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# WORSHIPPING PRIAPOS: EROTES AND PSYCHAI IN DIONYSIAN IMAGERY. ICONOGRAPHIC NOTES ON THE IVORY VENEERS FROM THE VILLA DEI PAPIRI, HERCULANEUM\*

GIANFRANCO ADORNATO

To Ken, *amicus angelenus*

**Riassunto.** Il presente articolo si focalizza sull'iconografia degli avori rinvenuti nella Villa dei Papiri a Ercolano, soffermandosi sull'associazione dell'immagine di Priapo con Dioniso, Eroti e Psychai. L'iconografia sugli avori, in particolare il paesaggio sacro e Priapo, sarà contestualizzata all'interno degli spazi domestici della Villa e di altri casi da Pompei. Inoltre, le fonti letterarie, soprattutto i *Carmina Priapea*, ci consentiranno di comprendere meglio il significato e i messaggi di questa peculiare combinazione di Priapo con Eroti e Psychai, imbevuta di reminiscenze ellenistiche. I rilievi eburnei confermano l'elevato livello del proprietario (Lucio Calpurnio Pisone Cesonino?) e il suo apprezzamento materiale e intellettuale verso questi oggetti di lusso e i loro motivi iconografici.

**Περὶληψη.** Το παρόν άρθρο εστιάζει στην εικονογραφία των ελεφαντοστέινων που βρέθηκαν στην Έπαυλη των Παπύρων στο Herculaneum, με ιδιαίτερη προσοχή στη σύνδεση της εικόνας του Πριάπου με τον Διόνυσο, Έρωτες και Ψυχές. Η εικονογραφία στα ελεφαντοστέινα, ιδιαίτερα το ιερό τοπίο και ο Πρίαπος, θα εξεταστεί στο πλαίσιο των χώρων της Έπαυλης και άλλων περιπτώσεων από την Πομπηία. Οι γραπτές πηγές, εξάλλου, κυρίως το *Carmina Priapea*, θα μας επιτρέψουν να κατανοήσουμε καλύτερα τη σημασία και τα μηνύματα αυτού του ιδιαίτερου συνδυασμού του Πριάπου με Έρωτες και Ψυχές, που είναι διαποτισμένος με ελληνιστικές αναμνήσεις. Τα ελεφαντοστέινα ανάγλυφα επιβεβαιώνουν το υψηλό επίπεδο του ιδιοκτήτη (Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus;) και την υλική και πνευματική εκτίμησή του για αυτά τα πολύτιμα αντικείμενα και τα εικονογραφικά μοτίβα τους.

**Abstract.** The present article focuses on the iconography of the ivory veneers from the Villa dei Papiri, Herculaneum, in particular on the visual association of Priapos with Dionysos, Cupids, and Psychai. The iconography on the ivory veneers – mainly the sacred landscape and Priapos – will be contextualized within the domestic spaces of the Villa and other cases from Pompeii. Furthermore, literary sources, in particular the *Carmina Priapea*, will allow us to better understand meaning and messages of the peculiar combination of Priapos with Cupids and Psychai, imbued with Hellenistic resonances. The ivory reliefs confirm the owner's (Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus?) highly-cultivated erudition and his material and intellectual appreciation towards these luxurious objects and the iconographic motifs.

## INTRODUCTION

During the 2007 excavation in the area of the lower terrace and the monumental hall of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum, the remains of wooden furniture and ivory veneers were discovered (Figs. 1-2a-b)<sup>1</sup>: this sector seems to have been added to the Villa's architectural complex; structures and decorations suggest a date around the beginning of the first century AD and have been interpreted as a monumental link between the main building and the coastline. The lower terrace with its panoramic salon was a seaside

