



BRILL

Centaur-Musicians in Classical Iconography

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Abstract

Centaurs, hybrid mythical beings, were associated with barbarism in antiquity, due to the fact that the widely disseminated iconography of the Centauromachy portrayed them as violent creatures against the Lapiths, creating an opposition between man/beast, order/chaos. However, the role of the divine centaur Chiron as Achilles' teacher offered another vision of these beings, especially in connection with music. This paper proposes a new interpretation of the iconographic evolution of the centaurs in association with music: as part of the heroes' education, the Dionysian and Marine thiasos and their presence in funerary art. A progressively humanised representation of these creatures might be explained by the role of music as a civilising influence, enabling their elevation to a higher spiritual level and as a way to obtain immortality.

Keywords

Centaurs – Chiron – music – Dionysian thiasos – marine thiasos – afterlife

1 An Approach to the Iconography of Centaurs

Centaurs (Κένταυροι in Greek) are, *grosso modo*, hybrid beings of both human and equine nature. With this generic name, we designate not only the divine centaur, Chiron, but also the different breeds of centaurs: the ones from

Thessaly, the Peloponnese, Cyprus and others, such as the marine centaurs and the centaresses.

Classical iconography shows four prototypes of centaurs. The first depicts a man with a horse body attached to his back, a prototype known from the tenth century BC and usually associated with Chiron¹ until the end of the fifth century BC. Among the most ancient examples of this prototype is the 'Lefkandi centaur',² a terracotta dated from the tenth century BC and preserved in the Eretria Museum (published by Desborough 1970, 21-30), which according to Hurwit (1985, 61), is the first iconographic representation of Chiron. The second prototype depicts a creature with a human head, torso, and arms but equine lower limbs. This is the most popular prototype of centaurs as generic beings, profusely disseminated throughout Greek pottery, in black and red figures alike (see S.2). The face usually appears grotesque, similar to satyrs, with a snub nose, wide forehead and animal ears. The third prototype follows the model of the second one, but with female anatomy (Κενταυρίδες). This motif originated in the Hellenistic period, while the most interesting examples are to be found in the Roman world, particularly in the sarcophagi which show a naked female torso with animal ears. Philostratus and Ovid were especially interested in this iconography.³ The last prototype, also present in Hellenistic and Roman art, depicts the *ichthyokentauroi*, creatures with a human head, torso and arms and an equine body with a fish fin. Hyginus (*Fab.* 197) and a short entry in the lexicon *Suda* (α 4655 Adler) accounted for their existence in antiquity.

The repertoire of motifs offered by Greek iconography on centaurs is, overall, very limited. The most recurrent motif was the Centauromachy, a topic that acquired political connotations as a symbol of the confrontation between Greeks and Barbarians/Persians. Other popular topics were the abduction of nymphs, the instruction of heroes and the encounter with Heracles. Within these motifs, there is absolutely no evidence in the Greek iconography from the Archaic and Classical period that could suggest any musical inclination in these creatures, let alone any trace of the humanised prototypes from the aforementioned icons.

1 Occasionally, the centaur Pholo is depicted (while fighting Heracles) according to this iconographical model, typical of the Archaic style. See: Musée du Louvre, Paris, France Artist/Maker Rider Painter Heracles and Pholus (?). Laconian black-figured dinos, ca. 560/540 BC.

2 For a reproduction of this artefact, see the final sitography, item S.1. The reproductions of the other artefacts included in the sitography are referred to throughout the paper by means of 'S' followed by a number.

3 Cf. Philostr. *Im.* 2.3 and Ov. *Met.* 12.210.

Chiron was an exceptional centaur, a centaur-god of immortal nature. According to Ps.-Apollodorus (1.8-9), he was the son of Kronos, conceived during an extramarital affair with the nymph Philyra and thus, half-brother of Zeus. He married Chariklo, Apollo's daughter according to some sources, a Pelonides nymph often regarded as the mother of some Greek heroes. Ancient authors considered him the wisest and fairest of the Centaurs (cf. *Il.* 11.831), a pious and kind-hearted friend of men (cf. Pind. *P.* 3.1; Eur. *IA* 926).

Greek pottery shows the wise centaur as a fully dressed bearded man (hence, humanised, far from the brutality evoked by his hybrid nature) with the croup and the horse hindquarters added to his body, especially in the oldest examples. This iconography may have had its origins in the theatre, due to scenographic limitations, and hence could have become popular throughout Greece. Chiron's iconography, thus conceived, was the first to emerge in Greek art, beginning in the tenth century BC and then becoming quite popular during the Orientalizing and Archaic periods. Although still present in the Classical age, however, it was progressively phased out over time. The centaur-god was often represented with heroes, especially Achilles. His divine status is plainly shown in the François Vase (Firenze, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 4209) where Chiron is depicted among other gods as a guest at the nuptial banquet of Thetis and Peleus.

