

The symbolism of the Lycurgus Cup¹

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The Rothschild Lycurgus Cup from the 4th c. AD is one of the most renowned masterpieces of late Roman glass workmanship. It represents a type referred to as ‘cage cups’ (*diatreta*) and belongs to a rare group of dichroic glass. It depicts the punishment of king Lycurgus for his *hubris* against Dionysus. The focus of the paper is on the iconography of the decoration and its symbolism. The frieze on the Lycurgus Cup is compared to other representations of the myth on ancient vases and mosaics in order to get a broader view of the theme. Moreover, the paper introduces a different interpretation related to a possible other usage of the cup.

KEY-WORDS: Lycurgus, Dionysus, vase painting, mosaics, glass

The Rothschild Lycurgus Cup from the 4th century AD is one of the most renowned masterpieces of late Roman glass workmanship. The frieze is preserved in excellent condition, but the cup bears modern ‘repairs’, which have obscured the original shape of the vase: the rim and the stemmed base imitating vine-leaves are 19th-century additions (Harden 1987: 245). The cup represents a specific glass type, *vasa diatreta*, which are openwork vessels made in a technique of cutting and grinding out of a thick blank of cast or blown glass (Koster and Whitehouse 1989: 25; Harden and Toynbee 1959: 182; Stern 2011). The decorative frieze of the cup is made in such high relief that it creates the impression of a vessel enclosed in a relief cage – another justification for its name, that is, *diatreta* or cage cups. Most of the examples of this genre were produced in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. The Lycurgus Cup represents another rare group, which is called dichroic glass. It displays two different colours depending on the source of the light. Both these glass types are very rare: about 50 late Roman cage cups are known (adorned mostly with geometric patterns) and less than 10 dichroic objects (Whitehouse 1989: 119). The Lycurgus Cup is therefore a unique example of these two groups, presenting an excellently preserved figured frieze which has given it its name.

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The cup is an opaque jade-green when seen in reflected light (Fig. 1). In transmitted light, it turns a translucent wine-red (Fig. 2; Elsner 2013: 103). This dichroic feature of the cup is caused by highly specific chemical glass composition. It is the usual variety of Roman soda-lime-silica glass, but with about half a percent of minor additions (such as colloidal gold and silver) which determine the unusual optical properties of the cup



Fig. 1. Lycurgus cup: Dionysus, British Museum, Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum

(Harden 1987: 246; Quinten 2010: 406–407; Chirnside 1965). It is not my purpose here, however, to discuss the technical factors of the cup. Instead, I will focus on the iconographical aspects of the vase, and the symbolism of the frieze.

Depicted on the cup is the punishment of king Lycurgus for his *hubris* against Dionysus. The 4th-century date of the cup is relatively close to the creation of a great



Fig. 2. Lycurgus cup: Lycurgus, British Museum, Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum

epic poem, *Dionysiaca* by Nonnos of Panopolis (4th/5th century AD), which tells the story of a conflict between king Lycurgus and the god Dionysus. Although there are several versions of the myth, the story of Nonnos is the closest literary parallel for the story depicted on the frieze.

THE STORY AND THE CHARACTERS

Lycurgus was an evil king of Arabia who killed innocent strangers coming to his country by cutting off their heads and adorning his palace with these trophies (Nonn. *Dionys.* 20.149ff.). Upon hearing one day that Dionysus with his retinue was to pass through his land on the way to the East, Lycurgus set upon the Bacchic *thiasos* with an axe, his hatred fuelled by the goddess Hera. Dionysus sought refuge in the sea and Lycurgus turned on the nymphs. One of them, Ambrosia, hurled a stone at him, knocking off his helmet. Lycurgus hit her with an even bigger stone and seized her, but Ambrosia prayed to the Mother Earth and with her help managed to escape. The nymph disappeared into the ground, reappearing as a grapevine. In her altered form Ambrosia immobilized Lycurgus to make him an easy target for the other nymphs. The Bacchantes would have taken their revenge were it not for Zeus who saved the king, but punished him by turning him into a blind wanderer (Nonn. *Dionys.* 21.166).

