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**SIGNALIZING A RITUAL TRANSITION:
Rhyton and Keras within the Context of
the Ancient Greek Symposium***

Abstract:

In the article the use of trumpeting instruments is analyzed in the context of the ancient Greek symposium. Especial attention is put on the *rhyton* and *keras*. They are in textual and visual sources many times intentionally represented in a fairly vague manner, which suggests the merging of their symbolic meanings. The horn as *rhyton* symbolically had reflected the Dionysian wilderness or irrational bestiality, while the horn, represented as *keras* (a rude *salpinks*) had signalized a moment of transition. It is argued that within the context of symposium these two covering meanings of *rhyton* and *keras* had signalized (at least visually if not sonorous) the transitional moment from "order" to "disorder".

Key words: ancient Greek music and instruments; symposium, Dionysian mythology

Introduction & Methodological Notes

Contemporary anthropologically oriented studies explain the ancient Greek banquet as a ritual where the ancient Greek citizen (ancient sources, however, provide us information for more or less Athenian culture) had, according to the Schmitt-Pantel's classification¹, transgressed between the imageries of "divine", "human", and "bestial". More precisely, a symposium (συμπόσιον), as the latter part of the banquet, following the meal (δέιπνον), can be interpreted as a ritualistic performance where the imagery of the citizenship (i.e. "order", "human") was sharply confronted with the projections of wildness and bestiality (i.e. "disorder", "non-human", the "otherness"). At the symposium, a Greek citizen lived to see his world divided at a symbolic level into (1) a divine world of gods and heroes; (2) an orderly civic life of the *polis*; and (3) a wild, non-human life, arising from the bestial nature of Dionysus, located outside of the *polis*' walls.

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¹ She designates these three imagery categories as "divin", "humain", and "bestial"; see Schmitt-Pantel (1992) 9.

The symbolic domain of "order" incorporated normative laws, commune politics and rational ideology of the citizenship. A symbolic cluster reflecting "bestial disorder" consisted of a body of convictions and fears about the world beyond the borders of the *polis*. It represented a non-human and non-urban place which was ruled not by the rational and logical culture of the *polis*, but the bestial, violent, and irrational powers. The imagery of bestiality was visually designed by, for example, mad *Maenads* devouring raw meat, or by troops of satyrs in frenzy, carrying skin-sacks, drinking pure wine and fuelled by their excessive libidinal drives.

Paradigmatically, the symposiastic ritual was realized under the patronage of the god of Dionysus, who was the master of illusion *per se*. Yet at the same time, he was the one who possessed the power to transgress over the city walls, even though the doors of the city had been closed.² And he was the only one who belonged as much to a bestial world as to urban, human environments.³

The symbolism of ancient Greek symposium was delivered through diverse, artistically articulated semiotic modes. Among them, the importance of lyric poetry and mythological narrations has been continuously debated in academic circles. In the recent years, however, it has become evident how plausible it is to take into account the interpretative postulate that circulations of wine, food, words and illustrations on the drinking pottery are referentially interconnected and symbolically interdependent, thus composing a ritually determined symbolic medium, which can be reinterpreted today. The aim of this essay is to establish various interpretative positions and thus present to the reader music and musical instruments as part of this symbolic corpus of words (mythology and textual sources), images (pottery illustrations), and reconstructed musical sounds, which were ritually delivered within the context of ancient Greek symposium. The purpose of this essay is to determine whether music and musical instruments, as used within the context of symposium, played a symbolic role and, if so, of what kind. The essay, in particular, highlights the argumentation that the trumpeting instruments, visualized on drinking vessels, signalized a transitional moment when the symposiastic ritual transgressed between the symbolic contents of *human*, and *non-human*. Therefore, the main focus will revolve around the moment when a symposium had symbolically passed from "order" (i.e. "human") to "disorder" (i.e. "non-human", "wild", and "bestial").

² As we read in Euripides' *Bacchae* (653-654).

