

THE SPHINX ON THE ROOF: THE MEANING OF THE GREEK TEMPLE ACROTERIA

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In the Archaic period, from the end of the seventh and above all in the sixth century BC, sphinxes are ubiquitous in the figured decoration of Greek temples. They appear not only as acroteria, but also on antefixes and simas. As acroteria, they always occur as lateral versions, flanking the central acroterion at a distance. Although these figures have recently been the subject of several exhaustive studies, their significance remains a matter of debate. In the absence of explicit texts, the only means of comprehending their meaning is by examining the combinations of figures in which the sphinx makes an appearance. It is their association in three-part or heraldic compositions with a central vegetal or floral motif which provides the key to the explanation. This group is similar to that known in the Levant in which two sphinxes flank a 'Tree of Life', a group which the Old Testament texts allow us to identify as the cherubim guarding the Tree of Life of Genesis 3.24. This group was transmitted to Cyprus and to the Aegean world without losing its meaning. A series of documents allows us to verify that the 'extended' group of acroteria that we are concerned with has not lost its symbolic value by comparison with the 'compact' group known particularly from Archaic Greek vase-painting. An explanation in terms of eschatological ends and aspirations also permits us to interpret the other associations of the sphinx – with gorgons, with horsemen and with 'Nike' figures.

INTRODUCTION

'It is remarkable that the investigation of the uses of figural representation in Greek sacred architecture is not one of the main areas of the present-day scholarship.'

(Marconi 2007, p. 1).

Jean Marcadé once complained that archaeologists had neglected acroteria (Marcadé 1993, 3).¹ The reasons for this disregard can be understood. Labelled with an ambiguous status between architecture and sculpture, they interest few specialists of either discipline. Moreover, they are more often than not reduced to small scraps, making their restoration and consequent study difficult. Claude Rolley chose to place on the cover of his *La sculpture grecque* the attractive head of a terracotta sphinx in the Louvre, an acroterion from Thebes (Fig. 1), but in his chapters dedicated to architectural sculpture acroteria are generally ignored. In the field of architecture, in volume 2 of the dictionary of R. Martin and R. Ginouvès, three very short paragraphs, unillustrated, are devoted to them (Martin and Ginouvès 1992, 131–2). M.-Chr. Hellmann's fine handbook is an exception, with her lengthy discussion of the decoration of temples, their polychromy and roofing (Hellmann 2002, 194–228, 229–62, 264–326). Neither of these works, however, questions the meaning of the figured motifs. True, the task might seem difficult, if not pointless. These figures do indeed appear both abundant and disparate. G. Gruben felt that they gave free rein to unrestrained fantasy ('eine ungehemmte Phantasie');² coming from such an erudite pen, the sentence may deter the search for rational explanation. So one may be tempted to give up any attempt towards interpretation, as implicitly suggest by W. Burkert: 'It is difficult to say anything in general about the iconography in temple ornamentation, be it friezes,

¹ I am very grateful to Alan Johnston for having translated the French text of this paper.

² Gruben 2001, 9: 'Und vollends bei den "Akroteren", die First und Seiten der Giebel krönen, ergeht sich eine ungehemmte Phantasie'.



Fig. 1. Sphinx acroterion in the Louvre (from Thebes). After Danner 1989, pl. 15, no. 138.

pediments, or acroteria' (Burkert 1988, 34). Marcadé's wish has however been granted by P. Danner, who has dedicated three volumes to the subject (Danner 1989; 1996; 1997). Besides a full *catalogue raisonné*, he puts forward interpretations for every figure depicted, and I will return to these.³ On the other hand we still have to await the full consideration that the rest of the temple decoration deserves; one can only join in C. Marconi's puzzlement, noted in the epigraph, since temple decoration would seem to be a candidate for providing direct evidence for the religious beliefs of the Greeks. With the exception of the pioneering works of M.-F. Billot, it is only recently that two publications have treated the question, those of N. Winter (2005) and S. Roland (2008). Despite the belated interest in the subject witnessed by these works, the various interpretations put forward in them remain nonetheless on the cautious side of logical possibility, for reasons to be developed below.

The origins of plastic decoration on the uppermost parts of Greek temples can be placed in Aetolia in the second half of the seventh century.⁴ We have there a major innovation, destined for a splendid future.⁵ At first it was confined to raking and lateral simas and to antefixes, but from the end of the seventh century such terracotta decoration appeared in the round at the angles of the roof ('acroteria'). In the early period we see disc acroteria decorated with geometric ornament and stylised vegetal motifs from the late seventh century (Danner 1989, 33), floral motifs with palmettes and volutes from the late seventh century as well (Danner 1989, 36), gorgons from the second quarter of the sixth century (Danner 1989, 42), and 'Nike' figures from c.525 (Danner 1989, 42). Here I propose to examine this figured decoration, approaching it through one of the most frequent types, especially in the Archaic period, the sphinx.

³ See the review by Gros 1991.

⁴ The long-held belief, based on textual evidence, that it was a Corinthian invention, must now be reviewed in the light of the evidence for an attribution to an 'Aetolian workshop' (Winter 2005, 110–11).

⁵ Marconi 2007, 8: '... one is tempted to speak of a revolution in Greek sacred architecture around 630–600 ...'.

Among the figures it is indeed one of the most frequent and earliest. As an acroterion it probably appeared as early as the late seventh century, although it is not surely attested until the second quarter of the sixth (Danner 1989, 46). Its floruit began around 560–550, and the phenomenon, a panhellenic one,⁶ lasted till the end of the century. Moreover the sphinx is omnipresent, in a variety of forms, in Archaic Greek sanctuaries (Marconi 2007, 90). On the temple it is found in a variety of places, whether merely painted or in terracotta or stone. Therefore the motif is a good point of departure from which to approach the full range of figured decoration of Greek temples. Its chosen angle of attack once decided, the present study cannot, however, overlook the other representations accompanying the sphinx on temple roofs, for the clear reason that an iconographic motif cannot be explained without its being placed in archaeological and symbolic context; it is surely on this matter that the works cited above leave something to be desired.⁷ True, the need to pass from the ‘analytical formalism’ of nineteenth century German *Ornamentik* to an interpretative and ‘synthetic’ formalism is clearly visible in all these studies,⁸ but if one admits the semantic relationship between these different figures, that passage must be engendered through the analysis of iconographic groupings or ‘constellations of symbols’ in which the individual motif appears.⁹ I do not here intend to present a full catalogue of sphinxes on temples and their various associated figures, since the work has been done by authors of merit.¹⁰ I hope it is enough to sketch the broad outlines and stress certain aspects.

I. SPHINXES ON THE ROOF

A. Lateral acroteria

An essential observation is to be made at once: although common as a lateral (corner or side) acroterion the sphinx is virtually absent as a central acroterion.¹¹ Apart from a vase representation from Taranto (Danner 1997, pl. 37:4), the only exception is perhaps at Prinias, c.630 BC, where some would restore two heraldic sphinxes as a central acroterion; while the reconstruction is far from certain (Rolley 1994, fig. 107; Roland 2008, 25 with fig. 8), this early building is in many respects exceptional in the history of Greek architecture, with the decoration concentrated at orthostate level, and thereby shown to be in a Near Eastern tradition (Marconi 2007, 6–7). However, at the corners, with body mostly in profile towards the outside and head turned ninety degrees to the spectator,¹² the sphinx accounts for the majority of acroteria both in mainland Greece (Winter 2005, 37 and 50) and in the West Greek world.¹³

While the state of preservation of acroteria is indeed often lamentable and fragments do not always permit certain identification of the relevant creature, many excavated wing fragments belong to sphinxes (Marconi 2007, 60 and 90). At Calydon on the *Löwensimen-Dach* (Winter 2005, 128–30 [550–540 BC]; Roland 2008, 101–6, figs. 85, 88–90, 94, 96 [580–570 BC]) and the *Blassgelbes Dach*, between 580 and 540 BC (Winter 2005, 125–8 [550–540 BC]; Roland 2008, 94–7, figs. 69–70 [580–570 BC]; Marconi 2007, 219), the corner acroteria are unmistakable; they

⁶ Marconi 2007, 90: ‘The appearance of a sphinx on a frieze is not surprising in the sixth century, for it is then that the representation of this monster in temple decoration reaches its peak of popularity.’ Cf. also Marconi 2007, 16, 89–90: ‘Such sphinxes, both in stone and terracotta, were common acroteria from the beginning of the century across the Greek world’; Winter 2009a, 65 with figs. 8–9.

⁷ For other reasons, P. Gros (1991) notes some deficiencies in the interpretation of these figures.

⁸ On these concepts, see Sauron 1982, 700–1.

⁹ For this methodological principle: Petit 2011, 12–8.

¹⁰ For all possible combinations: Danner 1989, 61. See also Danner 1997; Winter 2005; Marconi 2007.

¹¹ Danner 1997, 139: ‘Tiere und Mischwesen, vor allem Löwen und Sphingen, sind eine der am häufigsten vorkommenden Akrotergattungen, die in zahlreichen Orten Siziliens und Großgriechenlands nachgewiesen ist’; Danner 1997, 137: ‘Tiere und Mischwesen waren zum überwiegenden Teil Seitenakrotere’. Cf. Danner 1997, 146–7 and Marconi 2007, 90.

¹² Danner 1989, 20–2; 1997, 112 (there is no sure example of a sphinx with lengthwise head).

¹³ For a list of sphinx acroteria in the Western Greek world and in the Italian peninsula, see Winter 2009b, 69–71.

are polychrome sphinxes, with female heads decorated with a diadem and floral motifs. Apollonion A at Syracuse (first half of the sixth century),¹⁴ as well as temple B at Molino a Vento, Gela (mid-sixth century), also bear sphinxes as corner acroteria (Marconi 2007, 58–60; Ferrara 2009, 464–7). Probably so too did the two successive temples at Thermos, of c.630 (Roland 2008, 41, fig. 18)¹⁵ and c.540 (Roland 2008, 45, fig. 26; Winter 2005, 130–2, figs. 54–6). From 560, sphinxes feature regularly as corner acroteria on the treasuries at Olympia (Marconi 2007, 17).¹⁶ We find them at the temple of Apollo at Corinth around 550–540 (Winter 2005, 26). At Megara Hyblaea a wing fragment was found which perhaps belonged to a sphinx from the second phase of temple A, c.510–500 (Marconi 2007, 56). Sphinx acroteria are also found at Larisa-on-Hermos, on Athena temple II, c.540–530 (Danner 1989, 21 nos. 134–5; Marconi 2007, 21), and on Aegina at the Aphaia temple, c.500 (Danner 1989, 21, no. 123). Our hybrids proliferate on temple roofs in Western Greece and Etruria: Agrigento (Danner 1997, no. A38), Caulonia (Danner 1997, no. A50), probably Cerveteri (Rizzo 2009, 137–9 with fig. 1 [c.530], cf. also figs. 2–3 [Omobono]), Monte San Mauro (Danner 1997, no. A63), Paestum (Danner 1997, no. A70), Naxos (Danner 1997, no. A66), Syracuse (Danner 1997, nos. A73, A74, A75), Veio-Portonaccio (Michetti 2009, 98, fig. 5; Maras 2009, 108, fig. 1; Carlucci 2009, 124, figs. 22a–23 [reconstruction attempt]), and Vibio Valentia (Danner 1997, no. A80), etc.¹⁷

Given the state of preservation of most temples, it is no surprise to find it difficult to restore the appearance of their upper facades, and *a fortiori* their decoration. So it is often impossible to determine with what other figured representation the corner sphinx acroteria were associated. However, in some cases one can reconstruct the whole facade, acroteria included, even if sometimes conjecture is involved.

B. Sphinx acroteria in combinations

1) *Sphinx and floral ridge acroterion*

Among the oldest combinations of these motifs, we find in mainland Greece initially florals for all three acroteria, then a heraldic grouping of gorgon flanked by sphinxes, then immediately after lateral sphinxes and a floral central acroterion.¹⁸ In West Greece central acroteria with volutes can be combined with various corner acroteria, often volutes as well (Danner 1997, 137), but also sphinxes. In the Greek world overall it is the latter combination that seems to have been most popular throughout the sixth century (Danner 1989, 61–2, 73–4; 1997, 151; Billot 1993, 51), in particular between 540 and 480, but then it seems to disappear in the early fifth century (Danner 1989, 61; Billot 1993, 53; Danner 1997, 137).¹⁹ Most often the vegetal motif is in stylised form (Danner 1989, 10–6; 1997, 14–24); in the late seventh and sixth century they are usually discs with floral motifs such as the lotus (Fig. 2).²⁰ From the sixth century discs are replaced by palmette and volute acroteria, either simple or superimposed (Fig. 3), and the disc acroterion almost disappears in the fifth century (Danner 1989, 34–5). These ridge palmettes progress to increasingly naturalistic forms, to the point of incorporating an acanthus leaf in the

¹⁴ Marconi 2007, 53–4 (date and assignment are uncertain).

¹⁵ No sphinx is mentioned in Roland 2008, 41, contrary to fig. 18; but it is supposed (p. 44) that the second roof showed the same pattern as the first ('... the system of decoration followed rather closely the pattern set by the 7th century BCE temple').

¹⁶ Only one might be dated before 560.

¹⁷ Danner 1997, 25–37. The paws which show the claw of a lion were taken by the author to be of either a sphinx or a lion; in view of the statistical ratio of sphinxes and lions in well-attested material these paws are far more likely to belong to a sphinx; the same would apply to nos. A39, A40, A41, A42, A45, A46, A47, A48 (Gela), A51 (Leontini), A52 (Locri), A55, A56, A57 (Megara Hyblaea), A77, A79 (Syracuse).

¹⁸ Danner 1989, 62, 61 table: 'Die älteste Kombinationen sind die von Mittel- und Eckvoluten sowie von Gorgonen und Sphingen, die bereits in der ersten Hälfte des 6. Jahrhunderts nachweisbar sind.'

¹⁹ It is already known around 550 BC in Vaglio (Basilicate): Greco 2009, 365, figs. 8 and 18, 370 with fig. 17.