This story is the closest literary parallel to the frieze, but there are certain differences. A closer look at the cup distinguishes the following figures:

- 1) Lycurgus in the centre, naked except for the boots (Fig. 2), entangled by growing vines. An expression of extreme fear on his face, he stretches his left hand toward the god in a gesture (the thumb, the index and middle fingers extended and the others bent) that seems to be the Roman imperial gesture.
- 2) To the left there is Ambrosia before her transformation into a grapevine (Fig. 3). Her right hand is touching the ground and the left is slightly raised in a praying gesture. She is asking Mother Earth for help.
- 3) Standing behind Ambrosia is a Satyr (Fig. 4), a *pedum* or shepherd's crook in his left hand, a stone in his right, which he is hurling at the king (this figure is not present in the poem of Nonnos, hence the myth behind this depiction must be different in the details from the story given in *Dionysiaca*).
- 4) Pan is depicted to the right side of Lycurgus (Fig. 5).
- 5) An attacking panther faces the punished king (Fig. 1).
- 6) Dionysus appears opposite the figure of Lycurgus (Fig. 1). He wears a *mitra* ribbon in his hair, a himation thrown over his shoulders like a shawl, a tunic and boots. In his left hand the god holds a *thyrsus*, which was used when an adolescent was initiated into the sacred mysteries. He extends his right hand in a commanding gesture, bestowing punishment upon Lycurgus.

COMPOSITION OF THE FRIEZE

The composition of the frieze demonstrates a certain symmetry: The figures of Satyr, Pan, Lycurgus and Ambrosia are facing right, opposite Dionysus and the panther, both facing left (Fig. 5). The figures of Satyr and Pan are similar in their arrangement:



Fig. 3. Lycurgus cup: Satyr and Ambrosia, Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum

their right legs are bent and raised (their right hands as well), their left hands lowered and the scarf on Pan's arm copies the shape of the Satyr's staff. Dionysus mirrors the figure of Lycurgus. Even their footwear, high-laced boots is similar. Ambrosia and the panther are placed symmetrically on the lower level, on each side of Lycurgus' feet. Moreover, their presence divides the composition into two 'triples': the first one



Fig. 4. Lycurgus cup: Satyr, Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum

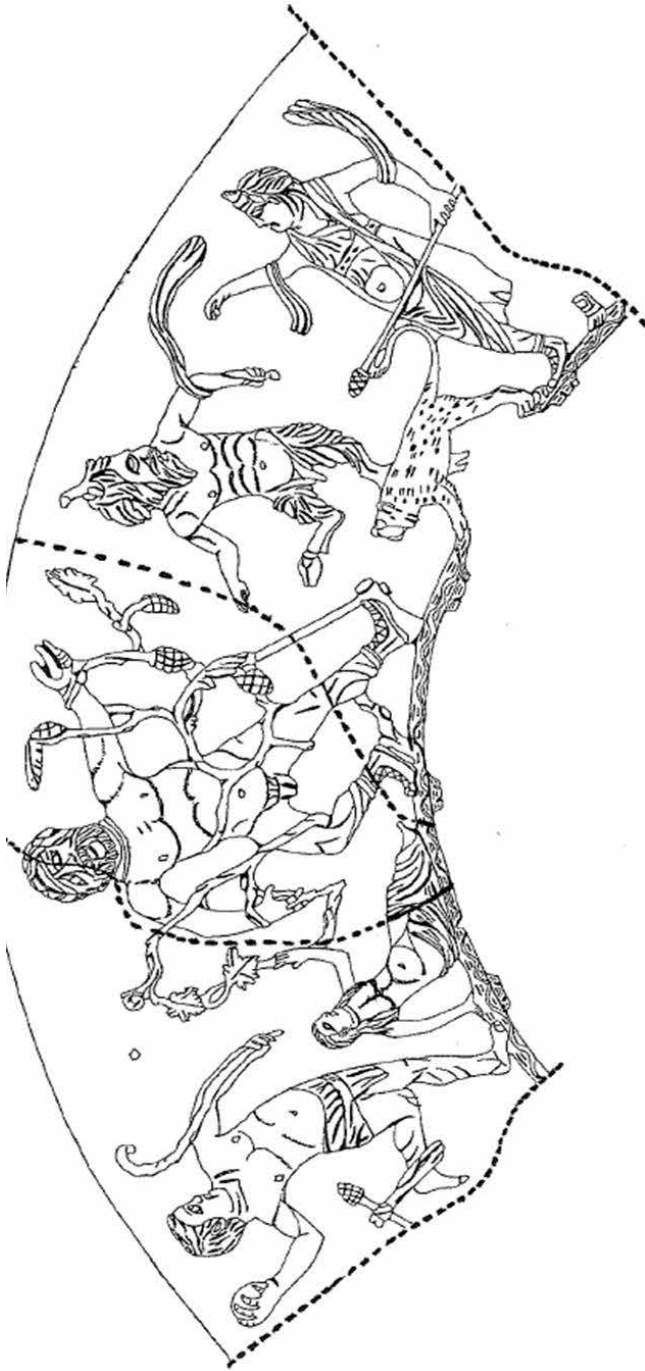


Fig. 5. Lycurgus cup: drawing of the composition (after Scott 1995: 54, Fig. 8).

