetis was represented in continuous fashion all round the vase.<sup>8</sup>

However, there seems now to be a good deal of scholarly agreement that the vase presents two separate scenes, each with two outer figures turned towards a central reclining or seated female.<sup>9</sup> In view of this I turn to the scene on Side B, since proof can now be provided that Ashmole's interpretation of it was correct (PLATE II (a)). I begin with the reclining bare-breasted lady, who holds a down-turned torch and has an air of calm introspection, for it is, above all, her identity which has proved so elusive. The object which she holds, however (as I already suspected in 1979), indeed proves to be a visual clue, though at the time I could get no further than the suspicion of it.<sup>10</sup> This object is in fact a reed-torch (the tied reeds can be seen running throughout its length), and it serves as a visual pun (rebus), since the

Greek for such a torch, was ἑλάνη or ἑλένη.<sup>11</sup> There is then no doubt that the artist intended the lady to be Helen (Helene); her general beauty, and specifically her exposed fair breasts, as Ashmole noted,<sup>12</sup> are also designed to identify this legendary lady. The torch almost certainly has a secondary significance (or more than one), since it also has to do with marriage, and, as it is downturned, it is connected with the underworld or afterlife. All this gives the torch ample significance in referring this scene generally to a marriage after death.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately these connotations of the torch have hitherto obscured its primary use as a simple visual pun on the name Helen.

Behind and overshadowing Helen is a tree, growing from the pile of layered rocks on which she reclines. Another tree (of the same species), which has one healthy and one dead branch, stands under the handle to the left of this scene. These trees are identifiable by their leaves as white poplars (*abele*; in Greek λεύκη). This species is known to be resistant to salty sea-spray and so to be found frequently on coasts and small islands. It was also in ancient times connected with the afterlife, probably because wreaths could be made of its leaves, which have a conspicuously white underside.<sup>15</sup> The name λεύκη is important for us here, since it is another rebus-pun, confirming for us Ashmole's location of the scene on the Black Sea island Leukē (modern Phidonisi), just as the torch indicates Helen. The identification of the tree-species as the white poplar/*abele* has been confirmed by a specialist from Kew Gardens.<sup>16</sup>

The seated lady to the right of Helen is probably Aphrodite. She holds a tall staff or spear suited to a goddess, and is seated on a separate island as she contemplates the marriage which she promotes. She has in the past been identified as Aphrodite/Venus, or Juno; a mosaic recently found in Cyprus depicts Aphrodite holding a spear.<sup>17</sup> The small bush which sprouts to her right beneath the second handle has in the past been supposed to be either a myrtle or a rose; both would serve as flowers of Aphrodite. The opinion, expressed by the same botanical specialist, was that it is more likely to be a myrtle, since 'most artists cannot resist representing the flowers on a rose'.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that this small plant was not intended to carry any real significance in the scene, but we have already seen that at least one tree and one attribute, made of plant material, do so. (PLATE II (b)).

<sup>11</sup> LSJ s.v. ἑλάνη/ἑλένη ('a torch of reeds', citing Neanthes Historicus [3rd c. BC]).

<sup>12</sup> Ashmole (n. 6) 11-13; see now *LIMC* iv 1.506 (illus. iv 2.294.19).

<sup>13</sup> Hind (n. 4) 22.

<sup>14</sup> LSJ s.v. λεύκη.

<sup>15</sup> *OCD* s.v. 'tree worship', with ref. to W. Mannhardt, *Wald-und Feldkulte*<sup>2</sup> (Berlin 1904).

<sup>16</sup> 'The two trees with lobed leaves (previously thought to be planes or figs) are much more likely to be white poplars (*Populus alba*, *abele*). It is native to Greece and well known in myth' (Celia Fisher, pers.comm. 31.8.1993).

<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian* 10.11.1993 (Reuter).

<sup>18</sup> Celia Fisher, pers.comm. 31.8.1993; and more definitely in favour of the myrtle in a second letter of 1.11.1993, since the flowers of the myrtle are 'hardly possible to depict on a vase'. Cf. Pliny *NH* xv 36.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Glass Studies* iii (1990) 172-6, with 130-6.

<sup>2</sup> K. Painter and D. Whitehouse, in K. Painter and M. Newby ed. *Roman glass: two centuries of art and invention* (London 1991) 33-45.

<sup>3</sup> S.J. Harrison, *JHS* cxii (1992) 150-3.