²⁰ See, for example, Danner 1989, 73, pl. 2, fig. 2, no. 24; Winter 2005, 6, 101–4, 134, 246–7, 262, 296. Danner 1997, 146: 'In der Architektur des Mutterlandes und der Ägäis sind Akrotere seit dem 2. Hälfte des 7. Jhs. nachgewiesen. Die ältesten Typen sind die Scheiben- und die Volutenakrotere.'

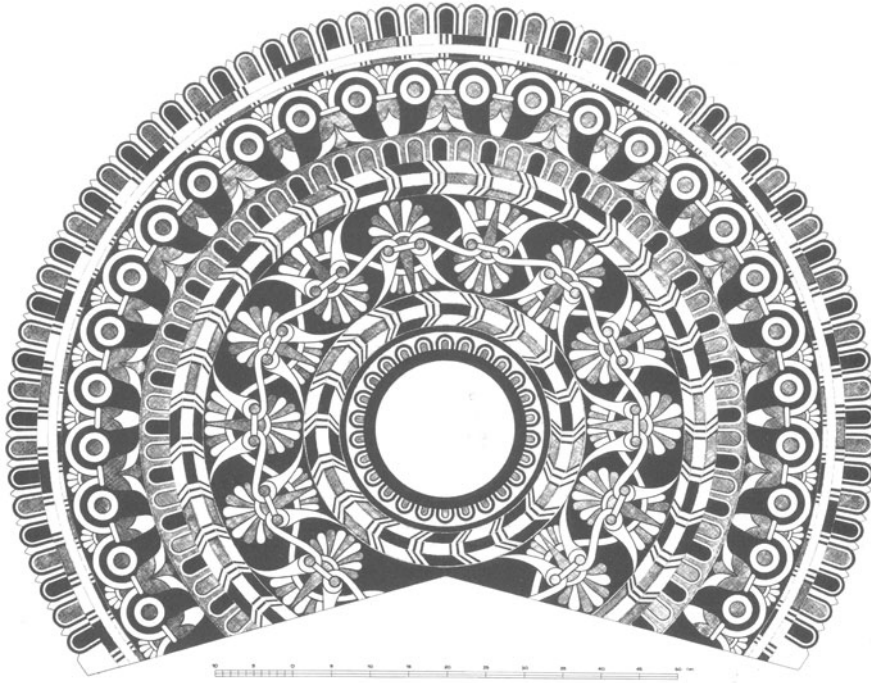


Fig. 2. Central disc acroterion (Olympia). After Danner 1989, pl. 2, no. 24.

fifth century.²¹ It is on Aegina between 510 and 480 that M.-Fr. Billot suggests we should seek the origins of the ridge acroterion in the form of an anthemion with volutes and acanthus. It is then found at Sounion, c.440. It is worth noting that this composition in lyre form appears also on Attic funerary stelai.²² The palmette acroterion or anthemion, one must remember, is an omnipresent, nigh on obsessive, motif found on various parts of the roofs of temples and other sanctuary buildings, in particular on antefixes and simas (for example, Roland 2008, figs. 73–77; Winter 2005, 24–5). Among innumerable examples one can cite those at Olympia on the treasuries of Byzantium, c.540–530, and Megara, c.510–500 (Winter 2005, 59–60), and at Corinth on the Apollo temple, c.540–530. It is regularly combined with the lotus.

G. Gruben restores the combination of sphinxes as corner acroteria and floral central acroterion on Naxos, on the Demeter temple at Sangri (Gruben 1997, 263, fig. 1) and the fourth temple of Dionysos at Hyria, c.580–550 (Gruben 1997, 265, fig. 2b); it is also found on temple C at Selinus (first half of the sixth century) (Fig. 4),²³ the Athena temple at Assos (c.540–530)²⁴ and the temple of Apollo and the Thearion on Aegina, late sixth century (Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 309 fig. V 21; Belli Pasqua 2009, 142 fig. 8) (Fig. 5), as well as the second Aphaea temple, c.500 (Danner 1989, 21 no. 123, 61; Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 309 fig. VI 24; Belli Pasqua 2009, 145 fig. 10), the temple of Apollo at Cyrene, c.500 (Danner 1989, 86)

²¹ Danner 1989, 73–4 ('Die Entwicklung der pflanzlichen Akrotere führt von einer "abstrakten Ornamentik der Voluten und Palmetten" zu einer stärker an der Natur orientierten Form.');

Danner 1997, 146 ('Die Voluten-Mittelakrotere entwickelten sich von einfachen Voluten, die mit Palmetten verbunden waren, seit archaischer Zeit zu mehrgliedrigen pflanzlichen Gebilden'). Cf. Winter 2005, 172, 177–8, 218; Billot 1993, 51 and 53. For the Parthenon, see Berger 1980, 67 nos. 15 and 77, figs. 10–1.

²² Billot 1993, 40–2, figs. 1–3, 6–8; for acanthus on funerary stelai, see Oakley 2004, 191–203.

²³ Marconi 2007, 129 fig. 64: two sphinxes as corner acroteria and a simple Greek palmette as central acroterion (cf. Marconi 2007, 132).

²⁴ Danner 1989, 21, no. 123; Marconi 2007, 26, fig. 9 shows griffins as corner acroteria (wrongly according to the author); likewise in Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 251, fig. V 70. For a correct reconstruction: Westcoat 2012, figs. 13–15.

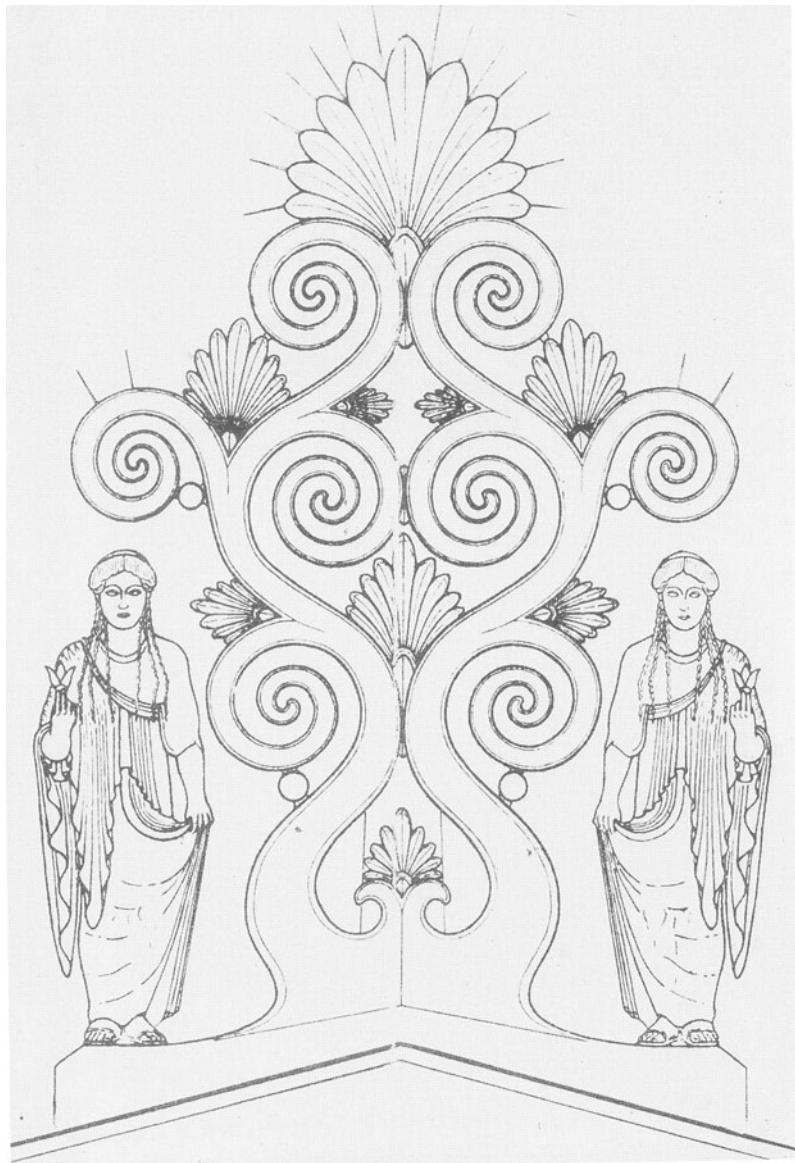


Fig. 3. Central acroterion with volutes (Delphi, Treasury of the Athenians). After Danner 1989, pl. 5, no. 173.

and the Delion on Paros, c.490–480 (Danner 1989, 22 no. 137; Billot 1993, 43; Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 329 fig. VI 41; Belli Pasqua 2009, 144 fig. 9) (Fig. 6). There are also representations on vases which show temples bearing a similar combination, and which doubtless refer to actual buildings (Danner 1989, 61–2; 1997, 137, pl. 36:1 and 4 [nos. F25 and F32]).

2) *Sphinxes and rider*

The group of horse and rider as a ridge acroterion is typical of West Greece (Marconi 2007, 45–8 and nn. 52, 59; Moustaka 2009, 69–70). Perhaps created in Sicily, the motif appeared in the first half of the sixth century (Danner 1996, 106) and remained in common use till the end of the fifth (Marconi 2007, 45). It is first attested on the temple of Olympian Zeus at Syracuse, c.580–570 (Marconi 2007, 45) and at Gela as a ridge acroterion perhaps around 580 (Marconi 2007, 46; Ferrara 2009, 464–7). Subsequently it is found on temple A (of Artemis?) at Syracuse, c.570



Fig. 4. Restoration of the façade of temple C at Selinus. After Marconi 2007, 123 fig. 64.

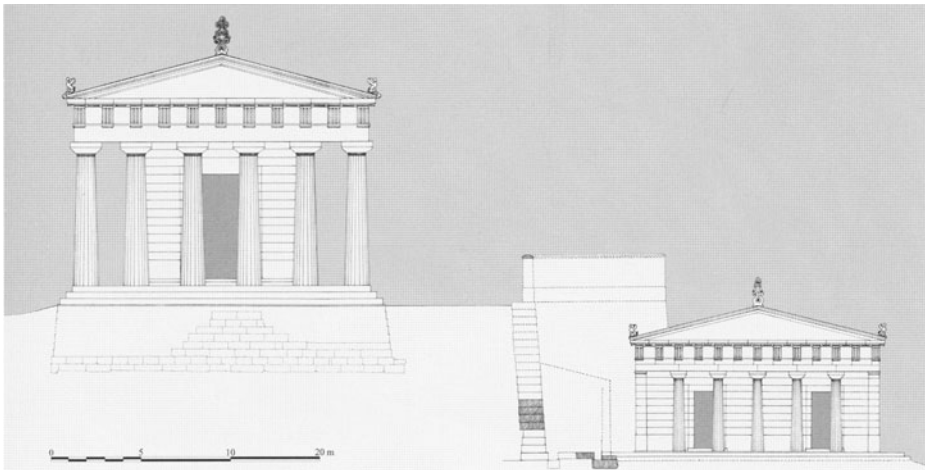


Fig. 5. Restoration of the temple of Apollo III and of the Thearion (Aegina). After Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 309, fig. VI.21.

(Marconi 2007, 52–4), at Kasmnai and Kamarina around 560–550 (Marconi 2007, 46 fig. 17; Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 259 fig. V 74) and at Akragas, Selinus and Himera towards the middle of the century (Marconi 2007, 46). It is frequently accompanied by two lateral sphinxes, as for example on different buildings at Molino a Vento, Gela (mid-sixth century?) (Marconi 2007, 46, 58–60).²⁵

²⁵ Marconi 2007, 41, 53–4, 59–60; Danner 1996, 106; 1997, 137: ‘Tiere und Mischwesen waren zum überwiegenden Teil Seitenakrotere. Sie waren wahrscheinlich mit Reiterkalypteren und Voluten-Mittelakroteren, vielleicht aber auch mit anderen Typen figürlicher Mittelakrotere verbunden.’

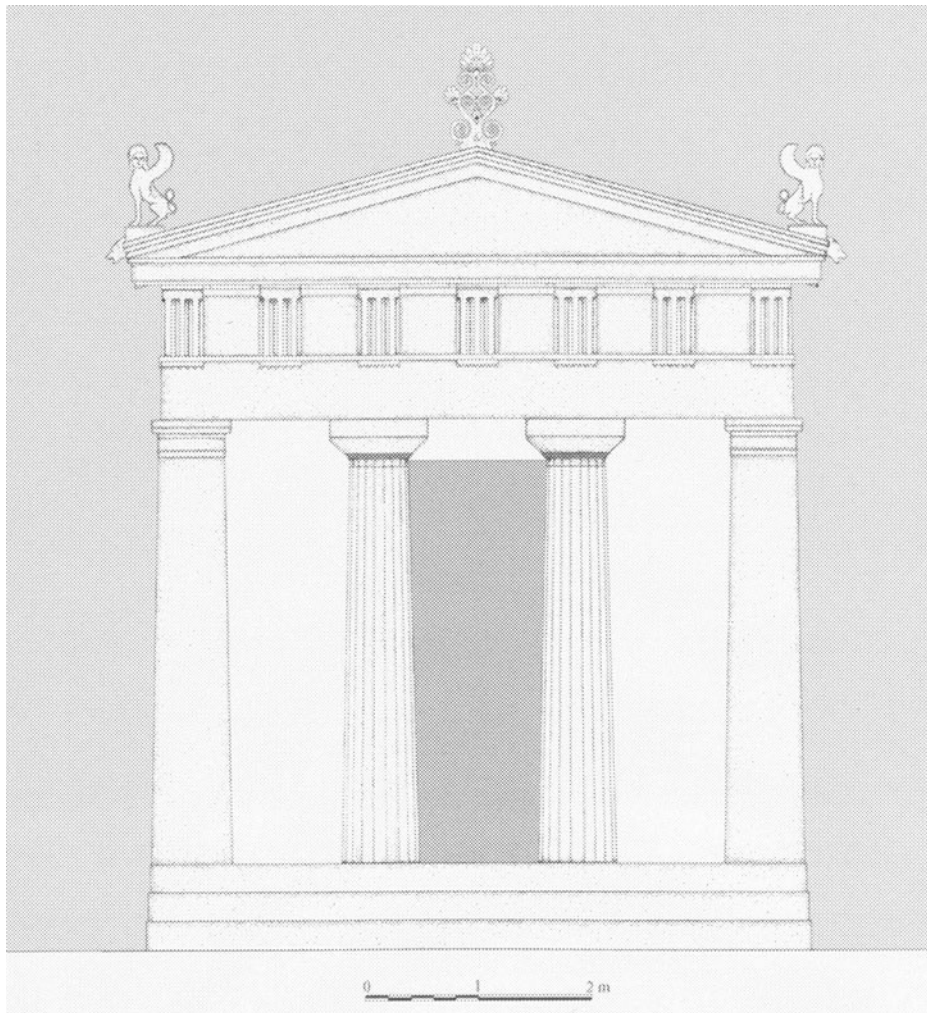


Fig. 6. Restoration of the temple of Artemis at the Delion on Paros. After Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 329 fig. VI.41.