composed of Satyr, Ambrosia and Lycurgus, and the second one of Pan, panther and Dionysus. There is also a technical symmetry paralleling the iconographical one: the profiles of all of the four standing figures were hollowed out and polished from the inside of the cup, but the two small ones, Ambrosia and the panther, were hollowed out only on the exterior of the vessel by grinding (Scott 1995: 53). This technical feature creates an effect when the cup is illuminated by transmitted light: the corpuses and faces of the four figures are more transparent than the remaining parts of their bodies, which produces a more spectacular visual impression.

ICONOGRAPHY

The Lycurgus Cup does not have exact iconographical parallels, but the theme of the punishment of Lycurgus was rather popular, enabling some of the motifs from the freeze to be traced in other works of art. Visual representations of this story began to appear on Greek vases already in the 5th century BC. The eldest is an Attic hydria from the Czartoryski Museum in Kraków (Griffith 1983, red-figure hydria, Kraków Museum: 1225, LIMC Lykourgos I 26, Beazley Archive vase no. 214835). They were, however, based on different versions of the myth: punished by madness Lycurgus kills his son, instead of the vine he wants to cut. A similar composition occurs on a 4th century BC Apulian vase (red-figure lutrophoros, c. 320 BC, Antikensammlungen, Munich, Germany, AS 3300, LIMC Lycourgos I 9). Dionysus gestures with authority, punishing the king. This punishment is symbolized by the presence of the panther, which is shown on the Apulian vase standing by the legs of a Fury and on the Lycurgus cup directly beside Dionysus. In the Roman world, the myth with Ambrosia as Lycurgus' victim gained greater popularity. The earliest representations of this story are dated to the 2nd century BC, such as the mosaic on Delos (Delos Archaeological Museum, LIMC Lykourgos I 33), depicting Lycurgus and Ambrosia. However, Lycurgus here has not been entangled by the vine entirely, but is aiming at Ambrosia who is making a gesture of invocation (Bruneau 1966: 401). A closer parallel to the Lycurgus cup is provided by a mosaic from Herculaneum (1st century AD, Archaeological Museum in Naples, inv. no. 9988). Here also Ambrosia invokes Gaia (Mother Earth), praying to be rescued from Lycurgus, who is trying to kill her with his double-axe. Added to the scene is the god Dionysus, dressed as on the Lycurgus cup in a tunic, cloak and a mitra on his forehead, stretching his right hand towards Lycurgus in a gesture imposing his revenge which is symbolized by the vine behind them and a panther leaping towards Lycurgus. This scheme is repeated also on a mosaic from the triclinium in a Roman villa in Sicily (LIMC Lykourgos I 42). The theme reached as far as Roman Britain. At the Brading Villa (room 12), one of the discovered mosaics dated to about the 4th century AD, depicts Lycurgus, identified by his double-axe, making an attempt to kill

a praying Ambrosia (Beeson 1997; LIMC Lykourgos I 41). Judging by the themes of the surrounding mosaics, this representation refers to the Dionysian sacred rites (Henig 2002: 153), but the rendering is schematic and it lacks the artistry of the Lycurgus cup.

J. van de Grift noted a depiction of the myth of Lycurgus on a silver kantharos from the 1st century AD in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (silver kantharos, Dionysus in a Centaur Biga, Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, no. 57.929.). Although the object is damaged, a representation of a man struggling with a vine is distinguishable with a male figure holding a thyrsus and a panther standing on his left. The other figures depicted on this frieze, without parallel in other works of art repeating this theme, indicate that despite the huge similarity with the Lycurgus Cup in the composition style, the artist drew upon yet another version of the myth (Grift 1984: esp. 12).

The symbolism of the myth made it a popular theme also on Roman sarcophagi. Lycurgus can be found also on incense-burners, capitals and gems. From the romance of Longus we learn that a relief with Lycurgus entangled by a vine adorned a Dionysian altar (Daphnis and Chloe 4.3). The context of the story was usually depicted on sarcophagi (see Matz 1968; Harden and Toynbee 1959: 203). Other objects bear representations only of the king and the vine, this because of a lack of space.

