

Focusing on the invisible. Greek myth and symbol contemplation

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THE SYMBOL process, being the conceiving and visualizing of symbols, is familiar to artists and mystics alike.¹ The reason for this is simple. Symbols, and symbols alone—from the Greek *symbollein*, to ‘bring together,’ ‘to unite’²—are capable of linking the material and the immaterial worlds. In this paper an archaeologist has set himself the task of examining how symbols work both from a theoretical and from an experiential viewpoint, employing a Greek vase painting as the nucleus of his investigation. In this manner he hopes to be able to arrive at a valid account of how symbolic images (such as those on Greek vases) may have been operative in human consciousness formation.³

Surely my speaking of symbolism subjectively in this manner will shock no-one today, for we have long moved away from the mechanistic world-view of Descartes and Newton—the reign of the purported objective—and have entered a new era in scholarship which acknowledges the role of the subject in the outcome of any scientific investigation.⁴ Depth, most of us will agree, must be interpreted, and all interpretation is bound to be subjective.⁵

The new direction taken by scholarship⁶ postulates the essential unity of the subject and the object. In doing so, it reformulates in contemporary terms what was quite self-evident to pre-Socratic philosophers two and a half thousand years ago: that mind cannot possibly be separated from matter, for the observer and the

1 Stella Lubsen-Admiraal, Dieter Metzler and Mark Mortford kindly read my manuscript and each contributed valuable suggestions for its improvement.

2 Literally to ‘throw together.’ See *LSJ* s.v.

3 The experiential approach to symbolism presented in this paper was prompted by Ken Wilber’s far-reaching idea of a ‘four quadrant’ analysis. See Wilber 1996. Wilber refers to the interior and exterior individual (the individual as subject and object), and the interior-collective (cultural) and the exterior-collective (social). The important thing to note is that none of these four aspects can be reduced to another, and a complete explanation needs to take them all into account. As he puts it, ‘surfaces can be seen, depth must be interpreted.’ Wilber’s ‘four-quadrant’ scheme should appeal to anyone trying to formulate a (posterior to) post-modern theory of myth and symbol.

observed in fact constitute a single interacting whole. It reintroduces the Greek notion of Kosmos (comprising the biosphere, the noosphere and the theosphere) and postulates that the parts must always be seen as aspects of an indivisible totality.⁷ In this perspective, myth and 'truth' become complementary aspects: 'the same tale seen from the outside and the inside.'⁸ The theory that I shall be proposing views myths and symbols from the outside and from the inside as well.

A symbol, as stated at the outset, is a linkage—a throwing together⁹—of the tangible outside and the intangible within. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke puts it, it is within us alone that the constant transformation of the visible into the invisible is taking place.¹⁰ Myths and symbols in this sense may be considered as instruments which stimulate and catalyze the ongoing process of consciousness formation. This is why in the world's various spiritual traditions, from shamanism and the Hopi Vision Quest to Tibetan tantrism, the Kabbalah and Christian mysticism, myths and symbols inevitably play a central role.

The same can be said for a number of modern psychological approaches, foremost the analytical psychology of C.G. Jung.¹¹ Jung can be credited with being the first Westerner to discover the existence of transpersonal archetypes.¹² The archetypes, as Jung defined them, are basic collectively inherited images or forms that are a part of us. Symbols that have been stamped into our psyche. Jung taught his patients how to work with archetypal symbols, employing the imagination.¹³ He was aware that certain kinds of symbolic images, when invoked, are capable of restructuring the mindset. In Jungian therapy a patient recalls a particularly vivid

- 4 On the various recent critical challenges to Cartesian mechanistic science and its interpretation, often referred to collectively as the 'new paradigm,' see Bohm 1955, Pribram 1971, Prigogine 1980, Grof 1984, Damasio 1995. 'New paradigm' thinking calls for a participatory view of consciousness—the idea that subject and object must be considered together. Einstein was the first to realize that scientific phenomena cannot by their very nature be objective, since the nervous system of the observer oscillates with the same velocity as that of the object he is observing (any changes taking place as the result of their interaction).
- 5 See Damasio 1995. Antonio Damasio, a philosopher and neurologist, has recently created somewhat of a furor by demonstrating that all objectivity is *de facto* bound to be subjective owing to the very structure of the brain.
- 6 See note 4.
- 7 'Things taken together are whole and not whole' (Herakleitos fr. 10 DK).
- 8 Des Bouvrie, this publication p. 17.
- 9 Note 2.
- 10 'We are the bees of the invisible. Frantically we gather in the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible,' Rilke wrote his Polish translator Hulewicz. See Cohn 1989:16.
- 11 On the instrumental role of Freud now des Bouvrie this publication p. 53ff.
- 12 For Jung's concept of archetypal symbolism see Jung 1959. For a lucid discussion of the Jungian archetypes see Schlegel 1973:vol. 4, 112-185.