<sup>4</sup> J.G.F. Hind, *JHS* xcix (1979) 20-5.

<sup>5</sup> J.J. Winckelmann, *Anmerkungen über die Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Dresden 1767); *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Vienna 1776).

<sup>6</sup> B. Ashmole, *JHS* lxxxvii (1967) 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> C.W. Clairmont, *AJA* lxxii (1968) 280-1.

<sup>8</sup> D.E.L. Haynes, *JHS* lxxxviii (1968) 58-72; Haynes, *The Portland vase*<sup>2</sup> (London 1975). See also *LIMC* iv 1.504.

<sup>9</sup> Hind (n. 4) 20; *Journal of Glass Studies* xxxii (1990) 134.

<sup>10</sup> Hind (n. 4) 21-4.

The youthful male figure, seated on the same layered rocks as Helen, must be Achilles, since he is also on Leukē Island. He is sitting by his shrine, signified by the pillar to his left. The reason for his family resemblance, with slight differences in the hairstyle, to the standing figure holding the cloak on the other side of the vase,<sup>19</sup> will become clear as we next turn to the interpretation of that side, following the majority of scholars in seeing that there too is a scene from Greek legend.

Side A of the Portland Vase was resolved long ago to the satisfaction of most scholars (with the exception of a strand of opinion which sees all the figures on both sides as drawn from Roman imperial history and Roman landscape) as representing the marriage of Peleus and Thetis in the presence of a sea-god (Poseidon, Nereus or Oceanus).<sup>20</sup> Again there is a mainly inward-turned three-figure composition, made four only by the small figure of Eros, seen in favouring flight above, and holding upwards and forwards a little lighted torch.<sup>21</sup> This then is a felicitous marriage, one attended by the gods, and leading to a happy outcome. Indeed the wedding of Peleus and Thetis was, like that of Dionysus and Ariadne, used as a divine exemplar for mortal weddings; poetic versions of these myths were recited at them.<sup>22</sup> The central figure is identified as Thetis by the sea-monster (*ketos*) in her lap, and most modern scholars are content merely to elaborate Winckelmann's explanation of this attribute.<sup>23</sup> The young man approaching her is surely Peleus. Nor can there be any mistaking the identity and purpose of the Eros; he seems to have stopped above Thetis, to look back and encourage Peleus,<sup>24</sup> who is hesitating because he sees (beyond Thetis) the right-hand figure in this scene. (PLATE III (a)).

The identity of this bearded figure, who looks on in thought, at the approach of Peleus, has been less secure.<sup>25</sup> But the use of visual puns continues on this side of the vase, and labels him in similar fashion. This deity plants one foot proprietorially on a low base by the trunk of a tree, which spreads over Thetis, the central figure of the scene. The tree is usually said to be a laurel or olive on account of the shape of its leaves.<sup>26</sup> However it rather represents the oleander, known to the Greeks as *rhododaphne*, *agriodaphne* or *nērion*.<sup>27</sup> This latter name *Nērion* is another rebus, hinting that the scene is Nereus' palace, and that this figure, who is generally recognized to be in the pose of a sea-god, is indeed Nereus, and not Poseidon or Oceanus. Certainly Nereus is the most appropriate god to be in attendance,

<sup>19</sup> *Journal of Glass Studies* xxxii (1990) 134.

<sup>20</sup> For the widespread acceptance of Winckelmann's interpretation of two figures in this scene see the table of 'Earlier Interpretations' in *Journal of Glass Studies* xxxii (1990) 173-6.

<sup>21</sup> Hind (n. 4) 20.

<sup>22</sup> Haynes, *The Portland vase*<sup>2</sup> 21.

<sup>23</sup> Haynes, *JHS* lxxxviii (1968) 58 ff. and *JHS* this volume, p 149 n. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Pace Haynes *loc. cit.*, who thinks that Eros is urging Peleus on to the Thetis he has identified on the other side of the vase. But Peleus gazes at Nereus beyond Eros.

<sup>25</sup> Various said to be Poseidon, Proteus, Nereus, Oceanus, Zeus or Romulus. Ashmole (n. 6) 6 thought that this figure could only be Poseidon/Neptune.

<sup>26</sup> Haynes, *The Portland vase*<sup>2</sup> 15.