South Italy also knew groups of a more baroque nature, combining in a single acroterion sphinx and rider. We see the hybrid literally carrying the rider on her back, or, more precisely, on her head and wings.²⁶ They are attested at Metaurus and Epizephyrian Locri, while the oldest is that from Paestum, c. 520 (Marconi 2007, 46; Danner 1997, 22 nos. A92–4, pl. 25:3–4, 124 for the dating). They appear at the corners while a floral motif commands the centre (Danner 1997, 137).

3) *Sphinxes and gorgon*

From the end of the seventh century the gorgon becomes a dominant motif in Greek sanctuaries (Marconi 2007, 214–15). Its popularity increases in the second quarter of the sixth century, and by 550 it becomes the normal form of decoration in a variety of places on the upper part of buildings (Marconi 2007, 216–7; Winter 2005, 110, 114, 123, 129, 137, 143 n. 30, 261–2, 279). It is found as an antefix on the temple of Hera on Corcyra, c. 600 (Marconi 2007, 215; Winter 2005, pl. 37), and the Oikos of the Naxians on Delos, c. 600–590 (Marconi 2007, 215), in metopes, as at Thermos c. 630–620 (Marconi, 2007, 215; Roland 2008, fig. 42), or centrally in a

²⁶ La Genière (1983, 165 with fig. 4) considers the group ‘mixobarbare’ (*sic*).

pediment, as on Apollonion A at Syracuse, c.590–580 (Marconi 2007, 41–2, fig. 16) and temple A (of Artemis?) at Syracuse c.570 (Marconi 2007, 53–4 with fig. 22), on Corcyra, c.580, and on the second temple of Apollo on Aegina, c.570–560 (Marconi 2007, 216). Of particular interest here is its appearance as a central acroterion. The first assured example would be the temple of Apollo Lyseios at Thermos, c.580–570, whose central acroterion was a disc gorgoneion (Roland 2008, 64 with fig. 48; Winter 2005, 114); it is also found on the temple of Herakles on Thasos, c.560 (Daux 1955, 368; Marconi 2007, 216). Calydon offers two probable, and seemingly contemporary, examples of the kneeling, running gorgon between two corner sphinxes, on the *Blassgelbes Dach*²⁷ and the *Löwensimen-Dach*, around 580–570;²⁸ the same format appears on the ‘H-temple’ on the Acropolis at Athens, c.570–565 (Marconi 2007, 216), and perhaps also on the second roof of temple C at Thermos, around 540.²⁹

In the Archaic period sphinxes predominate among corner acroteria on Greek temples,³⁰ although other associations are known in which different types appear, like winged females (Danner 1989, 61; 1997, 116–9), abduction scenes,³¹ horsemen (Danner 1997, 137; Marconi 2007, 46, 59) and floral motifs (Winter 2005, 35 [Corinthian system], 172 [Argive system], 206–7 [Attic system]).

C. Other sphinxes on temples

Sphinxes can also be found in many other places on sacred buildings. At Prinias, c.625, they appear as orthostates at the foot of the wall flanking the entrance of temple A (Hellmann 2006, 67–8 with fig. 79; Marconi 2007, 5; Roland 2008, fig. 8). They rapidly climb higher;³² one of the most striking examples, though of disputed interpretation, is the early sixth century ‘Hera head’ from Olympia, which, it has been argued, belongs to a sphinx from the pediment of the Hera temple.³³

Sphinxes can also be found in metopes, as perhaps on temple C at Thermos (end of seventh century) (Roland 2008, 62, no. A7) and on Apollonion A at Calydon, around 580–570.³⁴ On the temple of Athena at Assos, besides the sphinxes on the architrave and as corner acroteria, they appear heraldically positioned on the metopes (Marconi 2007, 27, cf. 90 and n. 34); the same goes for the little metopes (or Y metopes) at Selinus, c.550 (Marconi 2007, 89–90 with fig. 36, 120 for the dating); and a metope from Granmichele is similarly decorated (Marconi 2007, 90 with n. 37).

²⁷ Roland 2008, 93–4, fig. 68: the central acroterion is uncertain, but not the sphinxes. Marconi 2007, 10 n. 38, 125–8, 216; cf. Danner 1989, 86.

²⁸ Winter 2005, 128–9; Marconi 2007, 10 with n. 39; Roland 2008, figs. 88–90, 94–6, 103–4: it is dated to 580–570 (Roland 2008, 106) or in the first half of the sixth century BC (Roland 2008, 101). The description of the sphinx is not precise: it is uncertain whether the head is turned at 90°, as on Roland 2008, fig. 90, or lengthwise as on fig. 88. Cf. Danner 1989, 68; Aversa 2009, 104 figs. 25 and 27.

²⁹ Roland 2008, 44–5, with figs. 18, 26–27. Between the sphinxes, on the ridge, N.A. Winter (2005) reproduces a kneeling and running gorgon from a small fragment, but it is uncertain and controversial.

³⁰ Many authors remain reticent when faced with fragments of wings or female faces, as to whether these are sphinxes, ‘Nikai’ or, more generally, winged female creatures (Danner 1989, 61–2; for the faces, see Roland 2008, figs. 20, 64, 65, 78, 120, 122, 127, 128, etc.) However, when an identification can be made, normally it is a sphinx. So, for example, where Danner is undecided within his category of *Tiere und Mischwesen* between a lion and a sphinx, it is more often probably a sphinx (Danner 1997, nos. A38, A50, A63, A66, A70, A72, A73, A74, A80). Cf. Danner 1997, 137; Marconi 2007, 60 (many fragments of wings must belong to sphinxes). Although it is often shown with a ‘Nike’ or a gorgoneion as central acroterion and sphinxes as corner acroteria (Marconi 2009, 11; Sourvinou-Inwood 1979, 245–6; Floren 1987, 244–5; Lippolis, Livadiotti and Rocco 2007, 206 fig. V 25), the temple of the Alcmeonids in Delphi actually had three ‘Nikai’ (Danner 1989, 21 no. 128; Gruben 2001, 76).

³¹ Danner 1989, 62. Particularly an eagle kidnapping Ganymede: Danner 1997, 77–8. But they are also found as central acroteria as in Keos: see Ohnesorg 1993, 30, 88–95; 1994, 349–64.

³² Marconi 2007, 8: ‘... around 630–600 ... the entablature and the roof suddenly become the favourite areas for the figural decoration of temples. The figures seem thus to have been literally lifted up from the walls.’

³³ See, for instance, Rolley 1994, 177 with fig. 156; Marconi 2009, 4. According to Gruben (2001, 55), it is probably a relief, not a statue, showing a sphinx larger than life. For a reconstruction of the sphinx: Schröder 2011, 145 with fig. 13.

³⁴ Phase corresponding to the *Löwensimen-Dach*: Roland 2008, 110–1; Marconi 2009, 10.

At Monte San Mauro, c.570–560, two heraldic sphinxes face across a palmette; the panel is crowned by a *komast* scene.³⁵ Megara Hyblaea is said to have provided another such piece.³⁶

Sphinxes are also common on antefixes where they appear as confronted pairs: in Arcadia at Kotylon c.625 and at Bassai c.625 and again c.575–550 (Cooper 1990, 84 and 87 [on the ‘Laconian roof’]; Winter 2005, 123 and 142, pl. 57 left), at Delphi, 600–550 (Cooper 1990, 87 with figs. 19–20; Winter 2005, 123, 142; Marconi 2007, 16 with n. 80; Roland 2008, 139), at Corinth on a roof of Laconian type (Winter 2005, 142 and n. 27), and at Capua (Cooper 1990, 87). Though there is no motif between the pair the triple group is attested in at least an indirect manner, since in Arcadia, at Bassai and Kotylon, the two sphinxes are crowned by a stylised floral motif (Winter 2005, 142 and pl. 57; Kelly 1995, 252–3, fig. 12, 272 and figs. 19–20). On some antefixes they flank a female head of so-called ‘Daedalic’ type, because it wears the ‘layered wig’ typical of seventh century Greek sculpture. Such isolated protomes on antefixes are found frequently in Corinthian domains and in Aetolia, from the first Apollo temple at Thermos (630–620) to the first and second roofs of the Hera temple at ‘Mon Repos’, Corcyra (c.610 and c.600 respectively),³⁷ and at Calydon on the *Buntes Dach*, c.600–590 (Winter 2005, 120, pl. 43). It is in the following decades that they are flanked by sphinxes, as on Corcyra on the Corinthian roof at ‘Mon Repos’, c.580–570 (Roland 2008, 116 and n. 291, 137–8, fig. 129; Winter 2005, 122, pls. 44–5; cf. Billot 1990, 115) (Fig. 7). Several authors would take this female head to be an abbreviated sphinx. Thus S. Roland (2008, 96) remarks, ‘the female protome, which stylistically resembled the head of the sphinx from the lateral acroteria, would indeed have offered a partial visual repetition of the larger statues standing on the corners’. Also one may note that on the *Blassgelbes Dach* of Calydon the Daedalic heads bear an astonishing resemblance to the sphinx of the acroterion of temple A.³⁸

Thus presented, however, the reasoning cannot fail to surprise. Surely the image of sphinxes flanking a Daedalic head should rather run counter to the idea of the latter being a synecdoche

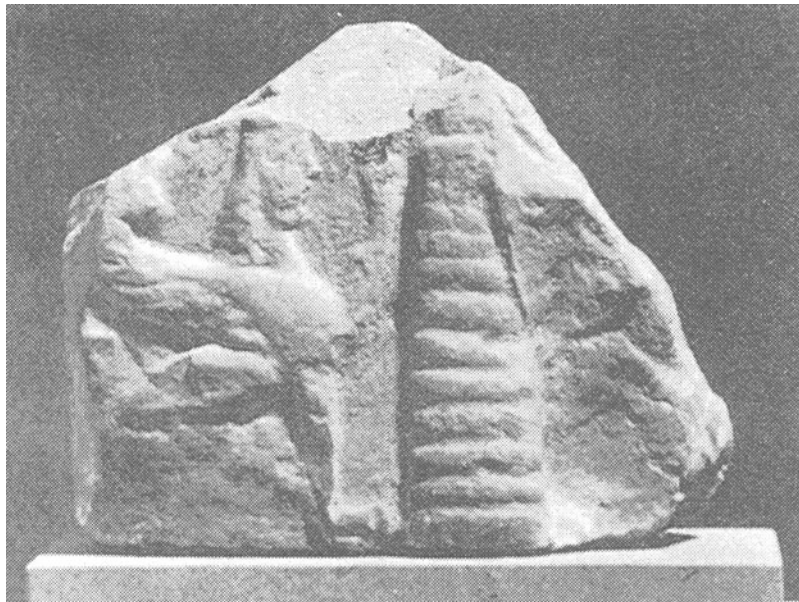


Fig. 7. Antefix from the temple at ‘Mon Repos’ (Corfu). After Winter 2005, pl. 45.

³⁵ Marconi 2007, 125–6 with fig. 60 (but according to Ghisellini [1982] it could be a votive plaque).

³⁶ Marconi (2007, 90 with n. 36) mentions the ‘phantom of a sphinx metope’.

³⁷ Thermos: Winter 2005, 114, fig. 12a and pls. 33–4; Corcyra: Winter 2005, 115 fig. 13a with pl. 36 (first roof), 118–9, pl. 42 (second roof).

³⁸ Winter 2005, 126, see also 123 and 112: ‘These heads, often crowned with a polos, could initially represent sphinxes which eventually evolve into lateral acroteria on some of these roofs beginning in the second quarter of the sixth century BC’.

of the former. N.A. Winter, nonetheless, sees no problem: the polos and the volutes ‘... might be thought of as attributes identifying the heads as sphinxes. Here the sphinx itself is actually represented in concrete form alongside the face’ (Winter 2005, 123). We will see later that another explanation is possible, even if it leads to a similar conclusion.³⁹

II. THE MEANING OF ACROTERIA

A. Current views

Questions have indeed been asked about the origin and significance of these figures called in to do decorative duty on Greek temples, and we will also address the issue in what follows. But before indulging in speculations on their meaning, one must first agree on whether they had one: for there is a strong temptation, in default of understanding them, to reduce them to a purely ‘decorative’ role with no further significance. Some have yielded to it, such as G. Gruben, cited above.⁴⁰ Most, however, refuse that easy exit, even if the interpretation of the figures remains controversial.⁴¹ P. Danner argues that the figures must have had a religious significance, though they cannot be linked to mythological sources (Danner 1989, 74).⁴²

Their meaning cannot either, it would seem, be deduced from any original architectural function, since it is not clear that acroteria originate in the decoration of fundamental parts of the architecture of roofs, as P. Danner would have it.⁴³ On the one hand, the view that the orders and their individual details are to be explained through petrification does not stand up to analysis (Barletta 2001, 137–8). On the other hand, even if those parts of the buildings decorated with these figures originally had a practical function, such a function is not of itself adequate to explain the presence of the figures. One may yet hope to find their meaning elsewhere. Some hypotheses have already been proposed.