It is not possible to discuss in this article all of the examples of objects with the Lycurgus theme (for a broader discussion, see Grassigli 1995; Griffith 1983; LIMC, s.v. Lykourgos), but in most of them Lycurgus is depicted pursuing his victim (regardless of the version of the myth). Usually, even if a vine is shown, Lycurgus is depicted clasp an axe or his sword firmly in his hands. The moment of the narrative depicted on the Lycurgus cup is different compared to other known representations, since the Dionysian revenge has already begun. Lycurgus is without his weapon, entangled by the vine, close to being suffocated.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FRIEZE

The symbolism of the Attic vases where Lycurgus kills his son stresses the rejection of Dionysus and his worship, and in consequence the god's punishment. The mosaics and vessels relating to the myth of Ambrosia being a victim of Lycurgus emphasize in turn the invention of wine by Dionysus. In the context of Roman Imperial poetry and the banqueting tradition, it could be a warning for the banqueters not to spoil the drinking, but not to drink too much (Grift 1984: 13). When we consider the theme in the context of Dionysian sacred rites, the meaning of the nymph's name is also significant, since *ambrosia* (gr. *ἀμβροσία*) means immortality. Ambrosia was also one of the nymphs who nursed the baby Dionysus (Pseudo-Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2. 21). Here, the vine and its product – wine – become the source of eternal life, achieved through the cult of Dionysus.

The Lycurgus frieze and the symbolism of the cup should be considered in a banqueting or even ritual context, due to its Dionysian connotations. It was obviously a wine cup, a drinking vessel, but even more likely, it could be a libation bowl. As D. Whitehouse has noted (Whitehouse 1989: 120), there is a description of a similar vessel in a 2nd century AD Greek romance of *Leukippe and Cleitophon* by Achilles Tatius. The main character, Cleitophon, attends a banquet celebrating a feast day of Dionysus, during which libations to the god are made from a very unique vessel. As the description goes, the vessel was made of crystal with carved clusters of grapes in relief. Those bunches were green and unripe when the cup was empty, but when the cup was filled with wine, the grapes turned a dark red [II.3.1–2]. A similar account, this time historical, of the 3rd or 4th century AD, is found in a letter of Hadrian Augustus to Servianus (SHA Firmus Saturninus Proculus et Bonosus 8.10; Whitehouse 1989: 119–20): ‘I am sending you over some cups, changing colour and variegated, presented to me by the priest of a temple and now dedicated particularly to you and my sister. I should like you to use them at banquets on feast-days’ (Trans. Magie 1932).

Therefore, not only does this fragment suggest the existence of dichroic glass already in the 2nd century AD, but it also leads us to see it as a libation bowl. This is suggested by the special use of dichroic cups during feasts and by the fact that such cups were special gifts among the Roman elites. The characteristics of the Lycurgus cup are described also in the epigrams of Posidippus and it also seems that the cup was seen as a kind of precious gem rather than glass (Elsner 2013: 108–110).

Moreover, *diatreta* such as the Lycurgus cup were used occasionally also as lamps (Elsner 2013: 107). A cup from the Corning Museum of Glass is formed like a bowl with the rim shaped to hold a metal fitting for suspension of the cup (CMOG, accession no. 87.I.I, c. 300 AD, see CMOG webpage: <http://www.cmog.org/artwork/cage-cup?image=5>). The unique dichroic features of the glass would have fitted here perfectly. Had the Lycurgus cup been used as a lamp, it would have been admired in all its splendour. Dionysian themes often adorned lamps and the use of light in many ancient festivals, those of Dionysus as well, played a significant role (cf. Zografou 2010).

Elsner favours the assumption that the cup served as a drinking vessel because of a residual part suggesting an ancient base in place of the modern one (Elsner 2013: 107). However, he does not exclude its functioning as a lamp as well, although as he rightly stresses, no scientific research has been conducted on the colour effects caused by filling the cup with wine or by lighting it with the use of oil (Elsner 2013: 107).

The meaning of the story of the punishment of Lycurgus was clear for the ancients. In a banqueting context, it signified rejection of the god Dionysus and his gift for humanity, which is wine. Those who surrendered themselves to the god’s power were bestowed with feelings of joy, ecstasy and luxury. Those who demurred the god were punished (Zanker and Ewald 2012: 130). The punishment was madness, as suggested by the narratives of the myth of Lycurgus, a madness symbolized not without

coincidence by an image of Lycurgus entangled by a vine. Wine is naturally a product made from grapes – vine fruits. Wine is a Dionysian gift, but when overdosed, it causes madness. A poem by Eubulos writing in the 4th century BC was probably still remembered, since it was quoted by Athenaeus (2.36) in his book on banqueting written in the 2nd century AD. In this poem, Dionysus himself describes the effects of drinking wine, cup by cup. When he speaks of the tenth cup, he says (Eubulus fr. 93 K–A = Olson 2007 no. H18 = Ath. *Deipnos.* 2.36): ‘and the tenth [cup belongs] to madness extreme enough to make people throw stones’ (Trans. Olson 2007).