2 Centaur-Musicians

2.1 *Chiron*

As the mentor of great Greek heroes such as Jason, Peleus, Asclepius, Aristaius and Achilles, Chiron taught not only hunting, medicine, geography and the arts of divination, which he had learned from Apollo and Artemis, but also music.⁴ The most popular iconography in Greek art presents him as a mentor and teacher of the young Achilles, entrusted to him by Peleus.⁵ We find the portrayal of an iconographical model of this kind in Philostratus the Elder's *Imagines* 2.2, titled "The Education of Achilles", presented as a description of one of the Greek paintings⁶ seen by the speaker in a gallery at Naples:

4 Cf. Pi. *P.* 9.65; Xen. *Ages.* 1; Philostr. *Ep.* 9.2.

5 For a later development of the myth, see the gem now at the Bern Kunstmuseum (Merz Collection, DL636) in which Apollo entrusts the education of Asclepius to the centaur Chiron, who taught him medicine and botany.

6 The question whether the painting described actually existed has received a great deal of scholarly attention. For a recent summary of the *status quaestionis*, see Miles 2014.

This Achilles, however, a child not yet conscious of valour, whom Cheiron still nourishes upon milk and marrow and honey, he has offered to the painter as a delicate, sport-loving child and already light of foot [...]. Cheiron flatters him by saying that he catches hares like a lion and vies with fawns in running; at any rate, he has just caught a fawn and comes to Cheiron to claim his reward, and Cheiron, delighting to be asked, stands with fore-legs bent so as to be on a level with the boy and offers him apples fair and fragrant from the fold of his garment—for their very fragrance seems to be depicted—and with his hand he offers him a honeycomb dripping with honey, thanks to the diligent foraging of the bees. For when bees find good meadows and become big with honey, the combs get filled to overflowing and their cells pour it forth. Now Cheiron is painted in every respect like a centaur; yet to combine a horse and human body is no wondrous deed, but to gloss over the juncture and make the two one into one whole and, by Zeus, cause one to end and the other to begin in such wise as to elude the eye of the observer who should try to detect where the human body ends, this seems to me to demand an excellent painter. That the expression seen in the eye of Cheiron is gentle is the result of his justice and the wisdom that he has acquired through justice, but the lyre also does its part, through whose music he has become cultured; but now there is also something of cozening in his look, no doubt because Cheiron knows that this soothes children and nurtures them better than milk.

This is the scene at the entrance of the cave; and the boy out on the plain, the one who is sporting on the back of the centaur as if it were a horse, is still the same boy; for Cheiron is teaching Achilles to ride horseback and to use him exactly as a horse, and he measures his gait to what the boy can endure, and turning around he smiles at the boy when he laughs aloud with enjoyment, and all but says to him, 'Lo, my hoofs paw the ground for you without use of spur; lo, I even urge you on; the horse is indeed a spirited animal and gives no ground for laughter. For although you have been taught by me thus gently the art of horsemanship, divine boy, and are suited to such a horse as I, some day you shall ride on Xanthos and Balios; and you shall take many cities and slay many men, you merely running and they trying to escape you'. Such is Cheiron's prophecy for the boy, a prophecy fair and auspicious and quite unlike that of Xanthos.

TRANSL. BY FAIRBANKS 2014, 133-7

The first mention of Achilles as a lyre player appears already at *Il.* 9.179-88, which describes the arrival of the embassy sent by Agamemnon with the order

to persuade him to give up his anger and return to combat. The embassy finds the son of Peleus while he is singing and playing his φόρμιγξ, but the centaur is not mentioned here as Achilles' music teacher:

They found Achilles refreshing his spirit in the bright and beautiful sound of the lyre, wonderfully made. The bridge on it was silver, loot from the time when he burned the town of Eetion. With it now he refreshed his spirit and he sang the famous deeds of men. Patroklos sat opposite to him, all alone, silent, waiting until the grandson of Aiakos should finish his singing. The two men came up, and Odysseus stood before Achilles, who, amazed, leaped from his seat holding the lyre. Patroklos too rose when he saw them.

TRANSL. BY POWELL 2014, 218⁷

Only later would literary references to Chiron as a musician appear. While the idea that the centaur taught medicine to Achilles is Homeric (cf. *Il.* 11.832) and continues to be mentioned by later authors (Sen. *Tro.* 830ff.; V. Fl. 1.406ff.), there is no reference to any music lesson before Ovid (see *Fast.* 5.379-414).