³ In respect of the transgressive nature of Dionysus, there is a very informative chapter in the book by Lissarrague (1997) about animals in Antiquity. Lissarrague shows various realizations of Dionysian imaginary – from human to bestial – where a special role was played by monkey. About diverse conceptualizations of the Dionysian nature, see also Spariosu (1991), Carpenter & Faraone (1993).

⁴ Theoretically, such an interpretation was first proposed at lectures of J.-P. Vernant, Collège de France; further reading material is offered by *Extraits de l'Annuaire du Collège de France 1976 à*

Methodologically speaking, the approach to be applied takes into account that the images did not acquire meaning as static pictorial representatives but as images circulating among the participants of the symposium (*symposiasts*).⁴ The second postulate which has to be explained and which is incorporated in the applied methodological frame, necessitates the understanding of images represented *en-face* of Dionysian faces as symbolic warning signs of the deregulated wilderness. Ancient texts made it clear that when one looks directly into the face of Dionysus, one sees and recognizes his wild, bestial, non-human nature. Dionysus was a god whom it was not possible to see or to contact any other way than by gazing directly into his face (*face-à-face*). When in *Bacchae*, Pentheus had looked directly in Dionysus' face (*en-face*), he saw him correctly, as a bestial creature (Euripides, *Bacchae*, 918-924):

Πε .

καὶ μὴν ὄρᾶν μοι δύο μὲν ἡλίους δοκῶ,
 δισσᾶς δὲ Θήβας καὶ πόλισμ' ἑπτάστομον·
 καὶ ταῦρος ἡμῖν πρόσθεν ἡγεῖσθαι δοκεῖς
 καὶ σῶι κέρατα κρατὶ προσπεφυκέναι .
 ἀλλ' ἦ ποτ' ἦσθα θήρ; τεταύρωσαι γὰρ οὖν .

Δι .

ὁ θεὸς ὁμαρτεῖ, πρόσθεν ὧν οὐκ εὐμενής,
 ἔνσπονδος ἡμῖν· νῦν δ' ὄραις ἅ χρεῖ σ' ὄραν .

Pentheus

Oh look! I think I see two suns, and twin Thebes, the seven-gated city. [920] And you seem to lead me, being like a bull and horns seem to grow on your head. But were you ever before a beast? For you have certainly now become a bull.

Dionysus

*The god accompanies us, now at truce with us, though formerly not propitious. Now you see what you should see.*⁵

1984, and *Les problèmes de l'image dans la Grèce ancienne*, published as a transcript of the lecture "De la figuration des dieux aux catégories de l'Image, de l'Imaginaire et de l'Imagination", printed in *Recherches et Documents du Centre Thomas More*, 35, 1982; after Schmitt-Pantel (1992). To see applications of the interpretative method in diverse fields of research cf. Vernant (1979), Durand & Frontisi-Ducroux (1982), Vernant & Frontisi-Ducroux (1983, 1997), Durand & Lissarrague (1980), Lissarrague (1987), Frontisi-Ducroux (1995). See also the 5th Volume (1-2) of the *Metis*, titled "Autour de l'image".

⁵ Translated by T.A. Buckley.

It should be emphasized that looking at Dionysus' face directly and correctly was not only a matter of watching. In the ancient Greek cultural and ritual practice of a symposium, the experience of looking directly in the face of Dionysus was realized in a combination of different verbal, drinking, musical, singing and finally also dancing practices. A few lines after the passage quoted above, we can see that after seeing Dionysus correctly, therefore *en-face*, Pentheus also started dancing ferociously (see *Bacch.*, lines 930-931). Such was a common scenario dictated by the symposiastic ritual. The same situation is depicted in the Xenophon's *Anabasis*, in the quoted passage below. Thus, it is possible to argue that when the image of Dionysus' face or his eyes visually appeared *en-face*, the illustration actually represented a symbolic warning that he who was looking at it, was at the same time ritually standing on the boundary point from where he (the participants were exclusively male citizens) could soon enter the wild Dionysian world. This was perhaps especially clear to the ancient Greek symposiasts, who gazed in Dionysius' eyes at exactly the same moment when they were drinking an alcoholic mixture of wine and water from the vessel, as it is virtually possible to imagine at *Figure 1*.