\* I would like to express my warmest thanks to Director Prof. Emanuele Papi and Riccardo Di Cesare for accepting the manuscript and providing me with insightful comments on a previous draft. The main core of this article has been delivered at the symposium *From Ashes: New Discoveries from Herculaneum and the Bay of Naples* (Getty Villa, October 20, 2019) on the occasion of the exhibition *Buried by Vesuvius: The Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum*, curated by Kenneth Lapatin. For the invitation and the perfect organization, I would like to deeply thank Timothy Potts, Jeffrey Spier, and Lisa Guzzetta. Significant comments have been provided by Bettina Bergmann, Domenico Esposito, Chris Hallett, Kenneth Lapatin, Sarah Morris, John Pollini, Ambra Spinelli, Andrew

Stewart. More recently, I had the chance to discuss my article with Maria Paola Guidobaldi, who discovered the ivory veneers and gave me important information regarding the excavation: a special thanks also for her kind help with photographs. To Director Francesco Sirano and his staff - Francesca Cantone, Maria Grazia Romano, and Marina Caso - I owe the excellent images of the ivories; the drawings were made by Giuseppe Rignanese; Margaret Kurkoski revised the English text; Maria Rosaria Luberto gave me support in preparing the final version of the article.

<sup>1</sup> GUIDOBALDI 2010 and 2019; on recent excavations at the Villa CAMARDO 2019; on the architecture of the Villa GUIDOBALDI *et alii* 2009; GUIDOBALDI 2011; ΖΑΡΜΑΚΟΥΠΙ 2014, with bibliography.





Fig. 1. Digital reconstruction of the Villa dei Papiri, from the southeast  
(© Museo Archeologico Virtuale di Ercolano).

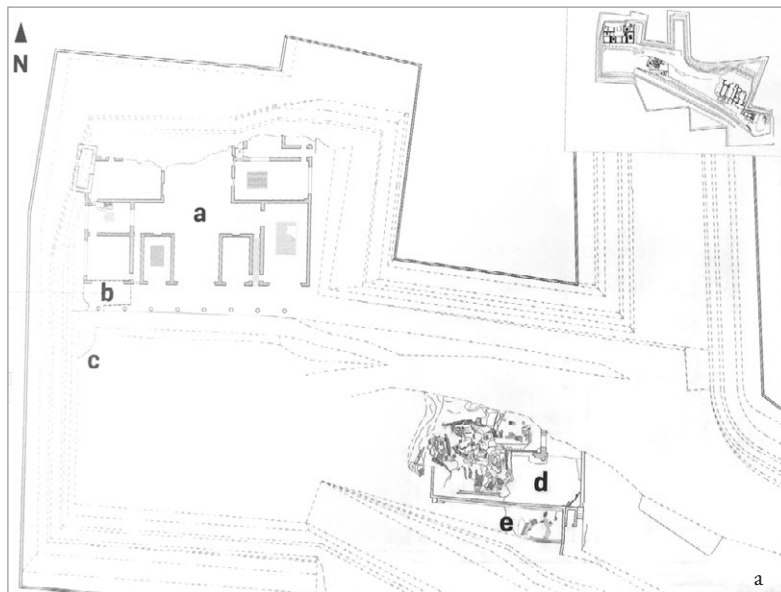


Fig. 2. a) Plan of the recent excavations; b) Aerial view of the collapsed monumental hall of the Villa dei Papiri (courtesy of Maria Paola Guidobaldi).