Before the fourth night Chiron will display his stars,
 that hybrid man mixed with the body of a tawny horse.
 Mount Pelion of Haemonia faces south;
 the summit greens with pine, the rest with oak.
 Philyra's son claimed it; there's a cave of ancient rock,
 where, they record, the good old man [i.e. Chiron] resided.
 He is believed to have detained in lyric song
 the hands destined to send Hector to death.
 Alcides arrived with his labours partly complete [...].
 Achilles' hands could not resist the brazen impulse
 to touch the shaggy skin and its bristles.
 While the old man [i.e., Chiron] fingers the foul, poisoned shafts,
 an arrow slips out and stabs his left foot [...].
 The blood of Lerna's Hydra and the centaur's blood
 mingled, and gave no time for rescue.
 Achilles stood tar-soaked, as if before his sire:
 the dying Peleus would be mourned like this.

7 Even though some authors, like Ovid (*Tr.* 4.1.15f.), saw Achilles' singing as a means of consolation for the loss of Briseis, others believed that the notion of 'glory or men' was the subject of the song: it provided the necessary stimulus for the hero who, according to the narrative of the *Iliad*, would soon resume his military activities.

His loving hands often stroked Chiron's frail hands
 (rewarding the teacher with values learnt).
 He kissed him often, and said to him where he lay:
 'Live, I beg you; don't leave me, dear father!'
 The ninth day arrived, when you, righteous Chiron
 encircled yourself with twice seven stars.

TRANSL. BY BOYLE AND WOODARD 2000

Even if we take into account a *scholion* to *Iliad* 16.37 (quoted by Roussel 1991, 115) saying that, according to Lycophron, the centaur had taught the son of Peleus τὴν ἰατρικὴν τέχνην καὶ λυρικὴν καὶ μουσικὴν (“the medical, lyrical and musical arts”), the hypothesis suggested by Guerrini (1958-1959, 50-2) that Achilles' musical education might have appeared in a lost Hellenistic text by Lycophron remains pure speculation. In accordance with the examples collected by Kossatz-Deissmann (1981), the artistic representations of Chiron's music lessons date only from Roman times. Even though there is no textual reference to his activity as a music teacher prior to Roman times, we would like to draw attention to a Hellenistic testimony on Chiron's reputation as a musician: the coins minted by Prusias II of Bithynia (183-149 BC) (Figure 1). In the obverse of the coin we see Dionysus' head, while in its reverse it is possible to identify very clearly the image of a civilized centaur playing the lyre.⁸ The association of this mythical figure with Dionysus will then become very significant in Roman art, where centaurs will often be part of the triumphal processions of the god, always playing music. There is therefore, no doubt that the centaur Chiron started to gain popularity as a musician during the Hellenistic period, despite the allegedly lost *Achilleis*.

The magnificent fresco from the Ercolano basilica (Napoli, Museo Nazionale Archeologico, inv. 9109; cf. *LIMC* 21/451) (Figure 2) may be debtor, to a greater or lesser extent, of a Greek original lost in time, which could have also served as the model for the sculpture in Saeptra Iulia mentioned (without describing it) by Pliny the Elder (*HN* 36.4): “There is just as much dispute as to the makers of the Olympus and Pan and the Chiron With Achilles in the Voting Enclosure (Saeptra Iulia), even though their fame pronounces them to be so valuable that their keepers must answer for their safety with their lives” (transl. by Eichholz 1962, 23).

This painting was found during the first excavations in Ercolano, in 1739, and soon became very popular, being reproduced in different artistic media during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The centaur appears in a human-horse shape, the most characteristic representation in Roman art, and his back is covered by an animal skin cape, as occasionally seen in other

8 See British Museum, 1841, B.2389; G.2151; RPK, p158B.2; 1920,0611.262.



FIGURE 1 Coin issued by the King Prusias II of Bythina. 2nd century BC.

representations of centaurs too. But his expression is calm and his temples are crowned with laurel, crediting the character with a more hieratic status, more typical of a musician/poet. Such a representation emphasises the human nature of Chiron, in opposition to the brutality of other centaurs. With the plectrum in his right hand, he strikes the strings of the lyre, while a young half-naked Achilles of Praxitelian physiognomy listens attentively to his teachings. This image has been considered by some scholars as a re-interpretation of the sculptural groups of the Saepta, as may be inferred not only from the position of the centaurs' hindquarters and the noticeable plasticity of the body (of statuary resemblance), but also from the architectural background on which the two figures stand out, as Kelsey pointed out (1908, 33). Other Pompeian paintings might have also been influenced by the sculptural group, such as one of the frescoes from the 'Casa delle suonatrici' (Pompeii IX, 3-5).⁹ The same iconographic elements also appear later on in some sarcophagus reliefs (as, for instance the Sarcophagus Strogonoff, at the Ermitage Museum, the Hierapetra Sarcophagus, at the British Museum, and the Sarcophagus of Metilia Troquata at the National Museum in Naples).¹⁰