1) *Psychoanalytical explanations*

Let us first remove from the list any psychoanalytical interpretation, as has been suggested recently. Sphinxes and gorgons would represent the ‘bad mother’, and Medusa the symbol of sexual desire between mother and child. These representations have been accorded a ritual role against mental distress or in the ‘exorcising of the demonic in art’ (cited by Danner [1989, 74–5 n. 295–300]). At best one can agree that such an explanation is not incompatible with the others; at worst one must object that it is a symptom of the intellectual fashion of the time, devoid of any archaeological or historical basis.

2) *The ‘effect of meaning’: creating liminal space and sacred space*

Without always defining the specific meaning of these figures, several authors agree with the notion that they instil, at least, an ‘effect of meaning’.⁴⁴ C. Marconi considers the sanctuary a bridge

³⁹ M. Mertens-Horn suggests that these antefixes may be derived from a cult where masks were worn for a chthonian Artemis, as in Sparta in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia (Mertens-Horn 1978, 63; cf. Roland 2008, 151–2). Yet, referring to the Apollo temple at Thermos, she has to conclude that the heads had lost their original meaning to become mere roof decoration, an argument that poses substantial methodological problems.

⁴⁰ Gruben 2001, 9; see also the opinion of E. Langlotz in Danner 1996, 104, cited below, about the riders.

⁴¹ Danner 1989, 74: ‘Die Gorgonen, Sphingen, Tiere, Amazonen und die als Mittelakrotere dienenden Niken, die mit Sphingen als Seitenakroteren kombiniert sind, können zur Gruppe der dämonischen Wesen und Sagengestalten zusammengefaßt werden. Die Bedeutung der dämonischen Wesen die mit Ausnahmen der archaischen Zeit angehören ist umstritten.’

⁴² Danner 1997, 152: ‘Das [the diversity of acroteria in Western Greece] zeigt, daß die Auswahl der bekrönenden Elemente in stärkerem Ausmaß durch religiöse Vorstellungen bestimmt war.’

⁴³ Danner 1997, 151: ‘Die griechische Akrotere haben ihren Ursprung in der Verzierung von konstruktiv notwendigen Teilen der Dachkonstruktion’.

⁴⁴ On this concept, see Arasse 1993, 60 and Marin 2006.

between the terrestrial world and the other, and that temple decoration should allow this liminal function to be instilled into the mind (Marconi 2007, 28). Also, according to W. Burkert, the monsters and beasts of prey would emit ‘the idea of liminality’ (Burkert 1988, 34). This concept, borrowed from social anthropology, can be productive; but one would still have to establish, on the base of iconographic or textual evidence, the relationship between the figures and the message being delivered, that is the symbolic process which makes that relationship possible, or to enter as evidence parallel examples in other civilisations. Demonstration is still required.

3) *An apotropaic function*

These creatures, who scrutinised the visitor from the corners of the roof, have often been taken as ‘guardians’,⁴⁵ a function also often assigned to their homologues on funerary stelai and in triple groups (Petit 2011, *passim*, esp. 31, 34, 54 n. 345, 59 with n. 376, 106–7 with n. 1201, 174 with n. 1248, 212–8; see also Winter 2009b, 69). But what were they thought to guard? Against what? Some would see in them apotropaic figures whose function was to protect the temple.⁴⁶ (We shall see below that a similar explanation has been invoked to account for the presence of the horseman.) P. Danner and C. Marconi, however, doubt this interpretation; and one can indeed wonder with them in what respect the deity residing in the temple would need such protection.⁴⁷ One cannot but get the impression that the apotropaic interpretation is too general, a form of default solution in lieu of a more precise and convincing explanation.

However, Marconi, even though he was not inclined to accept it, proposed one which is closely linked to it. He suggests that these monsters could have been used to arouse respectful awe among the worshippers: for example, the central gorgons and the flanking sphinxes on the roof would have created a *mysterium tremendum* in the viewer.⁴⁸ Even here, though, a reasoned argument is lacking and several objections come to mind. For example, if it is true that the appearance of gorgons is none too pleasant, the sweet smile of female sphinxes, like that in the Louvre (Fig. 1)⁴⁹ or those from Calydon (Roland 2008, figs. 70 and 90), do not seem designed to arouse such fear (*cf.* Schröder 2011, 148).

4) *Death demons*

Since sphinxes and other hybrids which decorate sanctuaries are also represented in funerary contexts, some have chosen to see in them death demons, who would have been tamed by the deity with whom they are associated. It is that deity’s protection for which one should pray against the baleful forces symbolised by the monsters.⁵⁰ As T. Schröder (2011, 163) has observed, however, the concept lacks precision.

⁴⁵ Gruben 2001, 9: ‘Gorgonen, Sphingen, geflügelte Gestalten, verschlungene Märchenbäume sitzen als Wächter auf dem Giebel an allen vier Ecken des Dachrandes’; Schröder 2011, 147.

⁴⁶ Marconi 2007, 89–90: ‘The sphinx was thus a constant presence in Archaic sanctuaries, but its meaning is disputed. Some regard it as an “apotropaic” figure.’ See Danner 1989, 74 with n. 290: ‘Den Gorgonen, Sphingen und Löwen in architektonischer Verwendung wurde vielfach eine apotropäische Bedeutung im Sinn der Abwehr von bösen Geistern oder frevelnden Menschen zuerkannt.’

⁴⁷ Danner 1989, 74; Marconi 2007, 216 (‘That Greek temples needed “apotropaic” protection to avert supernatural attacks seems unlikely’).

⁴⁸ Marconi 2007, 222 (‘They are part of an aggressive attempt to transform the viewers, increasing their sense of *mysterium tremendum* upon their encounter with the sacred’) and 215 (‘[they would be there] to induce in the worshipper a sense of anxiety, fear, and terror’). On the concept of *mysterium tremendum*, see Otto 1929, 15.

⁴⁹ See the cover of Rolley 1994 (and fig. 13), or Danner 1989, no. 138, pl. 15 (maybe from Thebes).

⁵⁰ Danner 1989, 75: ‘Daraus geht hervor, daß die dämonischen Wesen der Macht der Gottheit unterworfen sind, was der Folge bedeutet, daß “das Geschehen in der tödlichen dämonischen Kräften durchdrungen Natur . . . als von Göttern beherrscht empfunden wurde” . . . Die Darstellungen dämonischer Wesen sind “zeitlose Zustandbilder” von Todesdämonen, die einer Gottheit untertan sind und für die Menschen der archaischen Zeit “keine Symbole für die lebensbedrohenden Mächte, sondern . . . lebendige . . . Wirklichkeit” waren.’

5) *Tamed nature*

P. Danner believes that sphinxes, ‘Nikai’ or female figures in heraldic groups, as well as floral acroteria, represent tamed nature (see also Winkler-Horaček 2000, 23–8; 2011). He would see an indication of this in the fact that they appear on temples dedicated to Artemis, Athena, Hera and Apollo, deities that are represented in Greek art as master or mistress of animals and monsters.⁵¹ Firstly, if such a connection can be valid for Artemis, to extend it to Hera, Apollo and especially Athena requires a more fully argued demonstration. Moreover one cannot *ipso facto* characterise as ‘master or mistress of ...’ every figure or motif heraldically flanked by two facing motifs. It would be just as possible to see in the figured motifs which accompany deities attributes which determine their character or beings that serve them, rather than the symbol of the forces which they control. It is perhaps as ill-considered to qualify a deity as ‘mistress of monsters’ as to designate as ‘mistress of branches’ a *Rankengöttin* holding a branch in each hand (see, for instance, Petit 2011, 190–1 with fig. 178), or even term the Athena Parthenos of Pheidias as ‘mistress of Nike’ (except metaphorically), on the grounds that she carries a winged Nike on her right hand (Petit 2011, 39). In this vein, why not interpret the floral of the triple groups, flanked by sphinxes, as a ‘master of sphinxes’? The goddess on a bronze mirror handle of c.500 from Taranto who carries two heraldic sphinxes on her shoulders and offers a third on her right hand (Fig. 8), does not appear to have subdued them by violent constraint (Demisch 1997, fig. 271; Delivorrias, Berger-Doer and Kossatz 1984, no. 81; Petit 2011, 191 fig. 179). It is therefore wiser to see in the hybrids perched on the roofs ‘an attribute of the god of the sanctuary’, as C. Marconi suggests (Marconi 2007, 89–90; cf. Danner 1989, 74).

6) *Hypostases*

Several authors who refused to discern any association with domination or taming have suggested that these figures represent entities that are not hostile and then tamed by the deity, but simply placed in their service. C. Marconi notes that from the first half of the sixth century the creatures seem to play a role previously played by the deities themselves (Marconi 2007, 215), which would confirm their dependent relationship. According to P. Danner, these *Todesdämonen* would in some way be subservient to the deity, being his or her ‘satellites’ (*Trabanten*).⁵² Though not using the word, these authors identify the figures as ‘hypostases’ of the deity, in the sense given to the word by many writers:⁵³ it refers to a ‘divine being, most often semi-independent, who more or less fully incarnates a quality or an attribute of a deity of higher rank’ (Ringgren cited in Winter 1983, 508–9). The Taranto mirror handle cited above would illustrate this relationship between the hybrids and the deity⁵⁴ in the same way as the ‘Nike’ on the Parthenos’ right hand. The present author has supported this view in a recent book (Petit 2011, 37–9, 45–6, 80–1, 192–4, 232–3). Such a concept would allow us to reconsider the ‘Daedalic’ heads flanked by sphinxes on some Archaic antefixes (Fig. 7). The striking formal similarity between the central head and those of the flanking sphinxes was noted above, leading to the conclusion that the former was an abbreviation of the latter. However, the fact that one motif is surrounded by two others would argue against any simple identification of the two different entities represented. Rather, if we take the lateral figures as hypostases of the central being, a better explanation becomes available as to why they share the visual appearance of the goddess whom they serve: it would be a way of marking the close dependence, of showing how the

⁵¹ Danner 1989, 74: ‘... der Schlüssel zur Erfassung der Bedeutung [liegt] in der Verbindung mit dämonischen Wesen und in späteren Zeit mit weiblichen Figuren zu einer Wappenkomposition und in der fast ausschließlichen Beschränkung auf Tempel der Gottheiten Artemis, Athena, Hera und Apollon. Die pflanzlichen Ornamenten verkörpern ebenso wie die dämonischen Wesen den Bereich der von Göttern beherrschten Natur’; Danner 1989, 75: ‘Während Sphingen und Löwen die Herrin bzw. den Herrn der Tiere flankieren ...’.

⁵² Danner 1989, 74: ‘Die Tiere und Mischwesen, die die Gottheit flankieren, wurden als Attribute oder Trabanten einer Gottheit bezeichnet’.

⁵³ For this concept and its definition, see Petit 2011, 37 with n. 215–8.

⁵⁴ On this object and its interpretation, see Petit 2011, 192–4.



Fig. 8. Bronze mirror handle (Taranto). After Petit 2011, fig. 179.

ancillary being ‘shares the essence of a deity, who can thus be actively present in the world, without its essence being worn away in the action of this hypostasis’.⁵⁵ This hypothesis is not contradicted by the presence of such a head flanked by sphinxes on the temple of Artemis on Corcyra (Marconi 2007, 121–2, pls. 44–5). It constitutes to my mind a necessary point of departure; however, it explains only the nature, not the function of the hybrids on temple roofs. We must therefore take the analysis further forward, and try to determine the role assigned to them here.

B. The combinations and a suggestion

To achieve this we must return to the combinations of motifs in which the hybrid is inserted. First we have to show that the figures here in question, those that decorate Greek temples, have an

⁵⁵ Pfeiffer cited in Winter 1983, 508–9. Cf. a similar idea in Simon 1962, 779, apropos of Erotes and griffins accompanying Nemesis, in whom she would see the ‘Diener der Nemesis’ or ‘die Repräsentantin der Macht der Nemesis’.

interactive relationship, in other words that they possess a reciprocal symbolic relationship, one that is agglutinative, not ‘autistic’.⁵⁶ The matter is not self-evident, since according to E. Langlotz the horsemen were ‘völlig sinnlos und nur des Schmuckes halber ...’ (E. Langlotz, cited in Danner 1996, 104); similarly P. Danner considers that the floral acroteria spring from a purely ornamental conception,⁵⁷ and were simply ‘durch eine parataktische Aneinanderreihung in einer festgelegten Folge verbunden’;⁵⁸ the change from a paratactic composition to a functional combination would only have come about in the second half of the sixth century (Danner 1989, 63). Thus the floral acroteria (volutes and palmettes) would have evolved from abstract to concrete (or to realism) and by being placed in a heraldic or triple schema would have acquired a kind of *autonomen Bildcharakter*. While the meaning of this formulation remains somewhat elusive, we can agree, along with the author, that one must analyse the motifs in their associations. When, however, it comes to ‘figures’ (motifs other than floral: Danner 1989, 74), P. Danner admits that from the outset they form part of deliberate combinations. According to him, central and corner acroteria are ‘durch ein einheitliches Kompositionsschema verbunden’ (Danner 1989, 61). He makes the point that corner acroteria are associated with ridge acroteria by their bodily orientation.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, he gives no reason why floral acroteria should be excluded from such group analysis. One should therefore give due attention to the hypothesis that these too enjoy a symbolic relationship with the sphinxes or female figures who surround them. Indeed the various floral motifs are not ‘figures’ in the etymological sense, but they are representations which, even if from the beginning possessing stylised form, are in no way abstract, and therefore are ‘figurative’ in the sense the adjective has in the phrase ‘figurative art’; they are clearly signifiers which make reference to an actual, precise significance, here a floral or vegetal object. Danner does in fact concede that the group of a floral ridge acroterion and the corner acroteria do indeed form a ‘heraldic’ composition, similar to those that are of frequent occurrence in Greek art of the seventh and sixth centuries.⁶⁰ That remark is the starting point of my exegesis.