symbol encountered in a dream, and in the course of subsequent days or weeks produces semi-conscious variations until resolution is achieved.¹⁴ The role of the therapist in such dreamwork—entering the patient's myth and symbol-generating system—is in some ways analogous to that of the traditional shaman.¹⁵

Here is another example of the intentional use of symbols for the purpose of consciousness transformation. In Tuscany, near Mount Amiata, resides the Tibetan Dzogchen-master Norbu Rimpoche. Like the practitioners of other spiritual traditions,¹⁶ the Rimpoche makes wide use of symbols in his teaching,¹⁷ especially of symbolic objects, but also of symbolic stories, parables, and riddles.¹⁸

In particular, Norbu Rimpoche likes to employ ritual paintings on silk, known as *thangkas*,¹⁹ for teaching purposes. The *thangka* he uses most frequently represents Mandarava, the female manifestation of the psychic energy of the universe. In a ceremony called *chöd*, a purification ritual, an offering of clarified butter and incense is made to her with the awareness that the one who offers, that which is offered, and the one to whom it is offered are not separate but in essence one and the same. Sounding the sharp and cutting syllable '*phat!*' repeatedly, the lama and his students cut through dualism in order to reestablish primordial Oneness. The ringing of a bell during this ceremony, and the burning of incense, are also symbolic. The sound and the vapors bridge worlds and penetrate to the inner recesses of the psyche. *Chöd* means 'to cut,'²⁰ and by opening and relaxing the senses, these various symbols and symbolic acts assist the mind in returning to its original natural condition of openness and relaxation, which in Dzogchen is coequal with the enlightened state.

13 Jung 1958:212 (with ref. to earlier works). Since Jung, the technique of Active Imagination, traceable to his brief flirtation with Tibetan spirituality, has been developed and refined by René Desoille with his '*rêve éveillé*,' as well as by Hanscarl Leuner with his Guided Affective Imagery. Cf. also Shorr 1974. On Jung's dream psychology see esp. Jacobi 1973.

14 It is in dreams in particular that we generate symbols and create myths. The Lele of Malekula, a Melanesian society studied by John Layard, employ dream specialists to dream the island's collective myths, which are continuously modified to accommodate the changing situation. See Layard 1942. A similar fusion of dream, myth and mundane reality is found also among Australian aborigines. See Leach 1976:41.

15 Stepanova 1998 is the first account of shamanism known to me authored by a shaman(ess).

16 For example the Kabbala. See Scholem 1960:159ff.

17 See Shane 1986.

18 Norbu 1996:63.

19 See Anderson 1980. Note in this connection the similar use still made of Byzantine ikons, including the precise (now printed) instructions for their employment in contemplative visualization.

20 Herakleitos fr. 58 DK also uses the example of cutting to illustrate the essential unity of opposites. See Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983:189.

What archetypal therapists and Dzogchen-masters have in common is that both employ symbols as tools of their vocation, which can be called ‘consciousness-transformation work.’ Symbols enable us to focus on the invisible. They permit the invisible to be accessed, dormant intuition to be mobilized, and consciousness to be integrated and transformed. In the Dzogchen teaching, therefore, symbols are tools of enlightenment.

Now, the English word ‘enlightenment’ has two quite different—indeed contrary—connotations. Most people associate it with the ‘triumph of rationalism’ commonly ascribed to French philosophers in the late eighteenth century.²¹ But the same word also refers to the metaphysical state of realization, toward which, as Dante puts it at the end of *The Divine Comedy*, ‘all creation moves.’²² It is, I think, highly significant, and reflecting two fundamentally divergent outlooks or ‘Weltanschauungen,’ that the German language distinguishes between two differing connotations of ‘to enlighten,’ whereas English does not. The German verb *aufklären* means ‘to explain,’ ‘to bring in *reason*’; whereas the verb *erleuchten* is used for the latter sense of ‘enlighten,’ as meaning ‘to bring in *light*.’ The eighteenth-century philosophical movement is consequently called ‘*Die Aufklärung*’ in German, whereas ultimate realization is ‘*Erleuchtung*.’ The latter connotation—literally bringing in light where there was darkness—refers us directly to the process of spiritual awakening.

‘Where there is light, all is revealed.’ Thus John I, 5.²³ The Evangelist is seen to employ the symbolism of light in a discourse on spiritual transformation. The association he draws is ubiquitous to both the dual and the non-dual religious traditions, and the main reason this should be so seems to me to have to do with the fact that light contains the entire spectrum of colors. It is this miracle which makes light symbolic also of primordial unity.²⁴ It explains why light is often called the most central mystery of all, and it may also explain why divinities of light, such as the Egyptian Ra, the Greek Apollo, or the Roman Sol Invictus—powerful symbols in themselves—are central in virtually all ancient religions.²⁵ Their light is an inner phenomenon.