Moreover, the great influence of this painting can be noted in examples of minor arts, like lamps and gems; in glyptics, in particular, we may find numerous examples of motifs following these patterns. The iconography of Chiron's music lesson, similarly represented by artists and craftsmen, subsequently had a great development in the last century of the Roman Republic and in the first

9 See *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (henceforth *LIMC*) 235/451 (S.3).

10 See *LIMC* 214/451 (S.4).

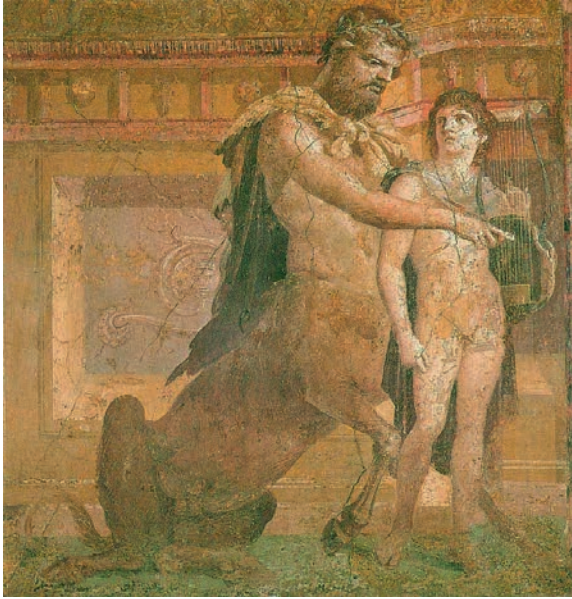


FIGURE 2

The centaur Chiron teaching Achilles to play the lyre. Roman fresco from Herculaneum. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. 1st century AD.

ones of the Roman Empire, as the numerous gems where the wise centaur teaches music to Achilles well attest.¹¹

By tracing the iconographic parallels of this subject, we have been able to verify that musical education also appears as a secondary motif in the representations of other episodes of the hero's life. For example, it is depicted as part of the shield's decoration in the mosaic representing Achilles recognised by Odysseus at Skyros in the 'House of Apollo' in Pompeii (VI.7.23; see S.8). It is also a secondary motif in the magnificent megalography of the 4th style that gives the name to the 'House of wounded Adonis' in Pompeii (VI.7.18). Adonis dying in Aphrodite's arms is the central theme of this composition (love and death) and is flanked by two representations of the music lesson, which imitate small-scale sculptural groups painted in grisaille. On the right side we see Chiron holding the lyre, while on the left side Achilles is playing the stringed instrument.¹²

Another magnificent example of the same motif is the so-called 'Tensa Capitolina' (Rome, Vatican Museums, 966), a ceremonial carriage (fourth century BC) decorated with reliefs on bronze plates depicting scenes from Achilles' life, where his musical instruction cannot be missed.¹³ Equally interesting are the oil

11 London, British Museum, 3191-3192 (cf. *LIMC* 396/451 and 397/451; see S.5f.); London, British Museum, 1923,0401.772 (see S.7).

12 Cf. *LIMC* 238/451 (see S.9).

13 Cf. *LIMC* 324/426 (see S.10.).



FIGURE 3 *Oil lamp with Chiron the centaur and Achilles. Copenhagen, Thorvaldsen Museum.*

lamp preserved in the Thorvaldsen Museum, H1176 (Figure 3) and the gem in the Collection Walters (42.1161; see S.11), showing Chiron half man/half horse placing one arm on a young naked Achilles, who holds the lyre in one of his hands. The idea of the moral effects that music has on human character and its consequent power on education was deeply rooted in Greek and Roman antiquity (cf. Anderson 1966 and Mathiesen 1984, 264ff.). Music (including melodies and rhythms) could cause diverse effects on the human mood: a dichotomy was already presented in the *Iliad*, where Homer distinguished the effeminate

lyre of Paris (*Il.* 3.54f.) from the heroic lyre of Achilles (*Il.* 10.189). According to Ovid, Chiron appeased the impetuous character of the young Achilles (*Ars* 1.11f.) while Seneca (*Tr.* 832-5) points out how Chiron increased the impetuosity of the hero with his music. Not every genre of music or every mode was appropriate for education (see the well-known Plat. *Resp.* 398c-400d). In his *Punica*, Silius Italicus attributed to Chiron a song of cosmogonic theme (*Pun.* 11.453-8), clearly differentiating him from the corrupting chant of the bard Teutras. As Antonio Rio (2012, 387) has pointed out, these verses, which had been discussed by other authors, fit perfectly in this paradigm if we relate them to the moral effects and the pedagogical value of music.¹⁴ Silius Italicus adds an important detail to the myth specifying the subject of Chiron's song (a cosmogony, a philosophical song), with which the centaur trains his pupil.