1) *Sphinxes as acroteria and the floral motif*

The triple group of sphinxes flanking the Tree, let us remind ourselves, is among the oldest and most common combinations of acroteria on Greek temples.⁶¹ Moreover the group of two sphinxes surrounding a more or less stylised floral motif – or ‘triad’ – appears frequently in Greek art already from the second millennium, after which there is a hiatus in the early Iron

⁵⁶ On these distinctions, see Petit 2011, 12–3.

⁵⁷ Danner 1989, 62: ‘Die First- und Eckvoluten sowie die pflanzlichen Mittel- und Seitenakrotere sind nicht durch einen kompositionellen Bezug, sondern durch die gleiche ornamentale Auffassung miteinander verbunden’. Danner 1997, 137: ‘Die Akroterkompositionen des griechischen Westens sind – ebenso wie jene des Mutterlandes – entweder durch eine gleichartige Ornamentik – wie im Fall der Voluten bzw. pflanzlichen Elementen gebildeten Mittel- und Seitenakroteren ... charakterisiert.’

⁵⁸ Danner 1989, 62: ‘Voluten- bzw. pflanzliche Mittelakrotere sind mit figürlichen Akroteren nicht durch eine “Komposition im Sinne eines Aufeinander-Abgestimmtseins” sondern durch eine parataktische Aneinanderreihung in einer festgelegten Folge verbunden.’ Danner 1997, 137–8: ‘Derartige Kompositionsschemata sind durch eine parataktischen Aneinandersetzung oder durch ein Aufeinander-Abgestimmtsein der einzelnen Elemente gekennzeichnet. Zur ersten Gruppe gehören die heraldischen Gruppen, die häufig aus pflanzlichen, aber auch aus figürlichen Mittelakroteren und aus Sphingen, Niken oder Reitern als Seitenakroteren zusammengesetzt sind ...’

⁵⁹ Danner 1989, 62: ‘Die Kompositionen mit einer Einzelfigur als Mittelakroter und mit figürlichen Seitenakroteren sind vor allem in archaischer Zeit, aber auch, wie die Akrotere der Westfront des Asklepiostempels von Epidaurus, in klassischer Zeit durch eine Aneinanderreihung zu einer Komposition verbunden. Ein Großteil der Seitenakrotere ist hingegen durch die Bewegungsrichtung und Körperhaltung auf das Mittelakroter bezogen.’

⁶⁰ Danner 1989, 63: ‘Den Akroterkompositionen mit einer Einzelfigur oder einem Voluten- bzw. pflanzlichen Akroter in der Mitte und figürlichen Seitenakroteren liegt das Motiv der heraldischen Gruppe zugrunde, das besonders in der griechischen Kunst des 7. und 6. Jahrhunderts häufig vorkommt.’

⁶¹ Danner 1989, 86. His table shows that the sphinxes flank a ridge acroterion of volutes most frequently (six examples), and just once a gorgon and perhaps a ‘Nike’.

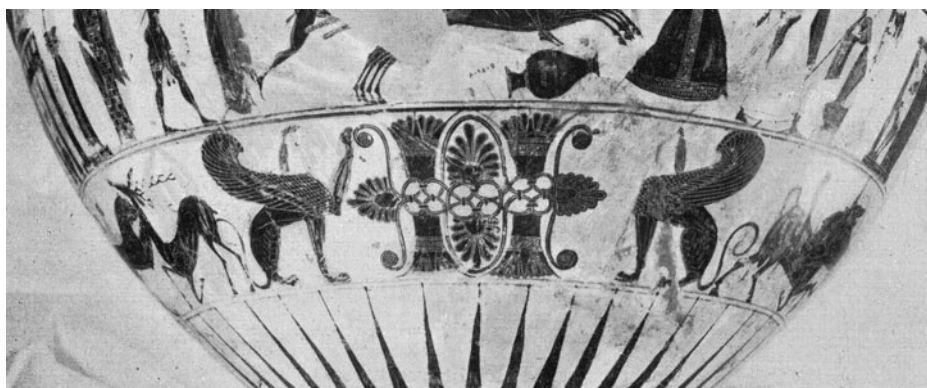


Fig. 9. François Vase (detail) (Florence, Museo archeologico). After Petit 2011, fig. 93.

Age, and reappearance in eighth century vase paintings (see, for instance, Petit 2011, figs. 88, 126 [Bronze Age], figs. 90–6, 117, 121, 125–9 [first millennium BC]). In the compact groups of vase-painting the placing of the figures cannot be paratactic since the three figures constitute a closely associated ensemble, to the extent that the sphinx often places a paw on one of the tendrils (Fig. 9).⁶² Perched on the roof of a temple, the heraldic group, whose three components are now distanced from one another by the length of the slope of the pediment, certainly appears somewhat disjointed. But has it lost *ipso facto* all functional coherence? Referring to the precedence of heraldic groups on vases, P. Danner concludes nonetheless that there is an organic dissolution in the group formed by the acroteria, for two reasons: the distance between the elements and the fact that the sphinxes now turn their bodies to face out.⁶³ But, on the one hand, we will see below that we can draw no safe conclusions from their positioning; on the other hand, the earlier vase paintings mentioned above, the regular and systematic placement of the three figures and the contextual analysis offered below all add conviction to the argument regarding spacing. One feature in any case shows that the three figures so separated come from a compact triple group: sphinxes *never* appear as central acroteria, a fact that proves that the ordering of the figures on the roofs owes nothing to chance. This characteristic also seems to underline the importance of the figure which they flank and for whom they serve as guardians.

Having pulled out the floral motif in his analysis, P. Danner rejects, rather too speedily as we shall see, the interpretation of K. Schefold, who sees in the floral symbol ‘[das] Bild des sich erneuenden Lebens’.⁶⁴ He also denies any solar or apotropaic significance in it. For him it is a question of natural forces over which the deity exercises power.⁶⁵

In the same way as the rosette,⁶⁶ the palmettes and the lotuses, which decorate Greek temples as well as vases and funerary stelai, become common and repetitive *usque ad nauseam* in Greek architecture, in Roman architecture, and right down into Neoclassical architecture and the decorative arts of the nineteenth century, to the point where nobody bothers to ask about their origin and significance. In particular we may point to the lotus, borrowed from the east, where it appears to have had a precise eschatological meaning,⁶⁷ and there is good reason to think that the palmette is equally significant.⁶⁸

⁶² As on the François Vase: Petit 2011, fig. 93, see also figs. 90, 94.

⁶³ Danner 1989, 63: ‘Das Schema der heraldischen Gruppen ist den architektonischen Voraussetzungen entsprechend abgewandelt, wie die Verteilung der Figuren auf die Giebelecken und die Wendung der Seitenakrotere nach außen zeigen.’

⁶⁴ Cited in Danner 1989, 74. Cf. Schefold 1952, 110; 1959, 24 and 55: ‘Das Urbild des Lebens’.

⁶⁵ Danner 1989, 74: ‘Die pflanzlichen Ornamente verkörpern ebenso wie die dämonischen Wesen den Bereich der von Göttern beherrschten Natur.’

⁶⁶ Winter 2005, 118. For the meaning of the rosette: Petit 2011, 67–70, 72–6, 138–41, 162–6.

⁶⁷ On the meaning of the lotus, see Strange 1985.

⁶⁸ See the quotation of C. Picard, below; and Petit 2011, *passim*, esp. 60–71 (Cyprus), 135–76 (Greece).



Fig. 10. Nimrud Ivory (British Museum). After Petit 2011, fig. 7.

As for the floral motif, whether it is placed on a disc acroterion (Fig. 2) or consists of a voluted palmette, plain or superimposed (Fig. 3), there is every reason to consider that its meaning and function depend on its placement in the triad it forms with the corner acroteria, the arrangement of which is by no means casual; since it only appears at the corners, the sphinx is never ‘flanked’. On the other hand the floral motif, when it appears in the triple group, is always flanked by guardians.⁶⁹ Since the respective position of the elements within the group is strictly controlled, one must reject the ornamental or decorative interpretations that have so often tempted commentators (see, for instance, Danner 1989, 62 and 73; 1997, 137). Therefore the interpretation of this group is connected to the one I have proposed for the triads known elsewhere in Greek art in tighter format. It is Old Testament texts that provide the interpretative key.⁷⁰

We have long known that the *K^erûb^hîm* (‘cherubim’) of the Bible are represented in the form of the hybrid called ‘sphinx’ by the Greeks (Petit 2011, 30–1). One often sees them in heraldic pairs flanking a floral motif that can take many forms, but most often is made up of a combination of ‘Phoenician’ or ‘Greek’ palmettes and volutes (Fig. 10).⁷¹ This triple grouping corresponds iconographically to the celebrated passage in Genesis 3:24, where we read that the *K^erûb^hîm* were set by YHWH at the gates of the Garden of Eden to protect (*lišmor*) the path to the Tree of Life and forbid the sinful couple access to it. The meaning of the motif is clear: it is a metaphor for (eternal) life, or immortality, symbolised by a floral motif (the ‘Tree of Life’) which is guarded by the cherubim, hypostases of the deity.⁷² We should pause over this passage; it is a fortunate *unicum*, fortunate in that here, and here alone, the iconographic metaphor is clearly explained. No other text, in Mesopotamia, the Levant, Cyprus or Greece, explicates in this way the nature metaphor (to harvest the fruits of the ‘Tree-of-knowledge-of-good-and-evil’, and subsequently of the ‘Tree of Life’). How to explain this mutual disregard between texts and iconography? Here the artist had to resolve the problem of ‘l’infigurable dans la figure’ (Arasse 1999, 12): how, when necessary, to represent immortality? Only an iconographical metaphor could cut this Gordian knot. What was needed was to find a motif that could symbolise life ever renewed: a motif from nature, a tree or plant, but stylised in a suitable manner to show that it was indeed a metaphor (Petit 2011, 159–60). From the opposite viewpoint, why should authors employ the metaphor from nature to express a concept which has an adequate, precise formulation in all

⁶⁹ Sometimes in the earliest period it is flanked by two ‘floral’ corner acroteria, but they are of modest proportions: Danner 1989, 86 (Aphaea temple on Aegina, ‘Hekatompedon’ on the Acropolis, Kalabaktepe temple at Miletus and also, c.420, the Apollo temple at Bassai). These corner florals may be seen as redundant iterations of the central motif.

⁷⁰ On this method of using Levantine texts to interpret a particular Greek iconography, see the discussion in Petit 2011, *passim*, esp. 115–16.

⁷¹ On the ‘heraldic group’ in the orient, see for instance Petit 2011, 22–36 and figs. 5–10, 12–13.

⁷² On cherubim as YHWH’s hypostasis, see Petit 2011, 44–6.



Fig. 11. Cypriot funerary stele (Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.2856). After Petit 2011, fig. 41.

languages? The silence of our texts on the meaning of the symbol is equalled by their silence on its actual artistic manifestations. The heraldic group may be abundant in Levantine, Cypriot and Greek imagery but is only very rarely described. Again it is the Hebrew Bible that provides the only descriptions known (*ekphraseis*, if one prefers), where we have mention of two *Kerubim* flanking the *Timorim* in the decoration of the Temple at Jerusalem (1 Kings 6.29, 32, 35; Ezekiel 41.17–20, 25; cf. 2 Chronicles 3.5–7; see Petit 2011, 29–33). This silence should cause no surprise if we consider the fact that descriptions of works of art are rare in ancient literature.⁷³

Recent analyses allow us to suppose that the triad motif came to Greece via Cyprus and re-emerges with the same meaning in the eighth century Aegean iconography (Petit 2011, *passim*, esp. 97–102, 121–3). Charles Picard had already drawn this conclusion in 1963 for the sphinx on Greek funerary stelai: ‘L’association du sphinx avec les palmettes de formes diverses indique clairement que son rôle de gardien de l’arbre de vie est toujours important et connu des Grecs’ (Picard 1963, 1431). Since the matter seems probable in the funerary domain and in vase-painting, can one propose the same hypothesis for the realm of religion? Here it would be in order to present some pieces which fill the gaps, on the one hand between tight and loose triple groupings and on the other between the funerary and sacral domains.

In the funerary sphere one can cite stelai crowned with ornament consisting of the same heraldic scheme. On Cyprus several funerary stelai of the Classical period have sphinxes either facing a large anthemion, with a paw on the volute of a vegetal motif, or with their backs turned away from the central anthemion but with one paw placed on a corner palmette (Fig. 11; Fig. 12). This type of decorative adornment is also found in Greece, with the sphinx’s back turned to a central anthemion (Fig. 13). The position of these sphinxes allows us to discard the argument based on the position of the hybrids as corner acroteria in relation to the vegetal motif – that is, facing outwards from it – and which led to the denial of any functional connection with the central acroterion (Danner 1989, 63). Besides, for ‘guardians’ such a position is extremely logical.⁷⁴ In this respect the stele in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 12) demonstrates that the sphinxes who turn their back on the central anthemion at the same time take due regard of the corner

⁷³ Even Pausanias, who often enough describes paintings or sculpture, makes no reference to any such group. We see the same absence of reference in the cuneiform area, where despite the many remarkable ‘Trees of Life’ of Assyrian reliefs, there is no allusion to them in any text. On this subject see Petit 2011, 173–4.

⁷⁴ For this position that underlines their role as guardians, see Demisch 1977, 82 and fig. 230; Petit 2011, 174–5.



Fig. 12. Cyriot funerary stele (Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.2499). After Petit 2011, fig. 42.

palmettes on which they place a paw. Along with M.-Fr. Billot we should recall that the acanthus, frequently found on funerary stelai (Homolle 1916; Billot 1993, figs. 14, 17, 19; Oakley 2004) and on some sarcophagi (like that from Akragas of the fourth century [Franchi del Orto 1988, 262 fig. 1 (= Danner 1997, pl. 35 [F2]); cf. Billot 1993, 55 with n. 123]), and which we see as a ridge acroterion on several temples from the mid-fifth century onwards, possesses an eschatological meaning (Billot 1993, 47), as we can assume from the anecdote cited by Vitruvius (4. 1) regarding the invention of the Corinthian capital (cf. Petit 2008, 349–50, with n. 122).