21 Which in effect reduced the inside to the outside, the subject to the object, the I to the it, and remapped the entire Kosmos in rationalist and materialist terms (Wilber 1996 being culpable for the jesuitical formulation). A similar counter-cultural understanding of the French Enlightenment is held by William Blake, who in his painting ‘*Newton*’ of 1795 situates the great scientist at the bottom of the sea: ‘immersed in the dark and dense medium of water, traditional esoteric symbol of the material world,’ Raine 1996:87, fig. 61.

22 Watts 1984:14.

23 John says of light (*phos*, contracted for *phaos*): ‘The darkness comprehended it not.’

24 This understanding survived into the Middle Ages. It is spelled out most clearly in the Abbot Suger’s famous treatise: *Libellus de consecratione ecclesiae St. Dionysii* (1144). In the Tibetan tradition primordial unity is symbolized by the rainbow.

The light John refers to is of course the *inner* light, for he is speaking as a seer. Significantly, the Greek word for seer is *hierophantes*, from *hieros*, 'sacred' and *phaos*, 'light', as well as from *phantazo*, 'make visible.' Seers are able to see things invisible to ordinary mortals in much the same way as shamans. The explorer Rasmussen quotes an Eskimo shaman as saying, 'Every real shaman has to feel *quamaneq*, a light within the body, inside his head or brain, something that gleams like fire, that enables him to see in the dark, and with closed eyes see into things which are hidden, and also into the future.'²⁶ What I am suggesting, and shall go on to develop, is that the experience of inner light is not exclusive to Nordic shamans; it was surely commonplace to Greek seers as well.²⁷

A Greek myth illustrates this point most clearly. It is the myth of Glaukos and Polyeidon in the tomb, recounted by Hyginus²⁸ and depicted on the cup by Sotades in the British Museum (Figures 1-4).²⁹ Because the connection of the myth with seeing and enlightenment has not been perceived before, I shall go on to analyse the myth and its visual representation from this perspective and then explain the method by which I arrived at my interpretation.

A first clue is given by the names of both characters, written on the cup in painted name-inscriptions. Both have to do with light and inner seeing: Glaukos refers to gleaming eyes and owl-like wisdom,³⁰ Polyeidon to 'multi-seeing' as well as 'multi-knowing.'³¹

According to the myth as it is told by Hyginus, Glaukos, the young son of king Minos, has disappeared, and various seers are consulted on how to find him. The Kouretes—ecstatic warriors of the Cretan secret society credited with divinatory

25 Christian saints, like Buddhist *arhats*, are represented with halos, also called nimbus or aureolas. These symbols of light emanating from the heads of begloried human beings represent 'light in darkness' inasmuch as they refer to their owners' powers of illumination. The rays emanating from the heads of Greek and Roman solar divinities are likewise in every sense 'symbols of transformation.'

26 Rasmussen 1922.

27 It has been suggested that some Greek seers may on occasion have shamanized. Thus Guthrie 1962:11-13 (of Parmenides); Hoffmann 1997:111. As Mark Mortford observes, the 'rationalism' generally ascribed to Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes—contemporaries of Pythagoras and the Orphics—may have less to do with empiric observation than with their qualities of inner, visionary, seeing.

28 *Fab.* 136. See also Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.96ff.; 3.17ff.

29 D5. Beazley, *ARV.* 763.3 ('Sotades Painter'); Robertson 1992:187f. (and fig. 197); Hoffmann 1997:A3, 120-127, figs. 66-7, 70.

30 *Glaukopis*, as Athena. Glaukos is associated with the owl by Hyginus (*Fab.* 49). The owl's reputation for wisdom derives from its capacity for seeing through darkness, referring to its power of heightened intuition ('in-sight').

31 The two etymologies of *eidein* both refer to seeing as illumination and therefore really mean one and the same.

powers³²—tell Minos that a miraculous calf has been born in his herd. It changes its colours every few hours from white to red to black and back again (the first symbol). The man who best describes the calf, they tell the king, will bring his son back to him alive. The seer Polyeidios appears on the scene and solves the Kouretes' riddle by comparing the calf to a ripening blackberry, which is first white then red then black (the second symbol). He is put in charge of the search. By means of divination Polyeidios soon finds the boy, who has fallen into a *pithos* of honey³³ and drowned.

But that is only the beginning of the story, for at this point Minos reminds Polyeidios of the Kouretes' prophesy that his son will be restored to him *alive*, not dead. He consequently has the seer shut up in a tomb with Glaukos' corpse. Polyeidios soon sees a snake enter the tomb, kills it with a stone, and observes a second snake arrive bearing a magic herb with which it revives the first snake. (The reader by this time will have realized that the entire myth is symbolic, and that the pictures simply visualize the story in abbreviated form.) Killing the second snake as well, Polyeidios uses the serpent's herb to resuscitate Glaukos and restores the revived boy to his father. Now comes the clue for our comprehensive interpretation: Minos refuses to let Polyeidios go until he has taught his son the art of divination. Glaukos is, in other words, to be initiated as a seer.