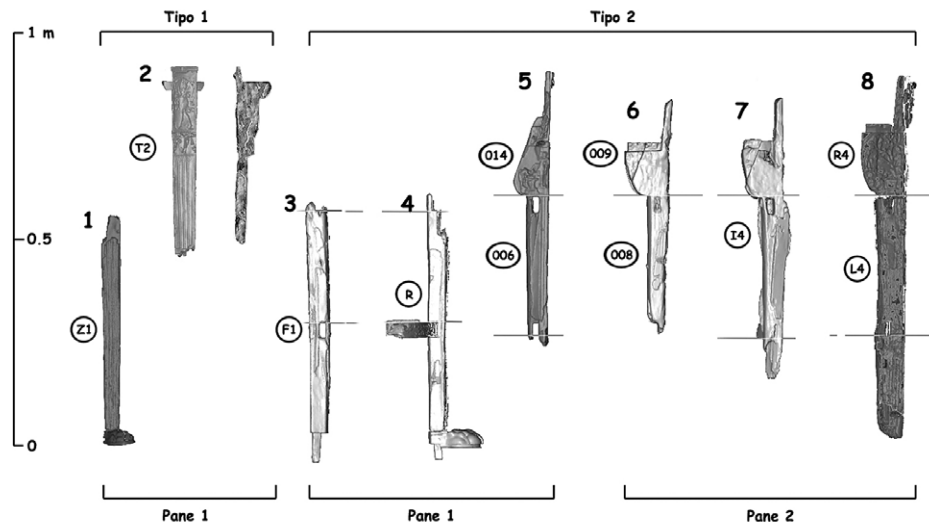


Fig. 3. Typological analysis (courtesy of Maria Paola Guidobaldi).

pavilion, decorated with statues, marble floor in opus sectile, and precious furnishings. Indeed, during the 1997 excavation of the monumental hall a statue of a peplophoros and the head of an Amazon were discovered, enriching the archaeological and architectural settings of the area.

The unique pieces of ivory reliefs represent a significant addition to the unprecedented quantity of astonishing sculpture in bronze and in marble<sup>2</sup>, the mosaics with geometric motifs<sup>3</sup>, the colorful frescoes<sup>4</sup>, the coffered ceiling and stucco decoration with weapons<sup>5</sup>, the carbonized papyrus scrolls<sup>6</sup>, and numerous other categories of remarkable objects within the peculiar setting and architecture of this prestigious Villa.

After my autopsy of the ivory veneers at the first international display during the lavish exhibition *Buried by Vesuvius: The Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum*, elegantly curated by Kenneth Lapatin and hosted at the Getty Villa (June 26-October 28, 2019), on these rare archaeological pieces, I would like to focus mainly on the iconography, the characters depicted, the narrative and meaning within the domestic context, and in comparison to other media.

## 1. TECHNIQUE AND ICONOGRAPHY

The wooden (*Fraxinus excelsior*) structure of the pieces is clad in smooth or elegantly carved ivory veneers, characterized by a brown color resulting from exposure to high temperatures: the color is a consequence of the migrations and absorption of the tannins in the wood and the effects of the high temperatures. Unfortunately it is not possible to reconstruct the eight wooden elements, to be interpreted as the legs of furnishings, since they belong to at least five to seven different objects<sup>7</sup>. Thanks to technical and formal patterns, the wooden legs have been categorized into two types by M.P. Guidobaldi (Fig. 3)<sup>8</sup>: type 1, attested only by two elements (Nos. 1 and 2 in Guidobaldi's scheme), belongs to three-legged, circular-plan tables, with straight and modeled legs ending in the shape of feline paws; the joint between the legs consists of three linear sections held by a knob in the middle; a metal pin has to be reconstructed under the paws since ferrous concretion is visible in that area. The six legs of type 2 belong to tripods (Fig. 4a-b), according

<sup>2</sup> COMPARETTI-PETRA 1883; PANDERMALIS 1971; WOJCIK 1986; MATTUSCH 2005; HALLETT 2019.

<sup>3</sup> PAPACCIO 2019.

<sup>4</sup> ESPOSITO 2019.

<sup>5</sup> GUIDOBALDI-ESPOSITO 2009.

<sup>6</sup> SIDER 2019.

<sup>7</sup> GUIDOBALDI 2010. After Guidobaldi's important contribution on discovery, reconstruction, and iconography, brief mentions of the ivory veneers are in WALLACE HADRILL 2013, 118; ROBERTS 2013, 199; LAPATIN 2015, 209.