(Figure 1)

In *Bacchae* (470) we read: “ὄρων ὄρωντα, καὶ δίδωσιν ὄργια” (*Seeing me just as I saw him, he gave me sacred rites*). With a look directly from eyes to eyes (ὄρων ὄρωντα), an illustration had a comparable meaning to the text in the above-quoted passage of *Bacchae*, when Pentheus had entered the madness after looking Dionysus directly in his face. Later on, we read about the same Dionysian madness, which drove Pentheus out of the *polis* into unregulated and irrational wilderness where *Maenads* finally bestially dismembered him.

With this cluster of metaphors, ritual practices and mythological imagery that will serve as the interpretative frame, we shall also observe what kind of complementary role instruments and music had played in this semiotic milieu.

Analysis

On either side of the first analyzed drinking vessel (*Figures 2a & 2b*; London E3) one can find a pair of Dionysian eyes looking out *en-face*. This illustration had fixed a view of the drinking symposiast. Between these eyes, which, as we have seen, had symbolized the entryway into the Dionysian wilderness, two smaller satyr figures are depicted. On one side, the satyr is holding a *rhyton* (a horn) and a shield (*Figure 2a*), while on the other side of the same vessel, the satyr, while holding a shield, is playing on a *salpink* (a trumpet) (*Figure 2b*). In symbolic terms, these illustrations may be interpreted as a covering of the Dionysian and the hoplite imagery. The attributes of Dionysian imagery are satyrs, a pair of goggling eyes, and *rhyton*; on the other side, a *salpink* and shields are symbolic representatives of the hoplite culture, associated with the culture of *polis*, thus simultaneously also representatives of the "human order".



Figure 2a



Figure 2b

Salpinks, a trumpet, was typical hoplite equipment. In the battlefield it usually signaled the beginning of a combat. The meaning of the *salpinks*' sound had been heard as a signal and was visually therefore perceived as a sign of the transition into wilderness and danger, associated with war. An ancient Greek citizen (a man and a hoplite combined in one, and at the moment of drinking from the vessel, also a *symposiast*) understood this transitional – *from order to disorder* – meaning of the *salpinks* designed on the vessel. On the other side of the analyzed vessel (Figure 2b) the satyr is holding a horn. The horn is an image that is quite commonly present on the symposiastic pottery and mostly interpreted as a *rhyton*, thus as an unsophisticated animal horn, from which satyrs drink pure wine. At this point, it would be worth to mention that drinking pure wine had been reserved exclusively for Dionysus. Pure wine was his symbolic attribute, which symbolically reflected the god's wild, uncultivated and bestial origin. The cultivated manner of ancient symposiastic *ars bibendi* dictated to drink a proper mixture of wine and water; pure wine may and can be drunk only by Dionysus himself (and by the company of satyrs as well). But, as it will be seen, *rhyton* can in some places be also interpreted as *keras*. It would often be more appropriate to perceive it as *keras*, therefore as a rude, unsophisticated trumpeting aerophone instrument⁶ made of raw materials.

The characteristics of both *rhyton* and *keras* sometimes also appear as intentionally visualized in a fairly vague manner, which suggests the merging of their symbolic meanings. The horn, visualized as a pure-wine drinking vessel of satyrs (*rhyton*) symbolically reflects the Dionysian wilderness or irrational bestiality, while the horn, visualized as *keras* (a rude *salpinks*), signalizes the moment of transition into wilderness (when associated with *salpinks*, it also signalizes the moment of transition into wilderness of battle). If these two meanings are interpretatively merged together, they result in a sign, which, within the context of symposium, visually signalizes the transitional moment. The transitional moment at which a *symposiast*, having been ritually prepared to enter the psychological condition of the wild and irrational Dionysian possession, gazed directly into Dionysian eyes while drinking a mixture of wine and visually "heard" the signaling warning sound of *keras*. A similar transitional moment is depicted in the passage of Xenophon's *Anabasis* (7.3.32-33):

⁶ I use the classification proposed by E. M. von Hornbostel and by C. Sachs (*Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 46 (1914), 553-90) and used also by West (1992; chapter 3). The system operates with four main categories: *idiophones*, *membranophones*, *aerophones*, and *chordophones*.