So the story of Lycurgus is a story of a gift, but also a double warning – be aware of the god, if you reject his gift; be aware of the gift, if you overdose it. The wine-madness symbolism of the cup is strengthened by its dichroic feature (Elsner 2013: 107). The transition from green to red may symbolize ripening of grapes and through this it can be related to the life-cycle and the death and rebirth of Dionysus and also the idea of *aeternitas* important for the late Roman religion (Grassigli 1995: 247). Naturally, the green and red colours reflect also white and red wine. Although in Italy it was the white wine that was more commonly drunk (Tchernia and Brun 1999: 65), it was the red wine that was sacred to Dionysus since it symbolizes also blood and refers to the bloodthirsty rituals of the god (Stuligrosz 2011: 404). Moreover, in *Dionysiaca*, the chapters in which the story of Lycurgus is described are full of references to the red colour. And it is not a coincidence that Dionysus seeks refuge in the Red Sea. A poet, Timotheus of Miletus, wrote of Dionysus’ gift of red wine mixed with water in the following metaphor [Timoth. *PMG* fr. 780.4–5]: ‘and [he] mixed the blood of Bacchus with the fresh-flowing tears of the Nymphs (...)’ (Trans. Hordern 2002).

Euripides writing in the 5th century BC attributed another symbolism to pale green/white (*chloros*) and red colours in Dionysian context. They relate to two classical elements: water and fire. Dionysus, like the water gives life, but like the fire brutally takes it away (Eurip. *Bacch.* 141–142, 704–711, 594–599, 624–625; Segal 1982: 149–150).

The conflict between Lycurgus and Dionysus is also a story of a conflict between the good represented by the wine-god and the evil symbolized by the Arabian (or Thracian in versions of the myth different from that given by Nonnos) king. If the Lycurgus cup served also as a lamp, this symbolism would be strengthened by the topical light and darkness conflict (visible in *Bacchae*: Segal 1982: 165).

Some scholars, however, go further, and suggest that the cup may be a luxurious symbol of victory of the emperor Constantine over Licinius in Thrace in AD 324. Although the co-emperors established the Edict of Milan stopping the persecution of Christians, Licinius, according to the image created by the letters of Constantine after his victory, persecuted Christians and confiscated their property. So, the story of Lycurgus would thus serve as a parallel for these historic events: Licinius being the evil Lycurgus and Constantine the victor and the saviour (Harden 1987: 249). A small detail suggests a specific relation between Dionysus and Lycurgus. If the gesture made

by Lycurgus is indeed a Roman imperial gesture, than both the figures make gestures characteristic of Roman emperors. In the parallel visualizations of the Lycurgus myth, this gesture was often made by Dionysus, but never by Lycurgus. Moreover, Constantine in his imperial propaganda applied images of pagan gods. In 325, a year after the victory over Licinius, a coin depicting Constantine as Jupiter was minted. The same coin due to the presence of a panther relates him to Dionysus and the god's eastern victories and through this symbol Constantine extends his power to the east (Key Fowden 2005: 390f). Therefore, a political symbolism of the cup is not impossible.

CONCLUSIONS

The interpretation of the symbolism of the Lycurgus cup depends highly on its original application: as a cup, libation bowl, lamp or even allegorical representation of Constantine's victory. All the theories presented above must remain merely hypothetical. The cup belonged to the Rothschild family from the middle of the 19th century. Shortly before it was acquired by Lord Rothschild, it was mentioned in a French article, but nothing is known of the cup's history before that (Harden and Toynbee 1959: 179). It is thus deprived of any archaeological context, which makes it impossible to understand fully the meaning of the Lycurgus cup. It is certain though that the Lycurgus cup was a very precious and unique object that could have belonged to an emperor or someone from the Roman upper class. The complexity of the Dionysian symbolism of the cup favours the theory that it was used in some kind of Dionysian rites at feasts. It is also certain that among the preserved renderings of the death of Lycurgus the iconography of the Rothschild cup is unparalleled.

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