<sup>8</sup> On technical aspects and typology, see the careful analysis by GUIDOBALDI 2010, 80: «la gamba di Tipo 1...è una gamba dritta, rastremata verso il basso, di spessore di circa 2,5 centimetri, terminante a zampa felina e modanata in un'elaborata e ampia voluta nella sua parte sommitale...nelle due gambe di Tipo 1, infatti, mancano le traversine circolari quali elementi di raccordo»; 85 «in tutte le gambe di Tipo 2, ma in particolare nelle gambe n. 6 e n. 7, è inoltre osservabile una lavorazione della faccia superiore della voluta «a coda di rondine» su cui incastrava, fungendo da cerniera fra la parte principale della voluta e il cuneo lavorato separatamente, un terzo elemento ligneo» and 2019, 116-119.

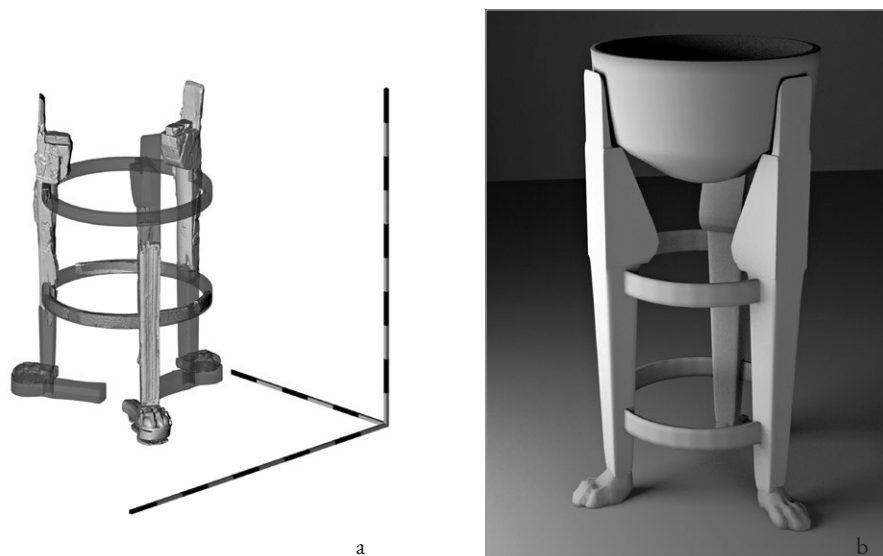


Fig. 4. Reconstructions of the tripod by M.P. Guidobaldi (a) and G. Rignanesi (b) (courtesy of Maria Paola Guidobaldi; © G. Rignanesi).

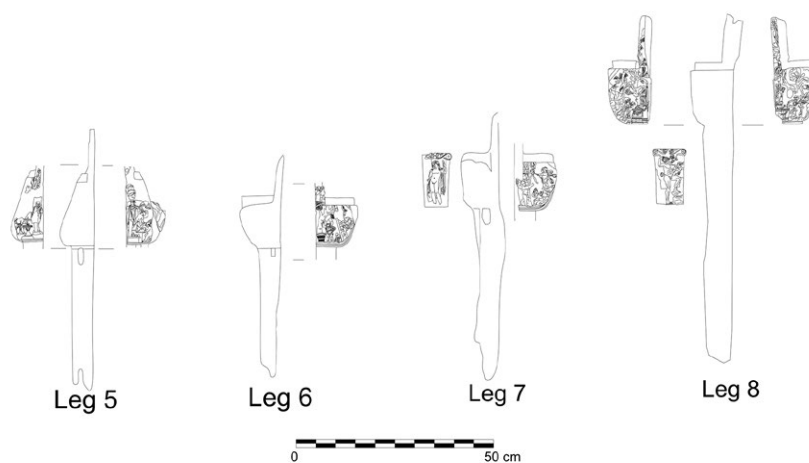


Fig. 5. Drawings of legs 5-8 with the ivory veneers (© G. Rignanesi).

to Guidobaldi's investigation (Nos. 3-8 of the scheme): the estimated height of type 2 is 89 centimeters, the legs were connected to each other by two circular hoops (cm 47 in diameter, placed cm 27 apart along the vertical axis), covered by an ivory veneer with a vegetal frieze of laurel and animal skulls; on top, the legs present a volute shape, worked in two distinct parts glued together before being clad with an ivory veneer; at the bottom, a sort of pin is inserted into leonine paws made of ivory and linked with a "3-spoke" base. From a stylistic point of view, two hands have been identified: one carver made legs 5 and 6, characterized by one or two figures with an inanimate element; a second master carved legs 7 and 8, composing scenes with at least three figures and a more detailed landscape.