ἀναστάς ὁ Σεύθης συνεξέπια καὶ συγκατεσκεδάσατο μετ' αὐτοῦ τὸ κέρας.⁷ μετὰ ταῦτα εἰσῆλθον κέρασι⁸ τε οἷσι σημαίνουσι ἀυλοῦντες καὶ σάλπιγγιν ὠμοβοεῖαις ῥυθμούς τε καὶ οἶον μαγάδι σαλπίζοντες. καὶ αὐτὸς Σεύθης ἀναστάς ἀνέκραγέ τε πολεμικὸν καὶ ἐξήλατο ὡσπερ βέλος φυλαττόμενος μάλα ἐλαφρῶς. εἰσῆσαν δὲ καὶ γελωτοποιοί.⁹

Up rose Seuthes, drained the horn with Xenophon, and joined him in sprinkling the last drops. After this there came in musicians blowing upon horns such as they use in giving signals, and playing upon trumpets of row ox-hide not only measured notes, but music like that of a harp. And Seuthes himself got up, raised a war-cry, and sprang aside very nimbly, as though avoiding a missile. There entered also a company of buffoons.¹⁰

The quoted passage represents the concluding part of the symposiastic ritual, since a few lines following the above quoted passage (*Anabasis*, 7.3.35), it is emphasized that: "Seuthes arose with them, not in the least like a drunken man". The subsequent stage of the symposium developed into a frenetic dance happening, fueled by the expected trance-like state of drunkenness.

On another vessel (*Figures 3a & 3b*; Paris, Louvre G 92), we can see images comparable to those shown in *Figures 2a & 2b*. Once again, two complementary figures appear on both sides of the vessel. On the one side (*Figure 3b*) a hoplite playing a *salpink* is presented, while the other side of the same cup shows a youngster sitting on a skin-sack, and handling the horn in a way suggesting that what he is holding in his hands is *keras* and not *rhyton* (the young man is blowing the horn, not drinking from it). In this case, the horn is thus a signaling symbol (*keras*), comparable to the

⁷ In this case κέρας represents a drinking horn.

⁸ Now a different meaning is signified by the same word. Here, κέρασι are rude trumpeting instruments; the meaning simultaneously appears in combination with trumpets of raw ox-hide (σάλπιγγιν ὠμοβοεῖαις).

⁹ This footnote is in Slovene language since it is dealing with the Slovene translation of the passage. Ksenofontov *Anabasis* je v sloveščini dostopen v Fašalekovem prevodu, ki je pri Mladinski Knjigi (Ljubljana) izšel leta 1963. Izdaja nam ne pove, po kateri predlogi je prevajalec prevajal, toda slovenski prevod ne upošteva dvopomenskosti živalskega roga, ki enkrat predstavlja pivsko čašo, drugič pa trobentno glasbilo. Kot lahko vidimo, v angleškem prevodu to dvojno prevajanje besede κέρας obstaja. Slovenski prevod ponuja možnost, da »so nato vstopili Cerasunčani, po taktu piskali na piščali in trobente iz surovih volovskih kož«. κέρασι je torej prevedeno v Cerasunčani in ne kot glasbilo rog, s čimer se izgubi simbolno prekrivanje dvojnega pomena roga, kar je vsebinsko jedro pričujočega članka.