So let us see of what the myth is symbolic, and how it can be related to the pictures on the cup. The myth of Glaukos' death, the discovery and burial of his body, his revival and return to the living clearly represent initiation.³⁴ Glaukos is the prototypical neophyte. His myth, with his drowning in the honey jar, proceeds according to the classical Hertzian pattern of the double funeral,³⁵ and the imagery reflects this structure. The first interment does away with the putrefying aspect of the corpse by embalming it in honey. The second funeral—the entombment—introduces Polyeidios, who transforms a burial into an initiation. Like the ripening of the blackberry referred to in the myth, rites of passage always proceed in three stages: separation—seclusion—reincorporation,³⁶ but there are some obvious discrepancies between the myth as told by Hyginus and the scene represented on the drinking cup. On the cup Polyeidios obviously has not yet obtained the *poa* which will revive Glaukos, who therefore should be dead. Yet he is depicted as being very much alive. How can we explain this contradiction?

32 Burkert 1985:261f. The Kouretes, an initiatory secret society of ecstatic warriors, annually celebrated the mystery of the death of Zeus, who in Crete was a divinity of the dying and returning type in many aspects similar to Dionysos.

33 On the significance of honey in Cretan rebirth symbolism see Dürr 1984:378f. (with further literature).

34 The fact that the setting of the myth is Crete, and that the Kouretes prophesy the resurrection of Glaukos can likewise be understood as referring to mystery initiation.

35 Hertz 1909, 1960.

36 Van Gennep 1908, 1960.

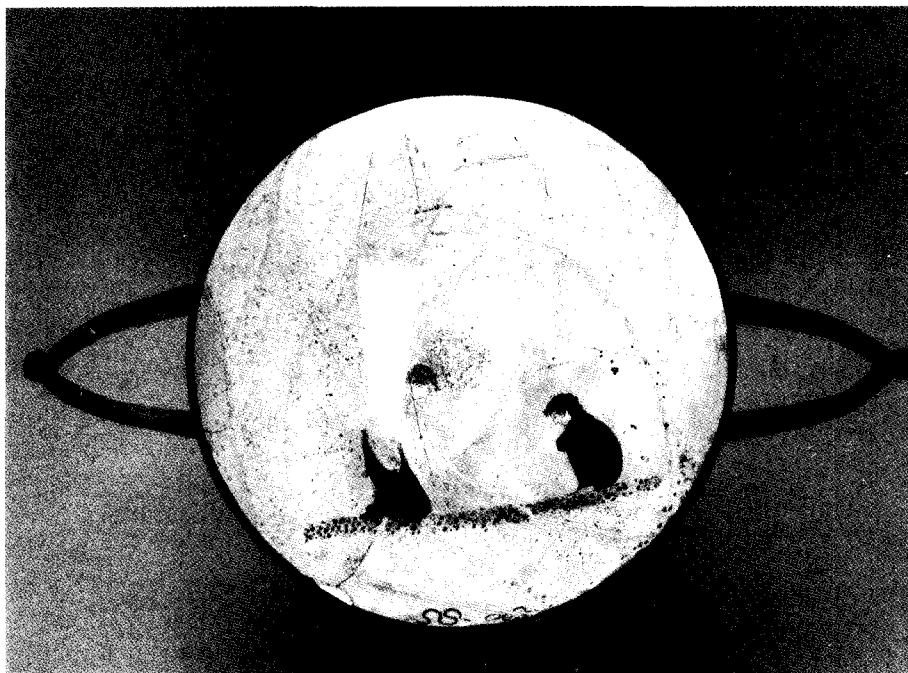
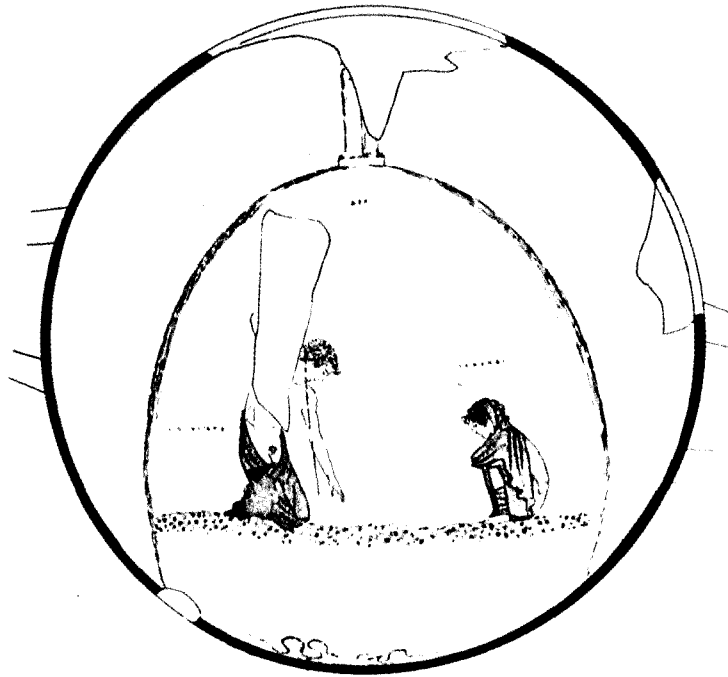