<sup>27</sup> LSJ s.v. νῆριον. Cf. Pliny *NH* xvi 79, xxiv 53.

since he was Thetis' father. An expert opinion, again obtained from Kew Gardens, confirms that the tree in question is most likely to be a *nērion*-oleander.<sup>28</sup> It is one of the most striking, as well as common, bushes in the landscape of Greece. Lastly the low ground-line on this side of the vase acts as confirmation that the scene is Nereus' watery domain, just as the layered rocks on the other side point to islands rising ruggedly from the sea.

We now have a full set of identifications for the figures on both sides of the vase which can be summarised as follows: A - Peleus; B - Eros; C - Thetis; D - Nereus; E - Achilles; F - Helen; G - Aphrodite. These identifications are confirmed by visual puns derived from the flora of Greece, labelling Nereus and his palace (*nērion*), the island (*leukē*) and Helen (*helenē*).

Some comment is required on the cut-down glass plaque, which has been fashioned into a roundel to form the base of the Portland Vase, seemingly its second base after the breakage of the original. The scene is in the same cameo-glass technique as those on the belly of the vase, but the figure is on a larger scale. He is Paris hesitating over which of the three goddesses he should choose as winner in the famous beauty contest. Above him is foliage, representing, to judge by the leaves, a plane tree.<sup>29</sup> Although this story is part of the Trojan cycle of legends, there is no reason to think that the plaque originally had anything compositionally to do with the scenes on the two main sides of the vase. It was probably inserted into the base as a result of the lower part of the vase being broken beyond repair, and may have been the best that the workshop could do by way of finding something of relevance to form a new base.

Finally below the handles of the vase are two masks, which have been interpreted as Pan-masks, since they appear to have horns curving round the handles, or alternatively as masks of Oceanus (PLATE III (b)). Ashmole believed that these 'horns' were mere traces of the white glass overlay, which had not been completely removed to reveal the blue background at this inaccessible point.<sup>30</sup> Masks at the base of handles and in other positions appear elsewhere on vases of cameo-glass, 'Bacchus' and 'Earth' on the 'Blue Vase'; Silenus on a ladle.<sup>31</sup> Medusa and Oceanus masks are frequently found in Greek and Roman art. Oceanus masks might fit here neatly, since the scenes on both sides of the vase were set out, or down, in the deep sea (Nereus' palace; White Island in the Pontus). But the masks do seem to be more like representations of Pan and, even if it is composed of residual white glass paste, the horn-effect may still be intentional. Perhaps the masks are Pan-masks, suggesting the underlying principle of life ('All'—Pan). By late Hellenistic times it seems that Pan was endowed with such all-embracing significance, and might well be thought to have set afoot the urge to pro-

<sup>28</sup> 'The tree past which Cupid is flying could be taken for a bay or laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), but it is just as likely to be an oleander which is also known as the rose-bay or rose-laurel' (Celia Fisher, pers.comm. 31.8.1993).

<sup>29</sup> 'The leaf on the roundel is far more like a plane. It is too well and sharply divided for a fig, which usually has fewer and more rounded lobes' (Celia Fisher).

<sup>30</sup> Ashmole (n. 6) 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Journal of Glass Studies* xxxii (1990) 138-9, 152-3.

create, hence to be behind all sexual unions whether well or ill-fated.<sup>32</sup>

The vase will have been fashioned to represent two famous, heroic, marriages which met contrasting fates. It was itself in all probability a wedding-gift to some noble, maybe even to an imperial, personage of the Augustan period.<sup>33</sup> Its secrets were, and are, capable of decipherment, using the 'visual aid' of the rebus or pun. The result is a simple, balanced and verifiable (from iconography as well as by the puns) interpretation of the two sides of the vase.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> C. Kerényi, *The gods of the Greeks* (London 1958) 154; O. Kern, *Religion der Griechen* (Berlin 1926) iii 127 ff.

<sup>33</sup> Haynes, *The Portland vase* 21.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful for the comments and encouragement of John Boardman, Brian Cook and Roger Ling, though none of them is to be held to endorse everything that is found here. Part of the above argument, that relating to Side B, has appeared in 'Achilles and Helen on White Island in the Euxine Pontus' (in Russian), *VDI* (1994.3) 121-6.