This paper will focus on the second type, in particular on legs Nos. 5, 6, 7, 8 (Fig. 5) and the peculiar iconography on the carved ivory veneers.

Leg 5 has figured scenes on both sides (Figs. 6a-b; 7a-c)<sup>9</sup>. On the left, an Eros (or Cupid) is leaning over a flaming altar offering a pine cone to an ithyphallic herm of Priapos<sup>10</sup>; on the right side, one Eros is

<sup>9</sup> Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco 6-7-14; cm 6x5.5x67.5; LAPATIN 2019, 222-225 [F. Sirano].

<sup>10</sup> GUIDOBALDI 2019, 120 identifies the figure of herm as Dionysos,

since the character is young and beardless. As we will learn from literary sources, Priapos is sometimes represented as a young god; see HUNT 2016, 286, n. 127: «it could also call to mind Priapos».

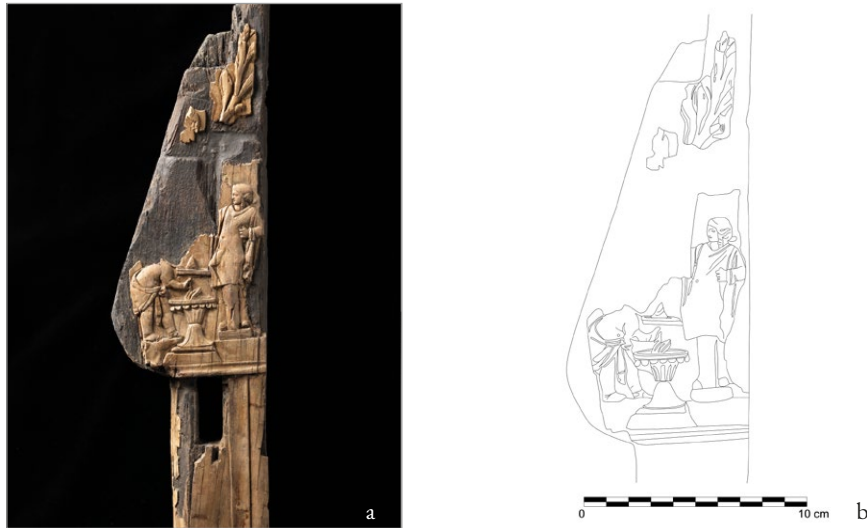


Fig. 6. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco 6-7-14. Leg 5: left side (a) and drawing (b) (a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b: © G. Rignanesi).