Fig. 1: Glaukos and Polyidos in the tomb. Interior of an Attic white-ground cup in the British Museum

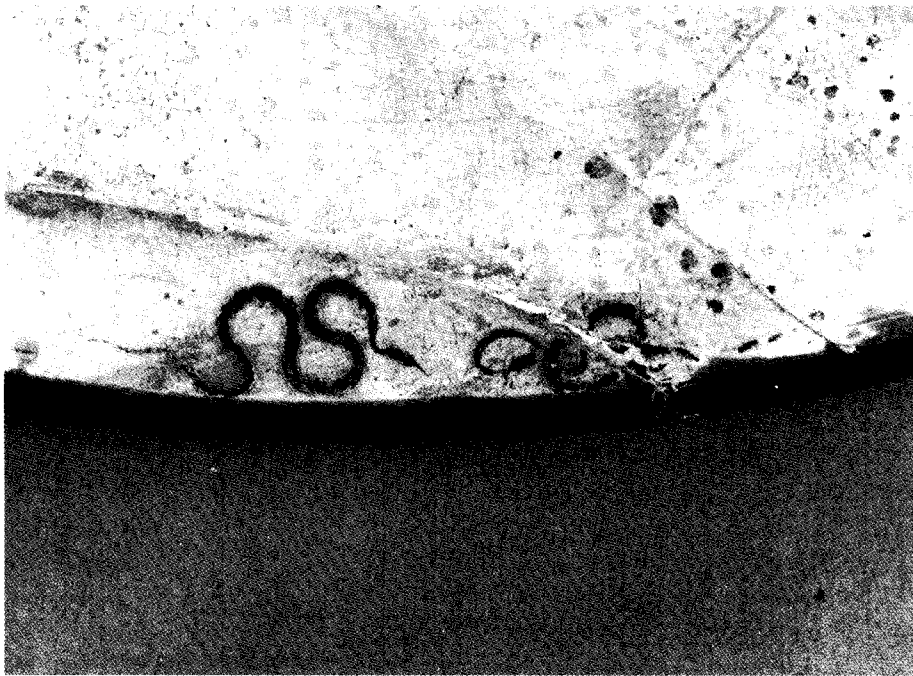
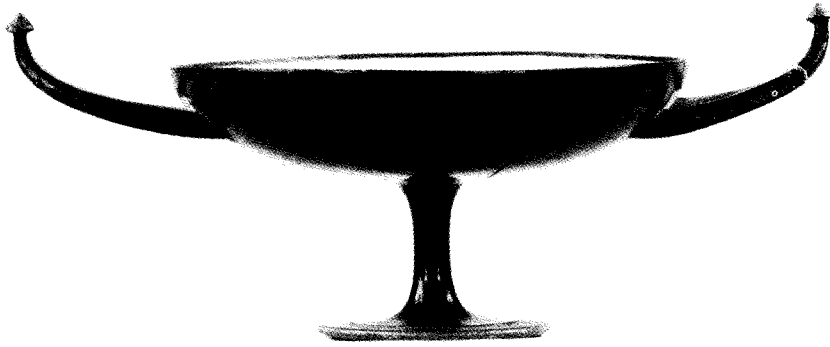


Fig. 1: Glaukos and Polyeyidos in the tomb. Interior of an Attic white-ground cup in the British Museum

Part of the answer is that the middle phase of the tripartite initiation—namely seclusion³⁷—has been selected by the vase painter as corresponding to the middle phase of the Greek funeral rite, the nine days of mourning during which the psyche is supposed to remain in the tomb. Now, a neophyte is universally treated as though he were dead or invisible. He is said to be in ‘another place’ or ‘another world’ and likened to a small child by various symbolic means, on the cup by Glaukos’ squatting posture. The more intellectually developed a person, the less fitted he is to understand himself. The child, like the primitive man and the illiterate peasant, is much nearer to true vision.³⁸ Glaukos is thus being characterized symbolically as initiatory raw material.

With this as background, let us look again at the two protagonists. The special vision of Polyeidōs, who transforms death into initiation, is, as said, announced by his name, which is generic for ‘seer.’³⁹ As *seer*, Polyeidōs ‘sees,’ or knows, in three different time-dimensions: the past, the present and the future.⁴⁰ In the myth, his intimate knowledge of inner connections⁴¹ is also characteristically manifested by his ability to solve riddles.