### Theophrastus in Bessarion\*

There is no denying that Theophrastus ranks among the most prolific Peripatetic philosophers. Diogenes Laertius lists 225 items in his bibliography, some of them perhaps twice—first as an independent treatise, then as part of a larger work.<sup>1</sup> As time went on, this vast *oeuvre* suffered the usual vicissitudes: the overwhelming majority of it has been partly or entirely lost. In sharp contrast to the Frankish West, where, despite great losses, more texts were in circulation under Theophrastus' name than was justified, in the ever shrinking Byzantine world we find comparatively few references to him. But this surely does not mean that the small number of references are unreliable. It is because of the continuity between Byzantium and ancient Greece up to the 12th century, and perhaps even beyond, that we are entitled to assume in the case of Theophrastus that his thoughts were faithfully transmitted.<sup>2</sup> To remain with the contemporaries of Bessarion, mention can be made of Andronicus Callistus, in whose *Defensio Theodori Gazae* there is a passage attributing to Theophrastus the view that movement is the distinctive characteristic of

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<sup>1</sup> D.L. v 42-51 = Test.1 *FHSG*.

<sup>2</sup> The continuity up to the 12th century has been pointed out by Ch. Schmitt, 'Theophrastus in the Middle Ages', in *Viator* ii (1971) 251-271. Concerning this issue, my debt to his works is evident. One example may be Michael Psellus who was conversant with some of Theophrastus' works on physics, see 77.27 (O'Meara, Leipzig 1989) and 33.57-73 (Duffy, Stuttgart-Leipzig).

physical objects.<sup>3</sup> This is a rather general statement, but its fidelity can be proved by the aid of earlier indirect sources.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in a letter to Theodore Gaza, Bessarion himself also discusses the ways of interpreting Aristotle and Theophrastus.<sup>5</sup>

The testimonies in Bessarion can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are brief remarks hinting at a given treatise of Theophrastus, such as *De Plantis*<sup>6</sup> or his *Physics*;<sup>7</sup> these, however, does not contain very much information, and indicate only that he was familiar with these works. But we know from other sources as well that he himself owned a copy of the *De Plantis*.<sup>8</sup> The other group consists of longer passages which are doubtless quotations from reports in late antique philosophers, or else paraphrases of them. The best example comes from the *In Calumniatorem Platonis*. The text runs as follows:

καὶ Θεόφραστος, ὁ τῶν τοῦ [scil. Aristotelis] ἀκροατῶν γνησιώτατος, ἀρχὴν τε κινήσεως τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἐμψυχον ἐν τοῖς Περὶ Οὐρανοῦ τίθειαι λέγων "εἰ γὰρ θεῖος ἐστὶ καὶ τὴν ἀρίστην ἔχει διαγωγὴν, ἐμψυχός ἐστιν. οὐδὲν γὰρ τίμιον ἄνευ ψυχῆς". (152.20-23 Mohler)

'And Theophrastus, the most excellent among Aristotle's disciples, claims in the *De Caelo* that the soul is the principle of movement and the heavens are ensouled, as he says: "if it is divine and has the best mode of existence, it is ensouled, since without soul there is nothing to be honoured".'

Without naming his source, Bessarion may be quoting here from Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*.<sup>9</sup> We

<sup>3</sup> 188.15 ff. (L. Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann* iii, Paderborn 1942). It is highly likely that here Andronicus Callistus is dependent on Theophrastus, Test.143 *FHSG* = Simplicius, in *Phys.* 20.17-26. For this point I am indebted to Bob Sharples.

<sup>4</sup> Motion is considered in each category, cf. Test. 153 ABC (all in Simplicius' in *Phys.*); involves divisibility, cf. Test. 155 AB (from Themistius' in *Phys.*) and C (in Simplicius' in *Phys.*).

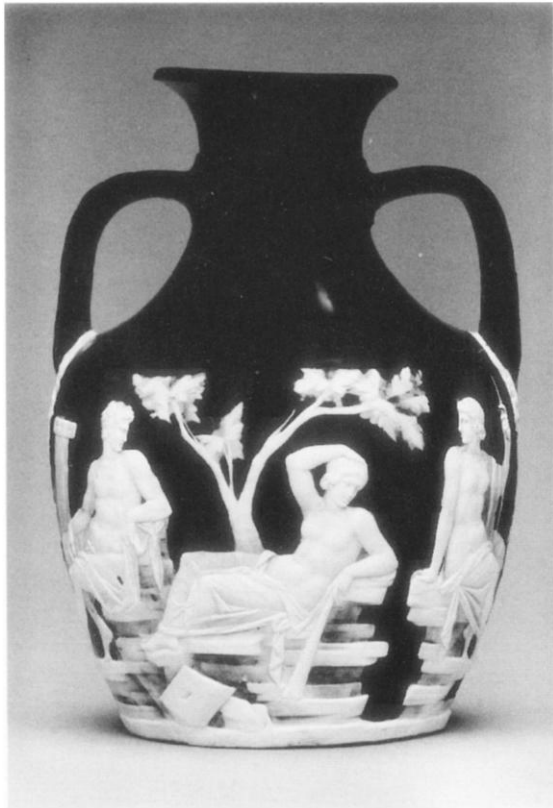
<sup>5</sup> *Ep.* 7, *PG* clxi, col. 685.