The same schema recurs on several sarcophagi, with two sphinxes as corner acroteria and a central floral one, often a Greek palmette. Since these sarcophagi imitate the facade of a building with pediments and the crowning figures are related to architectural acroteria, they serve to fill the logical gap between funerary and architectural sculpture. We find different variants of the combination in so-called ‘Greco-Persian’ art. Among the parallels in funerary architecture one can stress the material from Xanthos.⁷⁵ From c.460, ‘Building H’ on the acropolis has two sphinxes in the blind windows of the pediment. Because of the complete loss of the upper parts of the facade, it is impossible to tell if there was a ridge acroterion, or what form it may have taken (Metzger 1963, 67 and pl. XLVII; Demargne 1974, 53). On the Lion Sarcophagus of the last third of the

⁷⁵ For a list of the sphinxes on Lycian funerary monuments: Schmidt-Dounas 1985, 56 n. 21, see also 56–8.



Fig. 13. Attic funerary stele (from Tanagra. Athens, National Museum 2578). After Petit 2011, fig. 96.

fifth century two sphinxes decorate the ogival pediment, facing, but in separate panels (Demargne 1974, 49–53, pl. XXIV c–d, pl. 23). On the Merehi sarcophagus the sphinxes of the ogival pediment are surmounted by complex floral motifs on the extremity of the ridge beam (Demargne 1974, 94–5, pl. 53:3–4), which take a form similar to the decoration of mid-fourth century Greek funerary stelai (Demargne 1974, 95) and also notably to the ridge acroterion of the Parthenon (compare with Danner 1989, 13–4, no. 77, pl. 7). M.-Fr. Billot (1993, 54) notes that on Lycian sarcophagi the central acroteria in the shape of Greek palmettes on double volutes are of the same form as, and develop similarly to, those on Greek temples. The same motif will probably have decorated the ridge beam of the Payava sarcophagus (Demargne 1974, 94), dated to the same period, c.370–350 (Demargne 1974, 86 and 96), standing above the sphinxes placed in the blind windows of the ogival pediment above the royal couple (Demargne 1974, 71, pl. 35–7). Although the association of sphinx and floral is indirect on these two works it is thus certainly attested.⁷⁶ We also see a similar combination on the ‘Lycian sarcophagus’ from Sidon, c.390–380, where the sphinxes standing back-to-back occupy the whole pediment, with a palmette on the ridge above (Schmidt-Dounas 1985, pls. 15 and 24; Billot 1993, 54; and, for instance, Rolley 1999, 237 fig.

⁷⁶ On this concept, see Petit 2011, 17. For Schmidt-Dounas (1985, 143–4), the sphinxes guard the tomb. However she notes (143) that they also guard the sacred tree; it is also possible that columns set between two heraldic sphinxes were originally painted with floral motifs, so completing the triad.



Fig. 14. Sarcophagus from Amathus. Short side A (Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.2453).
After Petit 2011, fig. 38.

235). B. Schmidt-Dounas (1985, 75) notes that the majority of parallels cited for them consist of similar sphinxes flanking a floral element (palmette, ivy leaves or flowers).

A sarcophagus from Amathus on Cyprus (Fig. 14) presents an intermediate stage between some vase representations, in which the triad is presented in a compact and functional unity, and temple facades where the composition is pulled apart and loosened. On this work of *c.*480 the hybrids are not placed right at the corners, but at mid-slope, with the body turned to a central palmette and the head at right angles facing the viewer (see Matthäus 2007, 220; Stylianoú 2007, 27–34, esp. 29, 33–4). The parallel with their homologues crowning Greek temples is striking.⁷⁷ Iconographical analysis of this exceptional work allows us to assign to them a role similar to that of the guardians of the biblical Tree of Life (Petit 2004; 2006a; 2006b), because the files of chariots on the two long sides symbolically make their way to the Trees of Life which stand on the

⁷⁷ Parallel noted by Stylianoú (2007, 29, 33–4) and Matthäus (2007, 220): ‘it imitates the roof of a Greek temple, not only in its general construction, but especially through the representation of sphinxes, which are placed in the corners of the roof in the function of Greek acroteria – and they are Greek in style.’

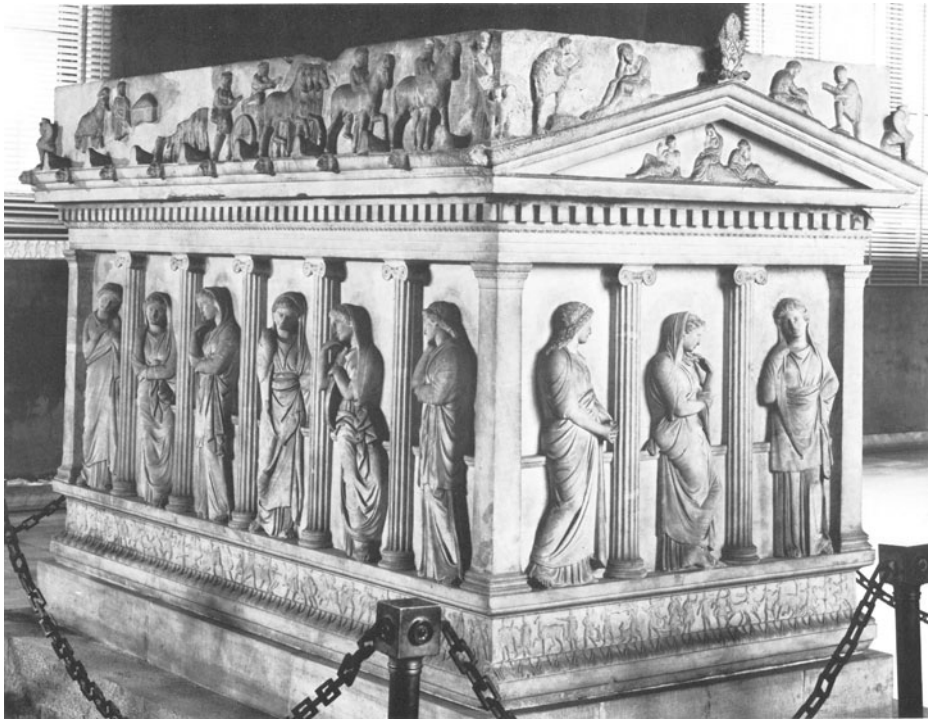


Fig. 15. 'Mourning Women' sarcophagus (from Sidon). After Fleischer 1983, pl. 3.

legs and to the crowning palmette guarded by sphinxes. As H. Matthäus wrote, 'by placing his corpse into a sarcophagus which imitates architectural features of a temple [the king] expresses his hopes for an afterlife in eternity and happiness and very probably some sort of apotheosis' (Matthäus 2007, 220). As a corollary, we can assume that similar decoration on Greek temples reflects similar aspirations.

Returning briefly to Sidon, let us consider the decoration of the 'Mourning Women' sarcophagus of c.350 (Fig. 15). It is almost totally conceived as a pseudo-peripteral building in the Ionic order (Fleischer 1983), except for an attic (above the cornice), through which the two 'temple' pediments are cut on the short sides. The pediments are decorated with a superb palmette as ridge acroterion, which alone rises above the attic, and two sphinxes as corner acroteria, set at forty-five degrees and seemingly rising from the body of the attic. For our purposes, the most interesting element is the frieze running along the long sides of the attic, which presents a cortege of chariots and horses; it has been interpreted as the funeral procession for the deceased to his final home (Fleischer 1983, 44–54). However, in proceeding along the long sides of the attic the cortege is iconographically directed to the two pediments. The final destination of the cortege could not be better revealed: heroisation, symbolised by the palmette flanked by sphinxes. Compared with the previous example this work marks an additional stage in the revelation of the message, since the cortege is now placed in direct association with, and on the same level as, the triad to which all evidence suggests it is heading, as on the Amathus sarcophagus.⁷⁸ At the same time the architectural form of the

⁷⁸ This explanation is otherwise not incompatible with the previous one. Surely in the case of Amathus we have a solemn cortege, modelled on the apotheosis of Herakles (Petit 2006a, 84–6 with n.2), as on the Payava sarcophagus (Demargne 1974, 76). In the other example (Sidon) there is every appearance of a funeral procession. But the triad symbolises their common destination. R. Fleischer (1983, 54) suggests that the two figures who appear on the sides of the pediment of the 'Mourning Women' sarcophagus, between the sphinxes and the central palmette, express sadness. However, the question arises whether they are of this world or beyond (Fleischer 1983, 55). Furtwängler (cited in Fleischer 1983, 55) saw a parallel in a relief in Zurich where Hermes' presence points to the afterlife. On the other hand R. Fleischer was reluctant to draw that conclusion since nothing on the Sidon sarcophagus points in that direction. Nothing, that is, except the sphinx, as we have just seen. Therefore it seems that the gesture of condolence directed in each of the groups of two figures towards the person in distress refers probably to some

work constitutes a substantial argument for assuming that corresponding decoration on temples should have the same significance.

Staying in the same funerary domain let us consider Attic stelai surmounted by a single sphinx (Petit 2011, 125–6, 147–51, 154–6); they present the same scheme, but abbreviated: a single sphinx above a floral element now reduced to the main volutes, a grouping which we might now term ‘binary’; and according to my hypothesis this binary group would retain all the symbolic force of the triads (Petit 2011, 147–56). Apropos of this M.-Fr. Billot stated that ridge acroteria consisting of lyre-palmettes took up the schema of the same motif found under the sphinxes on funerary stelai (Billot 1993, 43). Thus the voluted floral motif of acroteria on several temples displays the same morphological details as the lyre-palmettes which support some funerary sphinxes (Billot 1993, 42 with fig. 6, cf. figs. 1–3, 7–8 [Sounion, Aegina, Paros]) (Fig. 16). She adds that the acanthus of Corinthian capitals is identical to those of funerary stelai and ridge acroteria (Billot 1993, 52–3).

Let us turn now to the sacral domain. Cyprus knew a group of so-called ‘complex proto-Aeolic’ votive stelai, which, above the usual volute capital (two volutes emerging from a central triangle), present efflorescences often in the form of a Phoenician palmette, the whole being capped by a three-stepped abacus (see, for example, Ohnefalsch-Richter 1893, pls. XXXVI:3, XCV:1, 2; Shiloh 1979, 36–9, figs. 49–57). Two capitals in the Metropolitan Museum of Art display, among the efflorescences, two sphinxes facing across a vegetal motif (Karageorghis, Mertens and Rose 2000, 216–7, no. 347) (Fig. 17). This Cypriot custom of votive stelai with double volutes is also found in Greece, since the first (Ionic) volute capitals found in the Aegean area appear on stelai crowned by a sphinx and dedicated in sanctuaries (Naxos, Delos, Aegina, Delphi; cf. Barletta 2001, 101) (Fig. 18). This induced B.A. Barletta to champion the notion of a votive origin of the Ionic column, an idea dismissed by others;⁷⁹ this is not of great importance from our point of view, as this kind of column is also associated with the sphinx in a sacred context. This last example allows us to consider that the sphinxes on columns with volutes dedicated in Greek sanctuaries, like the famous ‘Naxian sphinx’ at Delphi, also combine the sphinx with a vegetal motif, here reduced to just the volutes, and from our present viewpoint also constitute a bridge between the funerary world and the sacral domain (Petit 2011, 124–5, 147–54).

P. Danner wisely remarked that the occurrence of the same motifs on funerary stelai, votive stelai and acroteria demonstrates the permeability of these contexts. He would see the notion of death as the link between the figures.⁸⁰ One can subscribe to this position, but also go further. Beyond the idea of death, it is that of survival after death which seems to be always behind the figure of the sphinx guarding the Tree. So there is no reason to allot a different symbolism to funerary sphinxes from those dedicated in sanctuaries; the latter category covers sphinxes on volute-columns but also those decorating temples, including the sphinxes in the form of corner acroteria guarding the central vegetal motif: they reflect the same heraldic schema, play the same role as guardians of the Tree and therefore must be imbued with the same eschatological significance.

We may note further that in the Levant we also find these sphinx-cherubim in a sacred context, since, as noted above, triple groups, no doubt in relief, attested by texts inside the temple at Jerusalem consisted of *K^erûb^hîm* flanking *Timorîm* in the same heraldic schema (see Petit 2011, 29–33).

2) Acroterial sphinxes and the rider

It remains to explain the replacement in West Greece of the vegetal motif as a central acroterion by the group of rider-on-horse, often associated with sphinxes as lateral acroteria (see above). Again this raises the question of the symbolic relationship between this group and the hybrids which

eschatological hope or consolation, symbolised by the triad of sphinxes and palmette into which the figures are inserted. Compare perhaps the scenes on the newly discovered sarcophagus from Kition: Flourentzos 2011, 22–5.

⁷⁹ Barletta 2001, 101–2 with n. 37. G. Gruben and A. Ohnesorg deny this, preferring an architectural origin. For sphinxes on columns, see also Marconi 2007, 90.

⁸⁰ Danner 1989, 79: ‘Der Umstand der gleichzeitigen Verwendung bestimmter Skulpturentypen in der Bau-, Votiv-, und Grabplastik weist ... darauf hin ..., daß die Gegenwart des Todes in der griechischen Religion ein wesentliches Element ist.’

