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A Wall Painting in Herod's Theatre at Herodion: An Image of *Elysium*?

With the expansion in 2008 of archaeological excavations to the west of the monumental steps at Herodion, a small royal theatre was revealed that had been completely buried beneath the slopes of the artificial mound;¹ a small group of rooms had survived above the theatre seating area. The royal box, the central and largest of the rooms, was located opposite the centre of the stage and was decorated with a variety of splendid murals (*pinakes*) and high-quality stucco embellishments. In no other theatre in the Graeco-Roman world has a similar royal box been found positioned above the spectators' seating area, like that at Herodion.²

The excavators have contended that the central embellished room, the royal box, would obviously have been used by Herod and his guests during theatrical or musical performances. They have also contended that the theatre is not part of the magnificent monumental burial complex (the mausoleum) and its related ceremonies,³ despite its close proximity to the complex and the funerary character of the inscriptions found in its rooms.⁴ They have estimated that the mausoleum was built around the year 10 BCE, six years before Herod's death.⁵

In contrast with this opinion, at least four examples of Roman-period theatres and buildings of benches with semicircular niches related to burial complexes and the cult of the dead have been recorded: one is the large theatre at Petra,⁶ built inside the necropolis and undoubtedly related to the cult and ceremonies connected with the dead that were practiced in the city; the second is the small theatre at Halutza/Elusa (Ἐλουσσα) adjacent to the cemetery;⁷ while the third and fourth

¹ Netzer *et alii* 2009: 110; see also Netzer *et alii* 2010: 84-108.

² It should be noted that similar to the location of the royal box in the theatre at Herodion, temples were usually located above the spectators' seating area (the *cavea*) in theatres of the Roman period (see Hanson 1959).

³ Netzer *et alii* 2009: 112.

⁴ See Netzer *et alii* 2009a: 91-94.

⁵ See Netzer *et alii* 2009: 117.

⁶ Hammond 1965.

⁷ Negev 1981: 123-124; Negev 1988: 117-119.

examples are to be found in catacombs 14 and 20 at the Jewish necropolis in Beth She'arim, where the space and benches in Π-like form were used as a gathering place on memorial days.⁸ These four comparative examples support and shed light on an alternative proposal to that held by the excavators of Herodion: that the small theatre located there was connected – among other things – with the monumental burial complex nearby. This proposal is reinforced by two verses from Virgil's *Aeneid*, from which we may deduce that the hero's tomb was close to the theatre:

*Nuntius Anchisae ad tumulum cuneosque
theatri incensas perfert navis Eumelus, ...*
To the tomb of Anchises and the seats of the
theatre Eumelus bears tidings of the burning ships, ...⁹

According to the excavators, the murals (*pinakes*) were almost certainly painted between 15 and 10 BCE, at the time of the theatre's construction (around 15 BCE). The murals depict windows with folded-back wooden shutters. The nails are clearly shown (in black paint) in an attempt to create a three-dimensional perspective. The windows framed delicate paintings of an imaginary rural landscape. Only one of the four windows revealed so far contains a painting that has survived almost in its entirety.¹⁰ The mural depicts a scene with a building and trees, next to which is a rocky hill with deer/goats climbing it. Either next to or opposite the deer/goats stand two hunting-dogs (hounds), watching them and/or ready for pursuit.¹¹ Does this wall-painting depict the deer/goats and the hunting-dogs merely incidentally, or does their appearance have an allegorical meaning?

The open shutters of the window reveal an enchanted world with tranquil and restful pastoral scene in which soft green foliage, light turquoise-blue skies and reddish rocks in the foreground create an atmosphere evoking *Elysium* (Ἠλύσιον) or the *Elysian* plain (Ἠλύσιον πεδῖον) of the Graeco-Roman world. There can be no doubt that the mural with its impressionistic representation expresses a longing for a world in which all is good, a world that can bring peace and rest to those who set eyes on it, and it is also perhaps an expression

⁸ Avigad 1971: 41-45, 81-82, Figs. 23-24, 35, 51, Pls. XIV-XVI (1), XXX (1).

⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid* V.664-665.

¹⁰ We thank Mr. Roi Porath, member of the archaeological expedition to Herodion, for the permission to publish the photograph of the wall painting (given us orally on January 23rd, 2012). It should be noted that three other murals, partly preserved, depict a Nilotic scene including the Nile river, a crocodile, a building and trees (see Netzer *et alii* 2010: 96 and 99 [colour fig. J]), a nautical scene featuring a large boat with sails (Netzer *et alii* 2010: 96), a bucolic scene and the images of Dionysos and Silenos (see A. Ovadiah's article in this volume).