We have already said that Glaukos’ name likewise has to do with seeing. It is cognate with *glaukōpis*, and refers to his gleaming eyes. With them he too symbolically ‘sees in the dark,’ like the *glaux*, or owl, with which he is associated by Hyginus.⁴² Thus, both Glaukos and Polyeidōs are depicted on the cup as being able to see in the dark tomb! This hints at a deeper level of meaning—a non-chronological, timeless, or dream dimension—reminding us that in the myth itself Minos insists that Glaukos be initiated as a *seer*. Now, seeing in this sense means heightened intuition,⁴³ inner light, clairvoyance, precognition. Shamans and seers cultivate these abilities, as do Tibetan sages.⁴⁴

37 Van Gennep 1960:90-115. Touareg dervishes practice a mystery initiation called ‘Blue Death’ in which the neophyte, after a period of fasting and other spiritual preparation, is secluded for three days and nights in a cavern deep under the ground, from which he emerges ‘reborn.’ I owe this information to Jabrane E. Sebnath.

38 This is why great teachers, such as Christ, have always proclaimed that the neophyte must become ‘as a child’ before he can be reborn into the realm of Truth.

39 Also *ierophanteis*, from *phainō* = ‘bring to light’.

40 See Hawking 1988.

41 *Opsis ton adelon ta phaiomena* says Anaxagoras (fr. 21a DK): ‘The phenomena are only the visible aspects of what is hidden beneath.’ (author’s translation).

42 *Fab.* 49.

43 Heightened intuition here means total awareness, a phenomenon different from that which enables some animals to see in the dark. See note 30.

44 See David-Neel 1971.

Indeed, with Glaukos things become more interesting still, for as we have said he is the son of Minos. His father and his uncle Rhadamanthys—here too a name referring to prophesy or oracular intuition, ‘seeing’—rule over the dead in Hades, a function they share with Dionysos in his chthonic aspect.⁴⁵ Glaukos’ covered head—a detail vital to the full understanding of the scene—is yet another symbol that can be understood in several ways. It refers us overtly to the middle stage of passage rites, the gesture being one of ritual seclusion or mourning. At another level the same gesture can be understood to mean that he is in the ‘other’, or timeless reality of a mystery initiation. As for the tripod prominently displayed on his tomb—a further symbol—the cauldron it would have supported was thought of as offering access to the world of spirit, making it both a chthonic and a divinatory symbol in one. The puberty initiation depicted on the cup can thus be read at three levels simultaneously: as standing for a puberty initiation, a funeral, and a mystery initiation.

At first glance we are surprised that the focal point of the composition should be in the cup’s lower rim, that is to say in the segment with the two snakes. When the cup is held by its two handles and tilted forward, it becomes clear that the snakes are meant to be seen in the same horizontal plane as Polyeydos and Glaukos. Being closest to the viewer, the snakes actually invite *his* participation in the act of witnessing the mysterious proceedings, so that three spectators are now involved in a triangular disposition: Polyeydos, Glaukos, and the viewer, with all three glances riveted on the focal center of the ‘three-dimensional’ composition, the source of ultimate signification.

In the myth, Polyeydos kills a snake and observes that a second snake revives it employing a herb as *pharmakon*. A slain snake and the killing of a snake are thus linked to Glaukos’ revival. The nature of this link needs to be grasped in order to understand the fuller content of the image. Polyeydos is revealing a mystery to Glaukos in the form of temporal synchronicity—timelessness like that which we experience in dreams. His inner vision is being opened,⁴⁶ referred to symbolically by his eyes piercing the darkness of the tomb. He can now see beyond darkness—inner darkness meaning the darkness of ignorance and death. What is being said is that birth and death are not linear phenomena that happen once in a lifetime, but that each of us is dying and being born at every moment. That corresponds astonishingly closely to what quantum mechanics tells us about matter consisting of energized particles constantly disappearing and constantly being ‘reborn.’⁴⁷ Being initiated—a death in life—awakens the capacity of becoming fully aware of this

45 Hom. *Od.* 4. 564, 11. 567ff.; Pind. *Ol.* 2. 75ff.; Pl. *Ap.* 41a.

46 On *autopsia* as mystic vision see Metzler 1972.

47 Capra 1975, Zukav 1979.

mystery, and thus capable of truly (rather than merely intellectually) understanding the nature of change. This is what is proclaimed in the myth by the allegory of the miraculous calf, which after being black, or dead, turns white again.

According to the initiate's expanded understanding, immortality and enlightenment mean the same. Both terms refer to the continuing perception of ontological reality (*ta onta*), devoid of time and concepts. This is the subtle world-space Herakleitos is referring to when he speaks about 'living their death and dying their life.'⁴⁸ This is what Nisargadatta is declaring when he says that the enlightened person—the one who sees and knows—is never 'born' and never 'dies.'⁴⁹ Thus, Glaukos' initiation by Polyeidon into the mystery of inner light can be understood as referring quite literally to his illumination: he is being restored to life as a fully enlightened seer.

So let us go back and see how we arrived at our three-level interpretation. First of all, we considered the symbol polyvalently, as being an open potential yielding meaning at three different levels of signification. The more external or material our outlook, the less likely we are to perceive the inner reality the symbol points to. The level at which we perceive symbols in fact depends entirely on the level of our own consciousness. At the first, or basal, level—taken literally—the Glaukos myth is simply a story. The myth and its visual representation are experienced as something external to us, with no apparent symbolic significance.