¹⁰ Translated by Carleton L. Brownson.

salpinks on the other side of the cup. Dionysian wilderness is designated by a skin-sack, a sign of pure, unmixed wine.¹¹ There exist many illustrations that represent satyrs pouring pure wine out from skin-sacks into *krater* vessels. A hoplite with a *salpink* and shield (*Figure 3b*) has visually similar attributes as the satyr on the previous vessel (*Figure 2a*). We can therefore once again interpret the illustrations on the drinking vessel as a symbolic covering of Dionysian attributes with the imagery of the hoplite, citizen mentality. The instrumental signs of this covering are trumpeting *keras* and *salpinks*.



Figure 3a

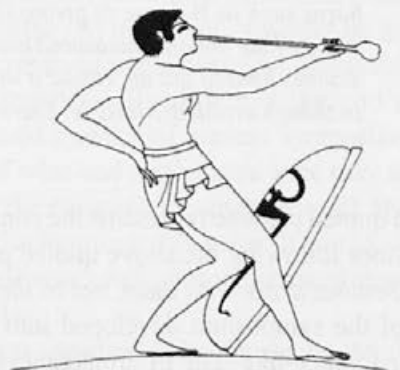


Figure 3b

On the basis of the analyzed visual and textual material, I think it is possible to argue that, within the context of the symposium, music and instruments of *salpinks* and *keras* played the role of visually signaling (and perhaps sometimes in real sound, as we have seen in case of Xenophon *Anabasis*) the transitional moment, when the participants started entering the ferocious psychological condition, symbolically experienced as a non-human bacchantic bestiality.

Second, it is possible to conclude that the anthropological approach in the analysis of the ancient Greek music provides plausible interpretations which focus on a symbolic meaning that music possessed within different contexts of the ancient Greek culture. F. Lissarrague wrote in his book that "*Les peintres de vases travaillent dans un milieu où le vin, la musique, l'image sont complémentaires et construisent, des uns aux autres, tout un réseau de correspondances.*"¹² I hope that the article has ascertained more

¹¹ In Lissarrague (1987, 68) the *Figure 3b* is commented as follows (emphasis my): "... comme par cet éphèbe qui utilise une corne à boire en guise de trompe; parodie du départ au combat, où le récipient du vin pur."

¹² Lissarrague (1987) 136.

clearly as to what role *salpinks* and *keras* played in the symbolic association with *rhyton* as well as the significance that pure wine had borne within the context of the Dionysian ritualistic symposium.

Further on, instead of finding answers, only new questions arise. The first question is whether the *aulos*, as an indispensable instrument at the symposium, was really a mere attribute of rejection, associated with different kinds of ecstatic cults only, as is nowadays still commonly interpreted? Within context of the symposiastic ritual, such a position cannot be blindly accepted, since we know that the music of *auoli* could be heard during the sacrificial acts of the banquet before a symposiastic drinking actually took place, as well as when the symposium ritually symbolized "order". Only briefly: within the context of the symposium, it can be argued that the *aulos* was associated with imagery of "order" as an accompanying instrument of the elegies¹³. As such it was not necessarily "*an enemy of the rational mind*"¹⁴. In connection with the main analysis of *keras* and *salpinks*, which signaled a transitional moment between "order" and "disorder", *aulos*, represented an instrument, which was found on both sides of that exposed boundary moment. *Aulos* represented "order", since it was accompanied by poetry of words. On the other hand, it was heard together with noisy sounds of idiophones (different kinds of *kimabala*) and membranophones (drums) during the frenetic dance of the drunken symposiasts, when the symposium ritually and symbolically crossed the border and entered the imagery of "disorder". (See Figure 4, Paris, Louvre G 71).



Figure 4

¹³ Elegies, as poems with moral, didactic and policy contents, played a special role at the symposium. See especially Bowie (1986). In concordance with the development of the symposium, Vetta (1983) distinguishes between three developmental stages of elegies. It is well known, that, Solon used elegy as a poetic form of propaganda; see Tedeschi (1982). About the use of elegy as a form of transmitting collective memory and as a carrier of the law, see Aristotle: *Problems* (XIX.28).