2.2 Other Centaur-Musicians

The earlier representation of a centaur associated with music that we have been able to identify is the image decorating the central umbo of a warrior's shield depicted in an Attic red-figured *pelikē* from the fifth century BC (Private collection).¹⁵ It is probably an icon of apotropaic nature, like so many others that usually ornate the soldiers' arms. Here the centaur is depicted playing the *barbiton*, an instrument frequently associated with the symposium and the Dionysian entourages. Given the nature of this depiction and its unusual location, it is not possible to identify this centaur as Chiron: nevertheless, this is a very important iconographic artefact attesting the connection of centaurs with music since the Classical period.

As already mentioned, the association of Chiron with music became a widely disseminated motif in the Hellenistic period. In Roman art this idea was extended to his peers too, the other centaurs: their iconographic models developed human instead of bestial traits, representing them increasingly as devoted to amorous idylls and music. Sometimes the old brutal customs of the Pelion inhabitants were still depicted,¹⁶ but the majority of artists preferred to show them in bucolic scenes, accompanied by erotes, musical instruments and female centaureesses or nymphs. Their wild side was replaced by a sweet amorous passion. Young or old, the association of centaurs with various musical instruments (not just *kitharai*, but also rattles, panpipes, cymbals and other instruments of Dionysian nature) became increasingly frequent. This iconographic model turned out to be very suitable for the decoration of villas and

14 Cf. LIMC 370/451.

15 Cf. LIMC 370/451 (see S.12).

16 See the mosaic depicting a pair of centaurs fighting cats of prey from Hadrian's villa, c. 130 BC (Berlin, Altes Museum, Nr. Mos. 1); cf. Brehme 2007, 135ff. no. 78.

private gardens, frescoes, fountains and any decorative fitting, with no apparent hidden symbolism. In glyptics, however, we believe that the representation of the centaur-musicians could be interpreted as a talisman for protection.

Among the most interesting examples of this iconography, which presents the centaur subjugated by love and music, are the magnificent 'Centauro Borghese' (Musée du Louvre, Ma 562)¹⁷ and the famous Capitoline centaurs (Furietti Centaurs) young and old, where the presence of the *syrix* (Figure 5) and the *krotala* (Figure 4) indicate their musical interests. This pair of centaurs sculpted in grey marble, preserved today in the Capitoline Museums (MC 656 and 658), were found in the Villa Adriana in Tivoli by cardinal Alessandro Furietti in 1736. The sculptures bear the signature of the Greek artists Aristaeus and Papias of Aphrodisias, one of the most remarkable sculpture production centres in Asia Minor (see S.14f.). The old centaur is a pathetic figure, a victim of amorous passion, hand-tied in a similar way to the Borghese centaur. The young centaur, showing a smiling face, has one of his hands raised. Van de Grift (1984, 383) attributed the difference in representing the characters of the two figures to the effects that love can produce in the soul, a subject very popular in Hellenistic poetry, whose origin can be traced back to Plato's *Phaedrus*. The topic of centaurs in love might be also connected to the beautiful story of love and death of Cyllarus and Hylomene narrated by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, an episode inserted in the description of the battle between the Lapiths and the centaurs (*Met.* 12.393-429, on which see DeBrohun 2004).

In the triclinium of the so called 'Villa of Cicero', located on the outskirts of Pompeii (Pompeii, Herculaneum Gate West Side, HGWo6) a series of elegant paintings on a black background with the depiction of centaurs was found. In these frescoes, a centaur and a centaress instruct two young boys in the art of music (Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9133).¹⁸ The subject of the centaurs' family, and especially the presence of the figure of the centaress (both of them motifs of Hellenistic origin), became widespread in Roman art. In these frescoes preserved in Naples, the subject is depicted with exquisite technique, according to the stylistic assumptions of the so-called 3rd style. A youthful and beardless centaur, represented in full gallop, instructs a young man (who seems to attend to the lesson zealously) in the art of the lyre. The male centaur holds a thyrsos and a tympanum, traditional Dionysian attributes that seem to have contaminated these iconographic themes. In front of

17 This famous sculpture group is a Roman copy (first or second century AD) of a Greek original from Hellenistic times (from the second century BC), found in Rome in the seventeenth century (see S.13).

18 Rollicking centaurs, first century BC.



FIGURE 4 *Old centaur by Aristeas and Papias of Aphrodisias. Gray-black marble, Roman copy (117-138 AD) after Hellenistic original. Roma, Musei Capitolini.*

PHOTOGRAPH: JASTROW (PUBLIC DOMAIN).



FIGURE 5 *Young centaur by Aristeeas and Papias of Aphrodisias. Lucullan marble, Roman copy after Hellenistic original. Roma, Musei Capitolini.*

PHOTOGRAPH: JASTROW (PUBLIC DOMAIN).

the two figures, a centauress (also in a dynamic position), plays the lyre and the *krotala* with a young man next to her (see S.16).