¹¹ Netzer *et alii* 2009: 111-112.

of hope for the continuation of life after death. It is an illusionist view observed, as described above, through a wide open window.

In the works of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar and Virgil, *Elysium* or *the Elysian plain* are described in different ways.

Homer described *Elysium* as a pleasant place at the western extremity of the earth, encircled by the river Oceanus:

But for thyself, Menelaus, fostered of Zeus, it is not ordained that thou shouldst die and meet thy fate in horse-pasturing Argos, but to the Elysian plain and the bounds of the earth will the immortals convey thee, where dwells fair-haired Rhadamanthus, and where life is easiest for men. No snow is there, nor heavy storm, nor even rain, but ever does Ocean send up blasts of the shrill-blowing West Wind that they may give cooling to men; for thou hast Helen to wife, and art in their eyes the husband of the daughter of Zeus.¹²

Hesiod, in his *Works and Days*, also described *Elysium* or the *Elysian plain* as the *islands of the blessed*, without referring to it by name, in the following words:

But to the others father Zeus the son of Cronos gave a living and an abode apart from men, and made them well at the end of earth. And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them; ...¹³

According to Pindar, the ruler of the mythological *Islands of the Blest* (μακάρων νᾶσος), probably *Elysium*, was Cronos. All who have three times passed blamelessly through life live there (in *Elysium*) in perfect bliss under the sway of Cronos and his assessor Rhadamanthys. Pindar described Cronos and his realm in the following words:

But, whosoever, while dwelling in either world, have thrice been courageous in keeping their souls pure from all deeds of wrong, pass by the highway of Zeus unto the tower of Cronus, where the ocean-breezes blow around the Islands of the Blest, and flowers of gold are blazing, some on the shore from radiant trees, while others the water fostereth; and with chaplets thereof they entwine their hands, and with crowns, according to the righteous councils of Rhadamanthys, who shareth for evermore the judgement-seat of the mighty Father, ...¹⁴

¹² Homer, *Odyssey* IV.561-569.

¹³ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 167-173.

¹⁴ Pindar, *Olympian Odes* II.68-76; see also *Dirges* 129+130 (95).



Fig. 1. The Fresco (after Netzer *et alii* 2010: 100, colour fig. L).

Virgil gave an account of Aeneas' descent to the underworld to meet his father, Anchises, and described *Elysium* as a place of peace and pleasure, with eternal rivers and shady forests, sun and stars:

For impious Tartarus, with its gloomy shades, holds me not, but I dwell in *Elysium* amid the sweet assemblies of the blest. Hither, with much blood of black sheep, the pure Sibyl will lead thee; ...

Here is the place, where the road parts in twain: there to the right, as it runs under the walls of great Dis, is our way to *Elysium*, but the left wreaks the punishment of the wicked, and send them on to pitiless Tartarus.

Each of us suffers his own spirit; then through wide *Elysium* are we sent, a few of us to abide in the joyous fields; ...¹⁵

Hints of the Golden Age to come, probably perceived as equating with *Elysium*, appear in Virgil's *Eclogues*, as early as Augustan era, overlapping Herod's reign:

..., in the age to come, the timid deer shall come with hounds to drink.¹⁶

In the *Eclogues*, therefore, deer/goats and hunting dogs (hounds) are an integral part of the landscape in the coming Golden Age (or the End of Days).¹⁷

¹⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* V.733-736; VI.540-543, 743-744.

¹⁶ Virgil, *Eclogues* VIII.27-28: ..., *aevoque sequenti / cum canibus timidi venient ad pocula dammae*.

¹⁷ See above, n. 16.

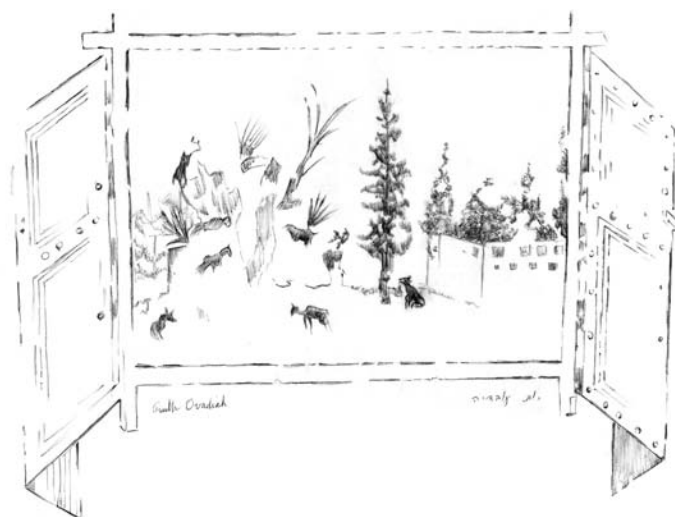


Fig. 2. Drawing of the Fresco (based on Fig. 1).