¹⁴ Wilson (1999) 87.

Finally, it would be interesting to discuss whether the ancient Greek ἡ μουσικὴ τέχνη should be more properly conceptualized not only as unity of music, words and dance but rather considering also a possibility that the instruments and music had been systematically articulated through ideologically defined ritualistic occasions.

It should not be missed that a construction of *mousiké* as a unity of words, music, and dance, was actually invented during the renaissance conceptualization of the opera.¹⁵ On the other hand, ancient Greek sources are persuading us that the conception of combining different kinds of symbolic meaning together with music was more diverse as imagined by the time of the renaissance *cameratas*.

To grasp the ancient Greek conceptualizations of music, we should consistently respect the dependence of music on the symbolic milieu within which music had been realized. A vast variety of different contexts resulted in diversified conceptualizations of music and of sound. And if there existed any destruction of *mousiké* at all (during the time of the ancient Greek "new musicians"), it could only have been realized on a symbolic level. Musical changes had been perhaps only a parallel, explicit effect of broad cultural changes in conceptualization of the communicative role of music. The agents of the "new music" belonged to a wider change of the Athenian mentality that took place by the time when musically and ritually delivered information was losing its power against the progressive thought of sophists, who deconstructed the *old citizens'* practices in communicating with the "truth" during the last quarter of the 5th century BC. Since the ancient Greek music was immanently connected with symbolic and ritual contexts, the destruction of *mousiké* cannot be seen only as a change in the significance of music, but rather as a confiscation of the meaning that music had borne in the archaic Greek society.

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¹⁵ About the Renaissance inventions of the ancient Greek music within the context of the birth of the opera style that first took place in Florence in 15th and 16th centuries, see Franchi (1988). For a position of Boethius in the processes of the Renaissance conceptualizations of the ancient Greek music, see Palisca (1990). How the ancient Greek music corresponded to the Renaissance idea of imitating nature (in case of Galilei's work), see Palisca (1968, 1994). About the popularization of the operatic conceptions of the ancient Greek music through Italy, see Schrade (1954).

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Illustrations (2-4) are extracted from Lissarrague (1987), with permission.

Citations of the ancient texts are extracted from the TLG^{CD-ROM} (Dumond, D.J. & Smith, R.M (1992-1995). *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. University of California.

Povzetek

Signaliziranje obrednega prehoda: rhyton in keras v kontekstu antičnega grškega simpozija

Sodobne, antropološko opredeljene študije antični grški banket opredeljujejo kot ritual, kjer je antični grški državljani prehajal med imaginariji »božanskega«, »človeškega« in »živalskega«. Posebej pa lahko simpozij kot drugi del banketa, ki je sledil obredni razdelitvi hrane in čigar mitološka referenca je bilo božanstvo Dioniz, interpretiramo kot simbolno pester obredni dogodek, znotraj katerega so se srečevale kolektivne predstave o »redu« (kot »človeško«) in »divjosti« (kot »živalsko« oz. »ne-človeško«).

Članek analizira uporabo trobentnih glasbil v specifičnem simpozijem trenutku, ki je označeval liminalni trenutek ritualnega prehoda iz »reda« v »nered«. Na podlagi ohranjenih besedil in vaznih podob je analizirana simbolna dvopomenskost živalskega roga. Slednji se namreč v analiziranih primerih, ki se navezujejo na kontekst simpozija, istočasno pojavlja kot *rhyton* (satirska pivska posoda, ki simbolizira »divjost«) oziroma kot *keras* (trobentni rog, prepoznan kot robata trobenta – *salpinks*).

Z upoštevanjem že vzpostavljenih metod »branja« vaznih podob (ki jih v uvodnem delu natančneje prikažem) in z razumevanjem antičnega simpozija kot prepleta dionizične mitologije in državljanske ideologije je v članku prikazano, na kakšen način so bili glasbila in zvoki nosilci simbolnih pomenov in kot taki tudi pomensko vpeti v antični grški muzični diskurz.