Oil lamps,¹⁹ gems²⁰ and many other sorts of artistic media continued to represent this image of centaurs associated with music, wine and love. Among them, luxury tableware especially stands out: great pateras, jars or cups (*skyphoi*) made out of gilded silver. One of the most magnificent examples in the Hispanic art is the Santisteban del Puerto *paterna*, from Jaen, showing an eclectic iconography that dates back to the second century BC (Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. 1917/39/1). Its central clypeus shows a motif of Iberian roots (a wolf devouring a human head surrounded by snakes), encircled by a purely Hellenistic motif (centaurs and centauresses carrying musical instruments in a nocturnal banquet, with erotes and trophies) (Figures 6 and 7; see also S.18). This peculiar depiction is deeply rooted in the Hellenistic iconographic repertoire, not only for the presence of young centaurs but also for the presence of centauresses. There are nine centaurs separated by trees in a procession or thiasos, represented in motion towards the same direction, with their clothes moved by the wind. Four of the nine figures play musical instruments: one centauress blows the *tibia* (*tibicina*), another one hits the cymbals and a third one is holding a tympanum, while a centaur strikes the lyre with a plectrum. The rest of the figures hold in their hands a tray of fruits, a crater, a torch and a *paterna*. Griñó and Olmos (1982, 15) have pointed out that this iconography was used to describe the blessed and happy life of the dead nobleman in the underworld (including hunting, banqueting, music, wine, festive conversation, occasional drunkenness, etc.). The interpretation of these iconographic motifs is confirmed by the morphology of the work, which suggests that the object was used in a funerary context.

Dated from the first century AD are the magnificent cups (*skyphoi*) known as the 'Berthouville hoard', a treasure composed of one hundred silver objects discovered in Berthouville, near Evreux, in 1830. They are *ex-votos* offered by Q. Domitius Tutus in a small shrine dedicated to Mercury Canetonensis. This collection (conserved in the Cabinet of Médailles, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale) includes, on the one hand, some tableware pieces from Italian workshops (first century AD) and, on the other hand, votive pieces from the workshops of Gaul (second century AD). In these artworks the main decorative motif consists in mourning centaurs and centauresses associated with erotes,

19 See the centaur playing the lyre now at Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum (Accession no. JHUAM HT 321), from the first century BC or first century AD. Provenance: Syria.

20 Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, AGD III 174, Gem 184 (cf. *LIMC* 65/451; see S.17).



FIGURE 6 *Patera from Santiesteban del Puerto. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional. 250-76 BC (estimated chronology).*

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holding *kithara*, *tympanon* and *krotala* in an eminently Dionysian context as assumed by Grift (1984, 377-88), realising a suitable subject for the container they decorate (Figures 8 and 9; see also S.19). The scholar carried out a detailed analysis of the *skyphoi*, searching for the most remarkable iconographic parallels and highlighting the contrast of passions (joy, suffering, ecstasy, tranquillity) that may be identified in the centaurs represented on these pieces of artwork. Grift also suggested that the use of Dionysian iconography in private contexts, at the beginning of the Imperial era, responded to the same ideology reflected by the poets of the time (Diodorus Siculus, Horace, Propertius and Rufinus). Their writings expressed a certain moralization of the theme, which should be understood as the reflection of the dual nature of Dionysus (Dionysus Dichotomus), whose power is associated with life and fecundity. In Grift's own words, "the baffling profusion of Bacchic images does not represent some haphazard revel but instead a carefully orchestrated allegory concerned with the two-fold nature of Dionysus. The leading players in this entertaining



FIGURE 7 *Patena from Santiesteban del Puerto. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional. 250-76 BC (estimated chronology).*

drama are the centaurs. The contrasting demeanor of each couple demonstrates the frenzied freedom and painful enslavement induced by the god's peculiar nature" (Griff 1984, 385).

In our opinion, the dual Dionysian nature is evident not only in the expression and character of the figures of the centaurs and centaresses, but also in the variety of musical instruments associated with them, including cordophones, aerophones and idiophones. Moreover, it is worth noting that this rich iconographic repertoire of Bacchic motifs was to be perpetuated for a long time in Roman art, being one of the most characteristic subjects in the decoration sarcophagi from the third century AD.

As we have already noted, this association of the centaurs with the Dionysian world originated in Hellenistic art and was later reflected in many artistic media, especially during the Roman Imperial period. It was regarded as an appropriate subject for different contexts, from the banquet to the funerary sphere. It can be simply a decorative motif or, as we have pointed out, susceptible to a process of allegorization. On many occasions, the centaur-musicians precede the triumphal chariot of Dionysus and Ariadne, as in the mosaic of the 'House of Aion' in Nea Paphos, Cyprus, which has been studied



FIGURE 8 *Detail of a silver cup, part of the Berthouville treasure. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet of Médailles, c. 50 AD.*

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by Olszewski (2013) or in the less famous mosaic found in Sheik Zuweid (Sinai; see S.20).