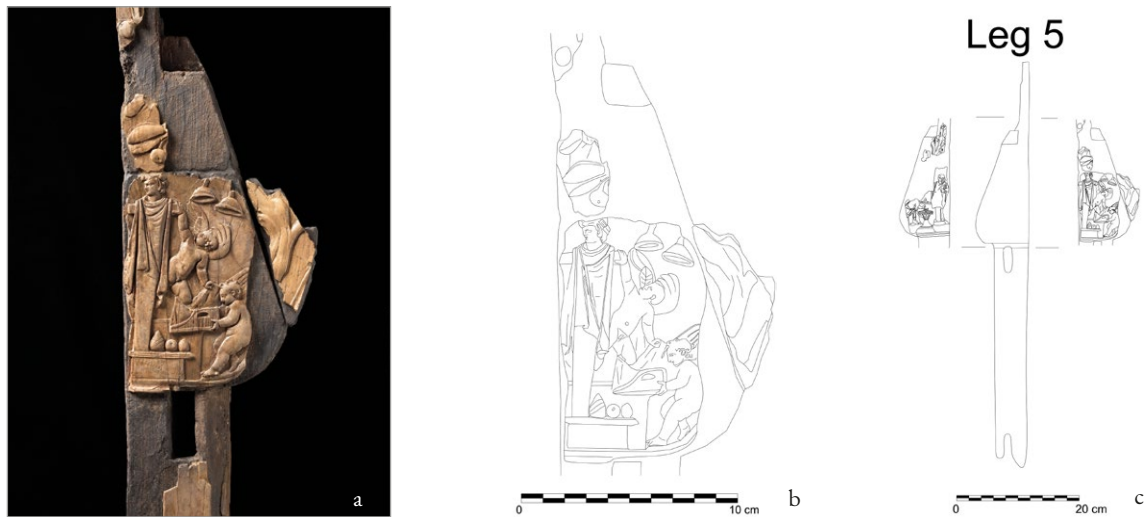


Fig. 7. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco 6-7-14. Leg 5: right side (a) and drawings (b-c) (a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b-c: © G. Rignanesi).

touching the left shoulder of a draped herm of Pan, a second one is presenting a box and offering a pine cone and fruits on the base<sup>11</sup>. The scene is framed by a tree, from which a pair of cymbals hangs down.

On leg 6<sup>12</sup> three Cupids are preserved (Fig. 8a-c), laboring around a pine tree: at the bottom, one Cupid is standing and gathering pine cones, wearing a short chiton and a pointed hat on the head; another is climbing a ladder and holding a chest around the left arm; a third one is visible on the left upper side: he is naked and rests his left foot on the pine needles. The Cupids have been said to resemble Attis, a Phrygian god of vegetation very close to Cybele, as indicated by the clothes and the presence of the sacred tree<sup>13</sup>. This assumption, however, is not based on established iconographic comparisons, since Attis wears a Phrygian cap, a soft conical cap with the apex bent over and not a pointed one, as in the case of the cupids<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> GUIDOBALDI 2019, 120 and LAPATIN 2019, 222 [F. Sirano] interpret the box as a *cista mystica* offered to the herm. According to Guidobaldi, the scene evokes the Dionysian rite of the *liknophoroi*, which consisted of carrying the *mystica vannus* (sacred basket) containing a phallus.

<sup>12</sup> Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco 8-9; cm 6x5.5x57.5; GUIDOBALDI 2010, 92-93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ead.* 2019, 120: «a cupid near a pine, a tree sacred to Attis, dressed just like Attis».

<sup>14</sup> LIMCI, s.v. «Attis» [M.J. Vermaseren - M. De Boer].