According to some scholars, the blue paint gives the illusion of the viewer being able to pass through the wall as the area depicted behind it. The part through which a person would pass, metaphorically, is also painted blue, greatly adding to the illusion of depth. Blue paint appears frequently in burial complexes in Alexandria, Egypt,¹⁸ as well as in the Villa of Oplontis in Campania, Italy, with the same significance.¹⁹ Interestingly, J. McKenzie claims that K. Schefold “had detected elements of Alexandrian theology in the wall-paintings when interpreting them as depicting a sacred world”.²⁰

On the mid-4th-century Christian mosaic pavement from Hinton St. Mary in Dorset, now in the British Museum, appear packs of hounds pursuing deer. It is noteworthy that none of these depictions display any trace of wounding or kill-

¹⁸ Vitruvius (VII.xi.1) states that “[t]he processes for making blue were first discovered at Alexandria; afterwards also Vestorius founded a factory at Puteoli. His method and his ingredients are sufficiently noteworthy. Sand is ground with flowers of soda to such fineness that it becomes like flour. Cyprian copper is sprinkled from rough files like fine dust so that it combines with the mixture. Then, it is rolled by hand into balls and they are put together to dry. When dry they are collected in an earthenware jar, and the jars are put in a furnace. In this way the copper and the sand burning together owing to the vehemence of the fire dry together, and, interchanging their vapours, lose their properties; and their own character being overcome by the vehemence of the fire, they acquire a blue colour”.

¹⁹ See McKenzie 1990: 98-99.

²⁰ See McKenzie 1990: 62; see also Schefold 1975: 111-119. For theatricality and illusionism in Alexandrian tombs, see Venit 2002: 37, 66, 86-87, 90, 116-118, 120.

ing, although the dogs are mostly shown as hard on the heels of the stags and does, which seem almost to be enjoying the chase.²¹

In conclusion, Herod's theatre at Herodion and the monumental tomb together form a single conceptual complex. In addition, the artistic characteristics – the reddish colour of the rockery or rocky cliff in the foreground,²² the deer/goats and the hunting-dogs on the hilly slopes, and the light-blue background – of the mural in question indicate that it contains an allegorical meaning consistent with the architectural-funerary remains.

Virgil's work too seems to strengthen and support the allegorical meaning of this mural as expressing a yearning for a life of future tranquility and peace in the Golden Age (or the End of Days) represented by the image of *Elysium*. The wall-painting in Herod's theatre at Herodion may thus reflect or represent a visual depiction of an allegorical perception or idea of *Elysium*,²³ where friendship and peace between wild and tame animals, normally inimical to one another, prevail.

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²¹ Toynbee 1996: 284-285.

²² For the reddish colour, especially the reddish flowers whose colour evokes that of the blood, see Servius, *Ver. Car.* V.79 (*Purpleosque iacit flores ad sanguinis imitationem, in quo est sedes animae*); see also Pindar, *Dirges* 129+130 (95) ("... in meadows red with roses, ...").

²³ If indeed the present wall painting is also related to a Nilotic landscape, as it appears in another mural (see above, n. 10), it can be presumed that the idea is basically a representation of *Elysium*. Diodorus Siculus (I.10.1), writing ca. 60 BCE, describes Egypt as the country in which men first came into existence (The Garden of Eden) living off the food provided by the Nile. According to him (I.9.6, I.11.1), it is the country in which the gods first lived, with the first two gods being Osiris and Isis. Josephus Flavius (*Ant.* I.39) explains that the Nile (Geon - Γηών) is one of the four rivers of Paradise which flow from Eden. McKenzie (1990: 100 and nn. 193-194) claims that "[t]he Romans viewed Egypt as a paradisaical land in which the gods once dwelled. This would accord with the suggestion that the idyllic world of the gods is depicted in the wall-paintings as indicated by the sacred aspects of the scenes; without conflicting with the depiction of real architecture in them".

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