At a second level we considered the symbol complex—the picture and each symbolic element it contains—as conjointly standing for something else. At this level, symbols express one by means of the other and therefore function much as signs.⁵⁰ We went beyond our purely literal or descriptive analysis and enabled the subject to move closer to the object. But at this stage our mind, although having just freed the symbol of some restrictions, began imposing others by assigning labels (identifications) on the authority of ancient and modern authors. This in effect is what we are doing each time we cite expert opinion to support our claim that one thing may mean another (*e.g.* seashell = goddess). The symbol, at stage two, remains a piece of secondhand information, to be stored in a recess of memory or a computer file.

At the third level things suddenly became interesting again, for we now moved so close to the symbol that our power of discrimination began to blur. In fact, at this stage we began to have an inkling that we may not be so radically separate from the symbol as our rational (left-hemispheric) brain had previously supposed. The

48 Fr. 62 DK. In fr. 4, employing a pun, he uses the bow as a symbol to express the same mystic precept. Cf. Pépin 1976:96.

49 Nisargadatta 1973, 1989, Balsekar 1982, Dunn 1985.

50 Whereas a symbol can sometimes be a sign, a sign can never be a symbol. See Leach 1976: 9-16.

process of *symbol actualization* had begun! We began to identify with what the symbol symbolizes.⁵¹

In the particular case in point—the Glaukos cup—I was immediately struck by it when I first saw it in its case at the British Museum. Something fascinated me about the myth depicted in its interior. For quite unconscious and subjective reasons, I took up this vase, rather than another, as my object for a deeper investigation. The myth thus became a symbol having a personal resonance.

Seeing myths and symbols at level three is like looking into a mirror reflecting and pointing back to something one has always known to be true. An inner sense has been awakened, providing insight into an interior world which cannot be accessed by the intellect alone. The symbol is working on us, revealing meaning. As William James puts it, in passing out of ordinary consciousness, we are in effect passing from the small to the vast.⁵² At level three, the symbol truly becomes a stepping-stone to the timeless.

So there is half the story: the view from the inside. We interpreted a thing seen on grounds of our subjective experience. We scrutinized Glaukos and Polyeidos from our personal perspective. The other half of our level three analysis takes us to the view from the outside. In other words, what the symbolism of Glaukos and Polyeidos might have signified for a fifth-century Athenian. We have arrived at the ancient cultural context.

Now, we know that both Sophokles and Euripides composed dramas on the Glaukos myth,⁵³ and these will have been performed in Athens within decades of the time the Glaukos cup was painted. The Cretan myth cited by the Athenian playwrights was, however, much older. It seems most likely to me that the tragedians and the vase painters were familiar with it for reason that it was part and parcel of their vast panhellenic system of myths and beliefs.

Levels one and two, which can now be seen to correspond to the rudimentary and possibly clouded levels of our modern comprehension, clearly have no validity for the ancient Athenian viewer, whose perspective would have been entirely from level three. Having commissioned or purchased the object for an impending funeral, he might have considered it an apt expression of faith in personal survival as befitting a funeral dedication. According to a third-level reading, faith in a

51 Stesimbrotos' allegorical, meaning Eleusinian, exegesis of Homer, as well as his concept of *hyponoia* (concealed meaning) are interesting in this context, inasmuch as they suggest a similar fusion. See Pépin 1976:95-105, Metzler 1980:78 and note 24; Lambertson 1986. As Mark Mortford points out to me, Plato's myth of Er and his simile of the cave are relevant, as is the *Meno* with its doctrine of *anamnesis*.

52 James 1958.

53 Only fragments survive: Soph. fr. 358-368 Nauck; Eur. fr. 634-646 Nauck.



Fig. 5: Glaukos-inspired bronze sculpture by the author. Height: 42 cm

Dionysian 'Hereafter' would here be symbolized by a Dionysian banqueting cup replete with rebirth symbolism.

There is, however, another and even more intriguing possibility, this being that both the vase painter and his client were initiates and hence familiar with the *mysteria*⁵⁴ from their own direct experience. Much speaks in favour of this assumption, for how else explain that a vase painter—a *banausos*—should be able to transmit to us in images the deepest content of the mysteries, namely their metaphysical essence? This alternative eventuality requires from us an additional level of interpretation, a fourth level,⁵⁵ less overt than level three. One might almost call it arcane.

Glaukos, the young hero who dies and is resurrected, was worshipped at Knossos as an initiation hero. His shrine has been excavated.⁵⁶ He was venerated there and elsewhere as one of the *chthonioi*, a paradigm for initiatory transformation.⁵⁷ His myth will have been told as an initiatory *aition*, the steps of his initiation being understood as steps to his enlightenment, or full self-knowledge.⁵⁸ In view of Glaukos' family connection with the 'other realm',⁵⁹ it may well have been told (and seen) at Eleusis as well.