3 Centaur-Musicians in Funerary Contexts

In this last section of the paper, we will focus our attention on Roman funerary contexts, in which the presence of centaur-musicians (or more generally, centaurs associated with music) is massive. The relationship of the centaurs with the underworld is attested in several Latin literary sources in which, along with other hybrid and monstrous beings, they are called 'guardians' of the Hades' gates. See, for example, Verg. *Aen.* 6.282-289 and Sen. *HF* 768-781:

The God of Sleep there hides his heavy head, and empty dreams on every leaf are spread. Of various forms unnumbered spectres more, Centaurs and double shapes besiege the door. Before the passage, horrid Hydra stands, and Briareus with all his hundred hands; Gorgons, Geryon with his triple frame, and vain Chimaera vomits empty flame.

TRANSL. BY DRYDEN 2009, 224



FIGURE 9 *Detail of a silver cup, part of the Berthouville treasure. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet of Médailles, c. 50 AD.*

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As ferryman, he controls his craft himself with a long pole. He was bringing the boat to shore empty of cargo to collect more shades. Alcides demanded room, but the crowd gave way, dread Charon shouted, 'Where are you heading so boldly? Check your hurried steps'. Alcmena's son brooked no delay, but coerced the sailor into subjection with his own pole, and climbed aboard. The skiff, which could carry crowds, foundered beneath this one man; it settled overburdened in the water, and drank in the Lethe on each side as it rocked. Then the monsters he had conquered panicked, savage Centaurs [...] seeking the farthest recesses of the Stygian swamp, the Lernaean labour submerged its prolific heads.

TRANSL. BY FITCH 2014, 111

The first representation of this motif is to be found in Archaic period Etruscan art. The pediment of one of the *aedicula* in the columbarium of Pomponius Hylas, (Roma, Via di Porta San Sebastiano) is from Roman times, as noted by

Newton and Ashby (1910). This stucco relief from the Flavian period depicts Chiron's music lesson to the young Achilles, reproducing the Hellenistic model mentioned above. The heroic death (symbolised by Achilles' character) seems hence to have been an appropriate topic for the funerary context. Moreover, in the same columbarium, there is also a painted pediment showing a fresco with a young naked male figure (identified as the personification of Fate) flanked by two ichthyocentaurs blowing into their *tibiae*, according to a very well-known prototype in Roman art (see S.22).

As the culmination of this long iconographic tradition, we should mention that the presence of centaur-musicians became extremely common especially in Roman sarcophagi between the end of the second and the third centuries AD. The Bacchic thiasos started to appear as a popular motif on the front of marbles. It was not just an ornamental design: it conveyed a deeper symbolic message, the promise of resurrection that Dionysus offered in his Mysteries. This is the reason why, in our opinion, it became a very suitable motif, full of decorum, for a funerary monument. In these reliefs, the processional members play their favourite instruments (*aulos*, *syrix*, *krotala*, *tympanon*), while performing orgiastic dances at a frantic rhythm. Centaurs appear as participants of the Dionysian procession, becoming part of the promise of resurrection that the god of wine and his merry entourage symbolically evoked. Some of them are young, some of them are old: even children are represented, mostly playing *kitharai* and pipes.²¹

As an additional element, let us remember that the marine creatures were those in charge of transporting the soul of the dead to the great beyond (cf. Rumpf 1939). For this very reason, the marine mythological beings also became very popular motifs in the decoration of Roman sarcophagi, where the marine centaurs (*ichthyokentauroi*) hold the clypeus with the portrait of the deceased and, occasionally, are depicted in idylls with the marine nymphs, delighting them with the sound of their instruments (Figure 10). Rodríguez (1993) has highlighted that this voyage, conceived of as a pleasing one, was always accompanied by music, offering a positive image of death and its transition and reducing the sorrow and favouring liberation.