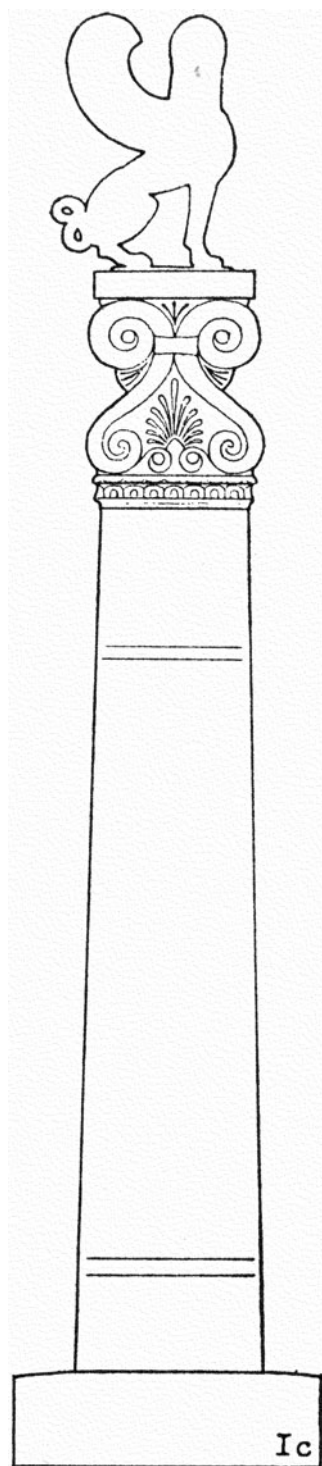


Fig. 16. Attic funerary stele. After Petit 2011, fig. 109.

flank it. Here the unusual acroteria from Paestum, Metaurus and Epizephyrian Locri, where a sphinx directly carries horse and rider, clearly prove a direct relationship between the sphinx and the rider on temple roofs, and show that sphinxes as lateral acroteria and riders as central ones cannot merely have a paratactic relationship, but interact symbolically, as C. Marconi believes (Marconi 2007, 46–8; cf. Danner 1996, 105–6).



Fig. 17. Cypriot votive stele (Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.2493). After Petit 2011, fig. 43.

Attempts to identify these riders have led to various suggestions.⁸¹ Some have thought them a status symbol, reflecting the ideology of aristocratic horse-rearers (Marconi 2007, 48; Torelli 2009, 4; Moustaka 2009, 73). This hypothesis appears unlikely. Firstly, would such an act of *hybris* have been tolerated, even one committed by a beneficent aristocratic family? Secondly, rider and horse

⁸¹ There is a good synthesis of the different interpretations in Torelli 2009, 4 and in Ciurcina 2009, 409–12.



Fig. 18. Sphinx of the Naxians. Delphi. After Petit 2011, fig. 107.

appear on some funerary monuments in regions, notably islands, where horse-rearing was impossible (Cermanović-Kumanović 1994, 1065). After much discussion a consensus seems to have been reached that we should see in them the Dioscuri.⁸² The main argument for this lies in comparing the group of rider supported by a sphinx with the text of Pausanias (3.18.14), who gives the following description of the throne of Apollo at Amyclae: ‘At the upper edge of the throne are found, one on each side, the sons of Tyndareus on horseback. Under the horses are sphinxes and wild beasts running upwards; on Castor’s side a leopard, on Polydeuces’ side a lioness.’ The explanation has accordingly been extended to riders without sphinxes. Yet this identification is not so obvious. First there is a chronological problem, since the first group of acroteria is earlier than the throne at Amyclae, which could not therefore have served as a model (Danner 1997, 122). In addition Pausanias’ text specifies other animals decorating the throne of Apollo, which does not thereby confirm any special status for the Amyclae sphinxes vis-à-vis the Dioscuri. We do not know either whether the Dioscuri and their horses were placed directly on the sphinxes and animals as in the sculptural groups; Pausanias’ description would allow them to be in a separate upper panel. Moreover, even if the Amyclae sphinx(es) did carry one or both

⁸² For these riders, especially those from Metaurus and Epizephyrian Locri, cf. Szeliga 1982 [*non vidi*]; La Genière 1983, 165 with fig. 4; Marconi 2007, 46 with n. 58. The ‘Dioscuri hypothesis’ should come from G. Caputo, according to Moustaka (2009, 69–70). P. Danner concedes the identification with the Dioscuri: Danner 1989, 152; 1996, 104–6; 1997, 152 (‘... die Reiterkalyptere, die wahrscheinlich als Darstellungen der Dioskuren zu deuten sind ...’).

of the twins, this does not mean that this service was reserved for them. To put it another way, not every rider carried by a sphinx is necessarily one of the Dioscuri; the symbolism could be more general. Furthermore, and above all, it is far from certain that on all the temples where they appear the riders were always in pairs. Where only one rider has been found can one still talk of Dioscuri in the plural?⁸³ And what business did the sons of Zeus have on temple roofs? By invoking the same very convenient apotropaism, a protective role has been ascribed to them. According to several authors, one should see in these men riding on top of temples the epiphany of the Dioscuri, who would thus guarantee the protection of the temple and the deity residing in it (Marconi 2007, 46; cf. 47–8; Danner 1996, 104–6). But again one must ask whether the owner-god really needed the protection of the Dioscuri.⁸⁴ Troubled by these difficulties, P. Danner brought forward the idea of their being anonymous heroes.⁸⁵ In this regard, one can think of the *heros epitegios* attested at Athens (Marconi 2007, 47–8), who cannot be one of the Dioscuri.⁸⁶ Avoiding a decision, C. Marconi takes up an intermediate position which would not satisfy a logical mind: it is convenient ‘perhaps to regard them as undetermined heroes *epitegioi*, who occasionally, especially in colonies with a strong devotion for the Dioskouroi, might be identified with Castor and Polydeuces’ (Marconi 2007, 48; see also Moustaka 2009, 69–70). In a final attempt to interpret the triad in question P. Danner would see the reason for the joint presence of sphinxes and riders on temple roofs in a common chthonian character.⁸⁷ Although he is constrained by his identification with the Dioscuri, his suggestion is, however, a step in the direction which I suggest should be followed.

First we should note that the sphinxes appear to flank both the vegetal motif (in mainland Greece) and the rider (in the West) in an identical manner, which suggests that the two central acroteria had more or less the same meaning, or at least belonged to the same symbolic field. We saw above that there are several aspects that plead in favour of an eschatological interpretation of the Tree flanked by sphinxes. Could we not extend that interpretation to the triad with a rider at the centre?⁸⁸ In several Mediterranean civilisations the journey of the deceased beyond the tomb can be represented as a journey on horseback. This is the case on Cyprus, as I believe I have shown in my study of the decoration of a late sixth or early fifth century *amphoriskos* from a tomb at Amathus, where the horseman, guided by a *psychopompos* equipped with a torch, is awaited, on the other side of the vase, by two sphinxes guarding the Tree of Life (Petit 2006b, esp. 272–4; 2007, 195–7). The scene is particularly well documented on Etruscan urns of the Hellenistic period: the journey beyond the tomb can be accomplished on a chariot or boat, but also, and especially, on horseback (Cristofani 1977, 112–43 nos. 136–87; cf. Petit 2006b, 272–5 with n. 38–40, 43–5). There are also other reasons for thinking that the belief had much earlier roots in Etruria (Steingraber 1984, 63 and 78; Torelli 1997, 74–6; Petit 2006b, 273 with n. 40, 47; Torelli 2009, 12–13). In the Greek world one can point to the *heros equitans* on several funerary stelai, who appears to reflect a similar conception of the journey beyond the tomb. For A. Cermanović-Kumanović (1994, 1065), the *heros equitans* is without doubt an ideal iconographic type of the heroised dead. On the other hand, a stele from the Asklepieion in Athens, showing a man on horseback, is inscribed Θεόδωρος ἦρωος (Malten 1914, 218

⁸³ Marconi 2007, 47–8. As she notes (46–7), the Sabucina model (fig. 18) is no evidence, because the second horse has no rider.

⁸⁴ Marconi 2007, 216; Danner 1989, 74. For the same idea concerning other acroterial figures, see above.

⁸⁵ Danner 1996, 106: ‘Daher ist auch die Deutung als Heroen, die nicht benannt werden können, in Erwägung zu ziehen.’

⁸⁶ Mention of a *heros epitegios* is found in a second century AD inscription on the throne of a priest who served both the Dioscuri and this hero. Clearly the hero was an entity distinct from the sons of Tyndareus (see Marconi 2007, 279, n. 65, who also rejects any mention of the *heros epitegios* in the accounts of the treasurers of the ‘other gods’ in 429–428 BC).

⁸⁷ Danner 1996, 104–6, esp. 106: ‘Diese Verbindung kann mit dem chthonischen Charakter erklärt werden, der nicht nur den Sphingen eigen ist, sondern auch den Dioskuren, die der Unterwelt und dem Himmel angehören. Die Dioskuren und die Tiere bzw. Mischwesen verkörpern jedoch zwei verschiedene Aspekte des Chthonischen.’

⁸⁸ In any case, the three motifs appear to be linked, as seems to be shown by a stamped vase from Agrigento, where we can see the sequence sphinx–vegetal–rider–vegetal–sphinx–vegetal *etc.*: Marconi 1929, 204 fig. 142 (see also fig. 141).

with fig. 11); and on other stelai a horse-head appears in a frame above a scene of a reclining banquet. Two figured scenes show an intermediate stage between these representations: on one it is a rider, not a horse, that appears in the window (Dentzer 1982, pl. 80, fig. 481), on the other the rider has deserted the frame and presents himself leading his mount by the bridle (thus at the end of his journey) before the banqueter, where a little serving-boy welcomes him and invites him to participate in the Elysian banquet (Galli 1934, 153; cf. Petit 2006b, 272–3).⁸⁹ On all these documents the journey on horseback seems to be a metaphor for the journey beyond (cf. Galli 1934, 154). If we return to our acroteria, the riders on top of the sphinx, which at Metaurus and Locri flank the central volute acroterion (Danner 1997, 137), can be interpreted as directing themselves to this motif, the symbol of immortality.⁹⁰ This hypothesis allows us to avoid a dubious explanation involving the Dioscuri or some form of apotropism.⁹¹

Here the group of the rider carried by the sphinx is indeed the key to the interpretation. P. Danner, who discusses the riders and sees in them the Dioscuri, goes on to interpret Tarentine funerary stelai with scenes of abduction as ‘Sinnbilder der Entrückung ins Jenseits in Zusammenhang mit dem Glauben an ein Weiterleben nach dem Tod’ (Danner 1997, 152). These groups, which are found combined with the horse and rider groups, represent notably the abductions of Ganymede by Zeus (Danner 1997, 77–8), Oreithyia by Boreas, Kephalos by Eos, and Thetis by Peleus. On the Nereid monument from Xanthos the interpretation can scarcely be doubted.⁹² P. Danner saw that these scenes drawn from myth cannot be given a historical explanation (Danner 1989, 77) and allows an eschatological interpretation, at least for the Lycian groups and for several fourth century vase scenes.⁹³ Why not therefore extend that interpretation to the sphinx bearing the rider (Danner 1997, 152; cf. 1989, 79)?

With respect to the rider moving *motu proprio* to the Tree of Life, we can detect a shift of meaning that finds parallels in Cyprus and the east. The sphinx-cherubim that guard access to the Tree – forbidding it to the outcast, allowing it to the elect – can go, in the latter case, as far as physically assisting that access: several representations show the sphinxes themselves harnessed to the chariot.⁹⁴ In the case of a horseman this would have seemed more difficult (except by making the sphinx his mount, but that method of locomotion appears to have been reserved for the deity, at least in the Old Testament).⁹⁵ This would be to reckon without the boldness of West Greek sculptors and coroplasts. This final stage is effectively reached when the sphinx itself carries both rider and horse in one fell swoop. Here the accomplishment of its task as *psychopompos* is certainly spectacular, but it is not the only case where the sphinx plays the role of ‘transporter of souls’ on a

⁸⁹ For this Elysian banquet see Childs and Demargne 1989, 291–2 with n. 191 (in spite of J.-M. Dentzer’s reservations). For this interpretation, cf. already Furtwängler 1855, 155–6; Malten 1914, 222; Galli 1934, 152–3.

⁹⁰ We shall see below that the same conclusion may be drawn for the rider on a Triton. At Metaurus (Danner 1997, A8) and at Locri (A20), the palmettes are combined with riders as corner acroteria (A92 and B40).

⁹¹ However, the identification as the Dioscuri perhaps does not exclude the one proposed here. Their chthonian aspect has often been noted (Danner 1996, 106). According to Gury (1986, 631) the Dioscuri ‘seize the soul of the dead [and] take him up to the heavens at the end of that happy journey which will allow him entry to the Isles of the Blessed’.

⁹² Childs and Demargne 1989, 256: ‘Chacun des acrotères centraux figure une scène d’enlèvement qui ravit le mort jusqu’aux cieux.’ For an abduction group from Karthaia, Keos: Ohnesorg 1993, 30 and 88–95; Ohnesorg and Walter-Karydi 1994. Demargne (Childs and Demargne 1989, 301–2), however, prefers a mythological explanation, which could also have an eschatological meaning. See also the thoughts of P. Gros (1991, 254) for whom these representations ‘au sommet des temples miment une ascension vers le monde des dieux’.

⁹³ Danner 1989, 78 with n. 345: ‘Bei der Darstellung der Entführungsgruppen von Xanthos und der Perseus-Gruppe von Limyra ... dürfte jedoch der eschatologische Aspekt der Entführung als Entrückung ins Jenseits im Vordergrund stehen.’ Also Danner 1989, 78–9: ‘Der chthonische Charakter der Entführungsgruppen kommt aber auch in den Darstellungen auf Bronzhydrien des 4. Jahrhunderts und auf westgriechischen Vasen zum Ausdruck.’ This is, however, unlikely for the group from Karthaia-Keos representing Theseus and Antiope (Ohnesorg and Walter-Karydi 1994, 349 n. 7).

⁹⁴ Petit 2011, 91–2, 182, 203, fig. 85 (Cyprus). In the Levant: Markoe 1985, G7; cf. Petit 2011, 91 n. 644.

⁹⁵ It is YHWH himself who mounts the cherubim: Psalms 18.10 (‘and he rode upon a cherub’). The same observation applies to thrones flanked by sphinxes: 2 Kings 19.15; Isaiah 37.16; Psalms 99.1, cf. 80.2; Ezekiel 9.3; 10.4–22.

Greek temple: a metope or orthostate from the temple on the acropolis of Mycenae, c.630 BC (Roland 2008, 25–6, figs. 10–1; Petit 2011, fig. 102), shows two sphinxes bearing a corpse, or at least an unconscious figure (Vollkommer 1991, fig. 2; Petit 2011, 124 with fig. 102). Such representations strengthen the case for the role one can assign to sphinxes as acroteria.