A level four interpretation would thus have to consider the eventuality of an Athenian purchaser having employed the Glaukos cup much as Tibetans employ their *thangkas*: as an aid in contemplative visualization. In this way, the myth, understood as being itself a symbol, would have been fully activated in its bridging function, and everything that separated the observer from the symbol would have

54 At Eleusis, initiation (*myesis*) culminated in the autumn festival called *Mysteria*. As Burkert points out, mystery initiation was an optional activity comparable with a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela. The mysteries were 'initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.' I borrow Burkert's definition, contained in Burkert 1987:11 and note 59.

55 I am grateful to Jens Braarvig and Richard Candida Smith for bringing to my attention the fact that something like my four levels of symbol activation is to be found also in the writings of medieval scholastics, in particular St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. In the scholastic tradition, the four levels are the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical, the last corresponding to the sensible perception of the invisible and ultimately union with the divine (*hierogamos*). See Braarvig 1987. The four levels are referred to also in Dante's *Letter to the Ca' Grande*. The Buddhist *dhyana* likewise stipulates four levels of symbol contemplation. See Conze 1996 glossary, s.v. 'dhyana'.

56 Callaghan 1978:1-29.

57 Morris 1988:750ff. The seers Trophonios and Amphiaraos are perhaps the best-known of Greek seers who enjoyed similar veneration. *Kl. Pauly* s.v. 'Amphiaraos,' 'Trophonios,' 'Oropos.'

58 For a diverging understanding of Delphic self-knowledge (lacking the consciousness dimension) see Jaeger 1945:i, 284f., Burkert 1985:148; and most recently Pagels 1995:119.

59 See note 45. In the myth, it will be recalled, it is Minos who insists on Glaukos' esoteric initiation. On the Eleusinian connection see also Callaghan 1978.

dissolved. More correctly, the symbol itself would have dissolved, so that what it symbolized flowed uninterrupted through the observer. His personal vision would give way to a broader vision in which the parts and the whole were seen together as being many and one simultaneously. This new vision would have been entirely beyond his rational comprehension. Rather than thinking, it is as though a detached watching or observing were taking place. This is the level of deepest symbol contemplation. It is from this level that Tibetan lamas contemplate the *devas* and *dakinis*⁶⁰ painted on their *thangkas* (and, for that matter, Orthodox monks their icons⁶¹). The experience of total freedom and detachment that accompanies stage four, the ultimate stage, is traditionally referred to as a death or dying. But the death that is meant is the death of thought and time,⁶² rather than of the body. It is a state, or mode of being, in which death itself becomes symbolic.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the initiation depicted on the Glaukos cup is to be understood in a metaphysical sense, as pertaining to immortality and enlightenment, the two terms being synonymous with self-knowledge at a higher level of comprehension. Contemplation here becomes prominent as the traditional method in which myths and symbols are most powerfully employed.⁶³

Enlightened immortality has little to do with the popular phantasy of post-mortem survival in a pleasant or unpleasant 'Hereafter.' It refers to the Socratic and pre-Socratic awareness of existence as unbroken flow.⁶⁴ It means that you cannot step twice into the same river, for everything moves on and nothing abides.⁶⁵ A splendid statement of this profound insight is given by Pindar in his dirge in memory of an Athenian who had been initiated at Eleusis:

'Blessed is he who has seen these things
Before he goes beneath the hollow earth
For he *sees* the end of mortal life
For he *sees* the god-given beginning.'⁶⁶

60 Fairy-like celestial beings.

61 See note 19.

62 On time as thought see Krishnamurti and Bohm 1988.

63 The best way to test the validity of this statement is to take up the contemplative practice oneself.

64 See Grof 1984, Braarvig 1987, Krishnamurti and Bohm 1988. The ancient awareness of timeless present, or immortal time, can still be found in a number of pre-industrial societies such as the Himba of Namibia, on which see Crandall 1998:esp. 108f. Cf. also Victor Turner's related concept of 'flow,' as in Turner 1978:254.

65 On Herakleitos' celebrated 'river-statement' see esp. Guthrie 1962:1, 488-92. But cf. also Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983:194-47.

66 Fr. 137a Sandys. For analogous formulations cf. Soph. fr. 753 Nauck and *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 480 Evelyn-White.

This passage is interpreted by Fritz Graf⁶⁷—absolutely correctly I am convinced—as meaning that initiation is the true death and in this sense the beginning of real life. It suggests that the vision of inner light, familiar to both the Eastern and the Western mystic tradition,⁶⁸ will have been for many the culminating experience at Eleusis.⁶⁹

67 Graf 1974:80.

68 Known in the latter as *visio beatifica*.

69 The central mystical experience is referred to in terms of light in most traditions. Since initiation into the Mystery brings insight, a more enlightened state as compared with the relative darkness of ignorance before, this is aptly symbolized by light. At Eleusis, the Great Light appears to have been experienced in the form of an overwhelming vision. See Kerényi 1967:95ff., Metzler 1972:116f.

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Illustrations

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