Leaving aside the representation of marine centaurs blowing conchs or *tubae* due to the affinity with the tritons (which appear in Pompeian frescoes and in the mosaics from the first and second century AD), the marine centaurs associated with the funerary context usually look mature, bearded and realizing a pathetic gesture, seeming to prefer the sweet sound of the lyre or the *kithara* to interact with the Nereids. There are many examples, with their

21 See the sarcophagus from the British Museum, 1805,0703.130 (see S.22).

corresponding variants, in which the mythical beings of the sea become part of a marine thiasos, carrying the image of the deceased in a clypeus while playing music and romantically interacting with the Nereids during the journey to the Afterlife. Little *erotes* emphasize the erotic nature of the group, in many cases, also playing some musical instruments like the lyre and the *aulos* (and occasionally even shells or marine horns). Like any other sea creature, ichthyocentaurs symbolically guaranteed the successful transition of the soul to the Underworld, an idea rooted in the classical tradition from the very beginning. As suggested by Zanker and Ewald (2012) and emphasised by Rodríguez (1993) and Koortbojian (1995), the Earth and the Sea, the two great telluric forces incarnated through the Dionysian and the marine thiasos, were profound expressions of life and death and acted as a promise of resurrection. As one example of this, we would like to mention the sarcophagus housed in the Museo Nazionale Romano (second half of the second century AD), whose front is decorated with a procession of Nereids riding on the back of four ichthyocentaur-musicians (two young and two mature), who respectively play a lyre, a conch and a *tibia*. The presence of small *erotes* suggests the idyll of these half-feline beings with the beautiful marine nymphs.

Occasionally, the motif of Chiron's music lesson and his singing reappears in Roman sarcophagi. Such is the case of the sarcophagus found in Via Casilina (Torraccia, second half of the third century AD), where the scene is magnificently carved on both sides. This representation (Figure 11) follows the traditional models disseminated through the different artistic media to which we have already referred (see S.23).

Conclusions

Through this iconographic survey, we have been able to verify how, in the Greek imagination, the centaurs' figures were used to embody different ideas, whose semantic interpretation evolved over time. With the exception of wise Chiron (of divine lineage), instructor of heroes, the first centaurs mentioned in the literary sources are beings dominated by their bestial instincts, aliens to civilization and hospitality. Their legendary battle against the Greeks, the Centaureomachy, was used in the decoration of public buildings to express political opposition between civilization and barbarism, order and chaos, Greeks and Barbarians.

These brutal beings were, then, gradually humanised in literary and artistic works throughout the Hellenistic period, progressively becoming musicians. Some authors, such as Ovid (quoted above) even referred to love



FIGURE 10 *Marine centaurs playing instruments, Sarcophagus. Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano, 2nd century AD.*



FIGURE 11 *Roman sarcophagus, Achilles and Chiron. White marble. Roma, Museo Nazionale delle Terme. 2nd to 3rd century AD.*

PHOTOGRAPH: JASTROW (PUBLIC DOMAIN).

stories associated with them. In our opinion, Chiron's fame and his uplifting capacity for singing might have been one of the reasons behind this semiotic metamorphosis, which overpowered their original wild nature. In her latest work, Rodríguez (2013) has noted that other brutal beings, such as the cyclops Polyphemus, were turned into musicians in the verses of bucolic poets.

As we have pointed out, the first iconographic testimony of a centaur associated with a musical instrument may be found in a shield's decoration on a Greek vase of the Classical Period (cf. *supra*), depicted as an exceptional subject. The iconography of the centaur-musicians did not, then, become popular until the third century BC, and this happened probably thanks to some (now lost) literary sources and Roman monuments soon imitated in a multiplicity of artistic media, such as the sculpture groups mentioned by Pliny the Elder in *Saeptha Iulia*. The most represented motif in the first years of the second century BC was Chiron's music lesson to the young Achilles, of which the coinage

of King Prusias II of Bithyna is the earliest surviving example. Later the motif was repeated profusely in the Hellenistic glyptics (perhaps with a moralizing and apotropaic symbolism), in luxury tableware (the true meaning of which is now difficult to envisage) and in other works of a purely decorative nature, such as frescoes and mosaics in private villas.

In some cases, the subject of the centaur teaching Achilles became an iconographic motif in the funerary context too, not only because of the allusion to death and resurrection (through fame) of the Peleid, but also because some literary sources, as already mentioned, placed the centaurs at the doors of the Hades, transforming them into beings of the Underworld. In the funerary context, centaurs became common participants in the bacchanalian procession, where music was always present. In this context, their images were used to symbolise the victory over death. Some centaurs were even transformed into centaur-fish (*ichthyokentauroi*) and were erotically involved with beautiful Nereids: these scenes always included the presence of instrumental music (to which we may, perhaps, add the sea murmur and the rhythmic flow of the waves). The sweet music they played accompanied the deceased to their final resting place, an allusion to a pleasant journey to the Afterlife and eternal happiness.

Just as it happens in the myth of Orpheus and the animals, or in the famous romance between Polyphemus and Galatea, we believe that the metaphor underlying the iconographic image of the centaur-musicians is the immense power of music, able to appease anger (as in the case of Achilles) or to lessen the most bestial instincts and passions (as in the case of Chiron). This idea is closely related to education, civilization and, ultimately, the elevation of human beings, hence capable of achieving immortality (Figure 11).

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S. 14

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S.20

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S.21

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S.23

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