In this perspective, the riders as corner acroteria, facing a central palmette, acquire a clear significance (Danner 1997, 137): they are on their way to heroisation, moving towards the Tree of Life, in other words, metaphorically, to immortality. As for the riders flanked by sphinxes, the presence of the hybrids would appear to guarantee them the same future.

3) *Acroterial sphinxes and the gorgon*

Explanations for the triad of sphinxes and gorgon, which is, as far as we know, the earliest in which the sphinx appears (Temple A in Calydon: Danner 1989, 86), should derive from the mythological kinship of the two monsters, attested already in Hesiod (*Theogony* 326) and more specifically in Hyginus (*Fabulae* 67): common scions of infernal ancestors, sphinx and gorgon are linked to the chthonian domain; the gorgon represents death, and her defeat under the blows of Perseus therefore constitutes a victory over the forces of death.⁹⁶ This is symbolised, for example, by the central acroterion grouping of Perseus and Medusa on the heroon at Limyra (Danner 1989, 74 and 78), or on the sarcophagus from Golgoi (Karageorghis *et al.* 2000, 204–6, no. 331).⁹⁷ Like the sphinx, she can guard the road to immortality. This identical function seems confirmed by an ivory plaque from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta which shows a sphinx with a gorgon head (*cf.* Mertens-Horn 1978, 39 fig. 5).⁹⁸ Or maybe, by a logical abridgement, which needs to be analysed, the image of the gorgon carries with it the promise of immortality. In any case, the gorgon tends to replace the floral as the central acroterion flanked by two sphinxes; it can also integrate it, as in an acroterion from the temple of Apollo at Cyrene, consisting of a large palmette with complex volutes in the centre of which a gorgon head appears (Danner 1989, 14 no. 82, pl. V; Bravo and Passarelli 2009, 158 fig. 14:1). Whatever the case may be, the two groupings show that gorgon, sphinx and floral belong to the same symbolic field and appear to depict the promise or hope of immortality.

4) *Sphinxes and female figures*

In the course of the second half of the sixth century the gorgon as ridge acroterion flanked by sphinxes is replaced by a commonly termed ‘Nike’ (Danner 1989, 61 [table] and 62), and in due course ‘Nikai’ take the places of corner sphinxes flanking another ‘Nike’ or a floral motif, as at the Argive Heraion⁹⁹ and on several buildings represented on vases (Danner 1997, 137, pl. 36:2 and 4 [F26 and F35]). One point must be stressed first: the term ‘Nike’ is a purely conventional usage for such winged females (see the opinion of Danner 1997, 116–7), adopted by simple comparison with the Athenian Nike; it is a dubious identification liable to lead the commentator down the wrong track. A. Moustaka believes that many winged female figures appear in the Archaic period who must be considered ‘*daimones*’, and who cannot immediately be given the appellation ‘Nike’ (Moustaka 1994, 895–6); this opinion is seemingly shared by P. Danner, who sees an original demonic character in winged females; it would be in the course of the sixth century that they acquired their particular ‘Nike’ status when flanking groups of combatants (Danner 1989, 76). However, the only known specific identification appears on a vase scene where the winged figure is labelled ‘Eris’ (Danner 1989, 75; Moustaka 1994, 896)! So authors have wisely stuck to the phrase ‘winged female figures’, *fliehende Figuren* or *Flügelfrau* (Danner 1989, 63 and 75; Ambrosini 2009, 218; Gasparri 2009, 495–7). P. Danner specifically rejects any mythological meaning in their association with sphinxes (Danner 1989, 74);

⁹⁶ See, for instance, Jourdain-Annequin 1989, 529; for the meaning of the gorgons, see also Camporeale 2005.

⁹⁷ The analysis of Schollmeyer (2007, 215–7) remains on the cautious side of logical possibility.

⁹⁸ For a similar function of sphinxes, griffins and gorgons, see Simon 1962, 759–60.

⁹⁹ As it happens, P. Danner (1989, 62) rejects out of hand any connection between the ‘Nikai’ and the central figure, and ties them in with the pedimental scenes: ‘Die heftige Bewegung der Niken von Argos ... kann nicht mit einem Bezug zum pflanzlichen Mittelakroter ... sondern mit einem Bezug zur Giebelarstellung erklärt werden.’

he does however note that their nature seems akin to that of the gorgons (Danner 1989, 75 with n. 317, 78), and allots to them too a relationship with death (Danner 1989, 760).

There are also wingless female figures which appear as both central and corner acroteria, which puzzled Danner (1989, 26–8, 77). However one parallel comes to mind for this motif: wingless female figures in running pose appear in the intercolumniations of the Nereid Monument from Xanthos, to be dated c.380 BC. They have been fully studied by W. Childs and P. Demargne who both assign to them an eschatological meaning: ‘Autour de la cella funéraire le cortège des Néréides glissant sur la mer escorte le dynaste et sa femme vers l’île des Bienheureux’. The abduction scenes of the acroteria would express the same notion (Childs and Demargne 1989, 256).¹⁰⁰ To support this interpretation other funerary monuments from Xanthos can be cited, such as the Harpy Tomb and the Payava sarcophagus, where other forms of eschatological preoccupations of the Lycian rulers are manifest.¹⁰¹ The authors cite the final passage of the *Andromache* of Euripides (1253–69) to corroborate the identity of the female figures as Nereids; Thetis promises Peleus the immortality of a god:

‘I shall set you free from mortal woe and make you a god, deathless and exempt from decay.
... Wait there until I come from the sea with a chorus of fifty Nereids to escort you’
(translation Loeb Library).

Can we assign the same identity and function to both the Archaic and Classical female figures? The notion that the Nereids of the Xanthos monument have a *psychopompos* role is obvious enough; the funerary context demands such an interpretation (Childs and Demargne 1989, 271). However, the underlying belief appears much older, since, on the one hand, in the *Aithiopsis*, a heroic poem of the late seventh or early sixth century, Thetis raises the corpse of Achilles and takes it to the Land of the Blessed, and, on the other hand, Pindar (*Olympian* 2. 28–30) apparently refers to a tale in which Ino enjoys immortality among the Nereids; here there is no mention of Thetis (Childs and Demargne 1989, 272–3), which suggests that she shared the role of *psychopompos* equally with her followers. Relevant here is a fragment in Naples, possibly from an acroterion, which has a Nereid riding a hippocamp (Danner 1997, 70 no. B45, c.400?); the representation recalls the group by (a) Scopas described by Pliny, which features ‘... Neptune himself, and with him are Thetis and Achilles. There are Nereids riding on dolphins and mighty fish or on sea-horses, and also Tritons ... and a host of other sea creatures’ (Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.7; translation Loeb Library).

Except in one case the Xanthian Nereids do not have their usual attribute in vase scenes, the dolphin (Cermanović-Kumanović 1994, nos. 258–261); but in the sixth and fifth centuries this is nothing unusual. It is during the period between the sixth and fourth centuries that we find the greatest concentration of Nereids on foot (Cermanović-Kumanović 1994, 820); and, apart from the fact that they characteristically run (Cermanović-Kumanović 1994, nos. 263–4), sometimes nothing formally distinguishes them from other female figures.¹⁰² So cannot we assign the same function to the *fliehende Figuren* without wings and, though winged, to the ‘Nikai’ on Greek temples as to the sirens and sphinxes, *i.e.* *psychopompos*? It was because they could not find earlier examples in architectural sculpture that W. Childs and P. Demargne, despite the textual references, decided that the granting of a *psychopompos* role to Nereids should be placed in the fifth to fourth century. I suggest that these Archaic acroteria figures could be the predecessors which they looked for in vain. In this hypothesis, the winged female figures would be representations of psychopompal hypostases of the same or similar nature as the Nereids at Xanthos, whose function is also related to that of the sphinx. We may note here that, according to the *Theogony* (263–4), the Nereids are related by kinship to the sphinx and gorgon.

¹⁰⁰ For the representations of Nereids and their meaning, see Childs and Demargne 1989, 270 ff. On the ‘Isle of the Blessed’, see *Odyssey* 4.561–9; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 167–71; West 1997, 165–7.

¹⁰¹ Childs and Demargne 1989, 254: on the one hand, ‘l’enlèvement des âmes par les Sirènes’; on the other hand, Payava’s chariot is compared to the ‘char qui enlève Héraclès ou Bellérophon vers l’immortalité bienheureuse’.

¹⁰² Thus a ‘Néréide en forme de Niké’ on this monument would allow such a meaning (Childs and Demargne 1989, 276). In this respect we should note the sirens on the acroteria of Western temples (Danner 1997, nos. A53 and A67), which strengthen the parallel between Lycia and the Western Greek world.

In this context we can set the two symmetrical groups, also from Locri, each consisting of a rider dismounted from his horse, both of them supported by a Triton, just as the rider on horseback is carried by a sphinx.¹⁰³ One could well see here an allusion to the cortege of Nereids like that described by Pliny, in which the Triton takes part. Here he would be leading the rider to the island of Leuke or the Isle of the Blessed (*cf.* Childs and Demargne 1989, 273). So the symbolism could be of a similar eschatological nature.¹⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

The triple group made up of sphinxes and the Tree of Life is attested in the Aegean world in the second millennium and is found in vase paintings from the eighth century. On the roofs of Greek temples we find a variety of types of acroteria whose diversity seems inexplicable. However, among the possible combinations of these figures, that with sphinxes at the sides and a floral ornament on the ridge is one of the earliest and most common in the Archaic period. Conclusions drawn in a recent study of the 'compact' group in vase-painting and funerary sculpture can be used as a working hypothesis to understand the meaning of the 'extended' group on temple roofs. In so doing we had first to attempt to measure the consequences of this topographic 'dilution' on temple roofs for the meaning of the triad. Some funerary parallels and several works which provide an intermediate stage between, on the one hand, the world of the dead and that of the gods, and, on the other, between funerary iconography and architectural sculpture, lead us to the conclusion that the heraldic group on the roof has lost none of its force. Not only can we discern the same message in the triple group on the temple, but, moreover, an analysis of the various figures attested as acroteria in Aegean Greece and the West leads to the selfsame conclusion. The other figures (riders, 'Nikai', gorgons) appear to belong to the same semantic field and to refer to eschatological beliefs or expectations. The global interpretation presented here allows us to interpret most of these motifs, whether appearing in isolation or in combination, and their reciprocal relationships.

I suggest, therefore, that we see in the acroterion figures decorating Greek temples an allusion to the hope of a heroic afterlife, which the deity residing there can promise to mortals. The floral motif at the ridge would be the symbol of survival after death, while the other acroterion figures would be chthonian creatures whose role can be twofold: they guard the road to the Tree of Life, the metaphor for survival after death, heroisation or apotheosis, and, according to circumstances, allow access to it; or they were also thought to guide mortals there, acting therefore as psychopomps. As for the riders, they should represent the dead in their journey to the afterlife.¹⁰⁵

If this interpretation proves correct, it will lead to a different understanding of the symbolism of ancient temples in particular, and of sanctuaries more generally, and would throw a very different light on ancient religions and their eschatological beliefs.

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¹⁰³ Marconi (2007, 46) sees here a reference to the role of the Dioscuri in the protection of sailors.

¹⁰⁴ Cermanović-Kumanović (1994, VI, 823) has suspicions about this meaning, without justifying her reservations.

¹⁰⁵ If we really want to see them as Dioscuri, we could consider these as psychopomps too (*cf.* n. 91).

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Η σφίγγα στη στέγη: η ερμηνεία των ακρωτηρίων στους ελληνικούς ναούς

Στην Αρχαϊκή περίοδο, από το τέλος του έβδομου και κυρίως στον έκτο αιώνα, οι σφίγγες εμφανίζονται συχνά στη διακόσμηση των ελληνικών ναών, όχι μόνον ως ακρωτήρια, αλλά επίσης ως ακροκέραμα και σίμες. Ως ακρωτήρια, εμφανίζονται πάντα στο πλάι, πλαισιώνοντας από απόσταση το κεντρικό ακρωτήριο. Αν και υπάρχουν αρκετές πρόσφατες, εκτενείς μελέτες των μορφών αυτών, η ερμηνεία τους παραμένει αντικείμενο διαφωνιών. Εξαιτίας της απουσίας σαφών κειμένων, το μόνο μέσο για την κατανόηση της σημασίας τους είναι η εξέταση των συνδυασμών των μορφών στις οποίες οι σφίγγες εμφανίζονται. Το κλειδί για την ερμηνεία τους αποτελεί η σύνδεσή τους, σε τριμερείς ή εραλδικές συνθέσεις, με ένα κεντρικό φυτικό μοτίβο ή μοτίβο ανθέων. Οι συνθέσεις αυτές είναι παρόμοιες με τη γνωστή σύνθεση από την Ανατολή, στην οποία δύο σφίγγες πλαισιώνουν το «Δέντρο της Ζωής» που σύμφωνα με τα κείμενα της Παλαιάς Διαθήκης ταυτίζεται με τα Χερουβείμ που φυλάνε το Δέντρο της Ζωής (Γένεσις 3.24). Αυτή μεταφέρθηκε στην Κύπρο και τον Αιγαιακό κόσμο χωρίς να χάσει το νόημά της. Μια σειρά εγγράφων μας επιτρέπει να επιβεβαιώσουμε ότι η αναπτυσσόμενη σύνθεση ακρωτηρίων που μας ενδιαφέρει δεν έχει χάσει τη συμβολική της σημασία σε σύγκριση με τη συμπαγή σύνθεση που είναι γνωστή κυρίως από την ελληνική αγγειογραφία της Αρχαϊκής περιόδου. Μια ερμηνεία με όρους εσχατολογικού τέλους και φιλοδοξίας μας επιτρέπει επίσης να ερμηνεύσουμε τις άλλες συνδέσεις της σφίγγας – με τις Γοργόνες, τους ιππείς και μορφές «Νίκης».