<sup>6</sup> *Epistulae* 34, 36. In the following, though some of Bessarion's works are also found in *PG* clxi, my references, whenever it is possible, will be to the page and line of L. Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann* ii (Paderborn 1927) and iii (Paderborn 1942).

<sup>7</sup> 214.4 Mohler. Bob Sharples has pointed out to me that the mediator is Simplicius (in *De Caelo* 564.24 Heiberg = Theophrastus, test. 238 *FHSG*).

<sup>8</sup> See L. Labowsky, 'Theophrastus' *De Plantis* and Bessarion', in *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* v (1961) 132-154, and ead., *Bessarion's Library and the Bibliotheca Marciana. Six early inventories* (Rome 1979) 193, for other works by Theophrastus in Bessarion, see *ibid.*, pp.221-3; E. Mioni, 'Bessarione bibliofilo, filologo', in *RSBN* n.s. v (1968) 61-83, and see also *id.*, 'Bessarione scriba e alcuni suoi collaboratori', in *Miscellanea marciana di studi bessaronie*, (Padova 1976) 263-318, esp. pp.286, 299.

<sup>9</sup> ii 122.10-7 Diehl. This is a part of Test. 159 Fortenbaugh et al. See also Proclus, *In Tim.* iii 136.1-2 Diehl, and *Theol. Plat.* I 64.17-8 Saffrey-Westerink. The references in his works show that Bessarion had extensive knowledge of Proclus, see Mioni 1976 (n. 8) 279-80, 283. There is a codex containing Proclus' *In Tim.* (Marc. gr. 195) where scholia by Bessarion are to be found, cf. Mioni, 1976 (n. 8) 284 and the *Praefatio* by E. Diehl to his edition of Proclus' commentary (vol. i, p.viii). And

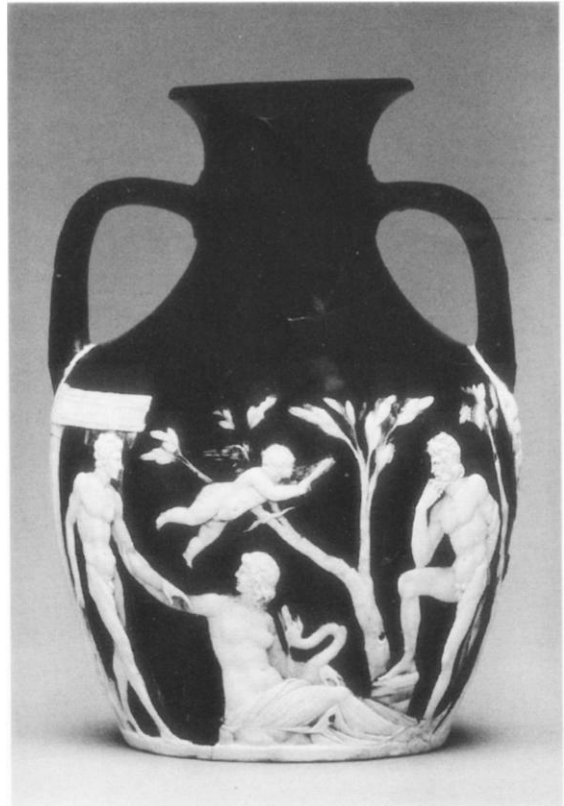


(a) Achilles and Helen on Leukē;  
Aphrodite; behind, a leukē



(b) Aphrodite; Pan mask and myrtle  
bush; Palace of Nereus

(a) Peleus in Nereus' palace:  
Thetis, Eros, Nereus;  
behind, a nerion tree



(b) Nereus; leukē; Pan mask;  
Achilles on Leuke Island