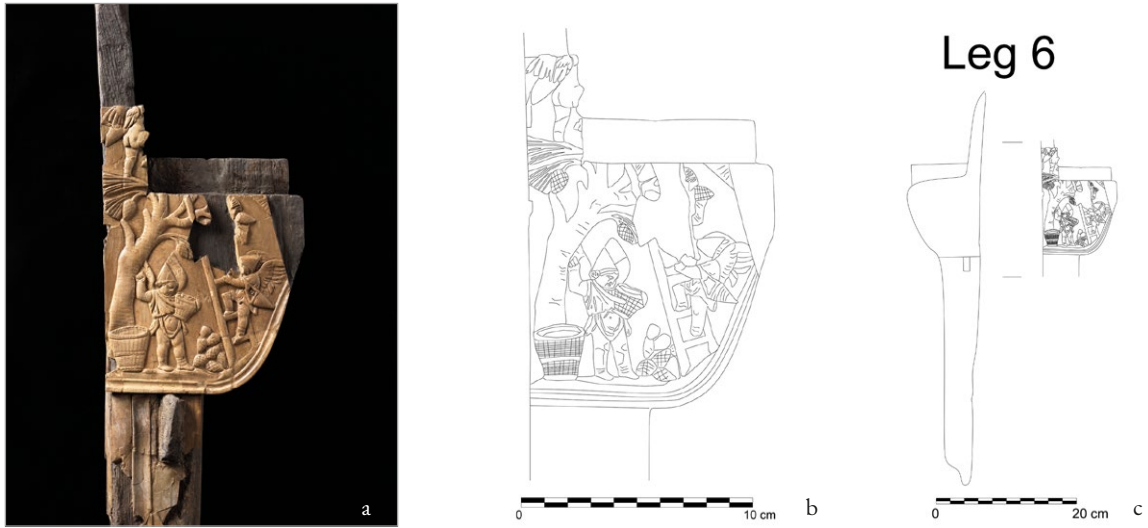


Fig. 8. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco 8-9. Leg 6: right side (a) and drawings (b-c)  
(a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b-c: © G. Rignanesi).



Fig. 9. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco F1, 4, O4. Leg 7: right side (a) and drawing (b)  
(a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b: © G. Rignanesi).

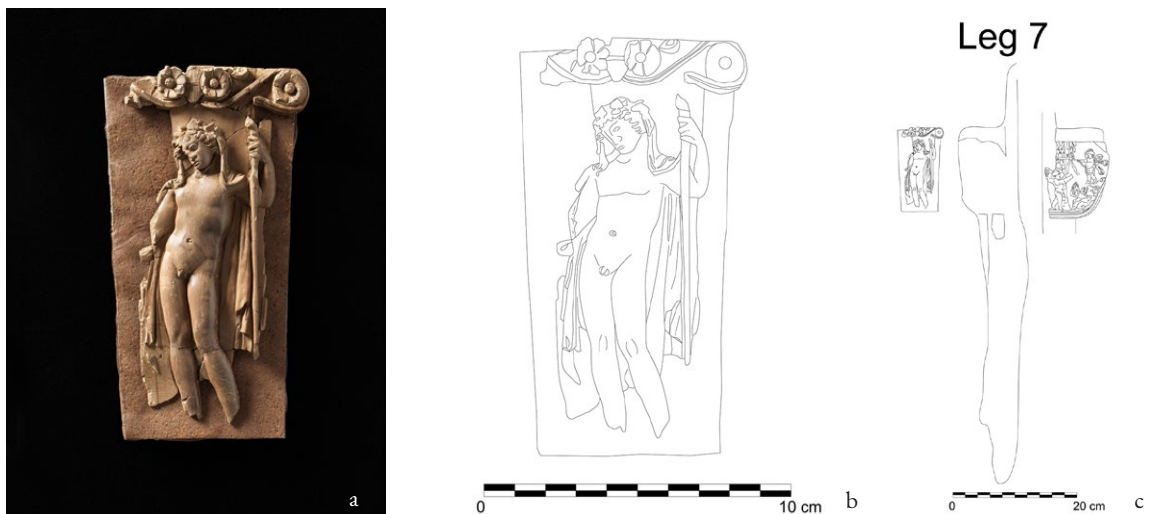


Fig. 10. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco F1, 4, O4. Leg 7: frontal plaque (a) and drawings (b-c)  
(a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b-c: © G. Rignanesi).

From my point of view, the pointed hat and the short clothes recall countrymen, peasants, servants or figures of low social status, here intent on gathering pine cones from the tree<sup>15</sup>.

Leg 7 has on the right side three Erotes next to the trunk of a palm tree (Fig. 9a-b)<sup>16</sup>; the fragments of the hoops are decorated with a laurel branch and berries. One Cupid standing on a rocky ground is festooning the tree with a knotted fillet; a second Cupid is standing on the left side and a third one is crouching, bending the right hand on his face. On the frontal plaque, a nude and crowned Dionysos (Fig. 10a-c) stands holding the thyrsus in his left hand; the god displays a soft body and wears a mantle on his head and shoulders. The divine figure is framed by a volute capital with rosettes.

In the volute of leg 8<sup>17</sup>, on the left side we discern a scene of an offering to the statue of the ithyphallic Priapos (Figs. 11a-b; 12a-b; 13a-c): the clothed statue is located on a high base, next to a pine tree: a syrinx or Pan-flute hangs from the tree; at the bottom, a psyche is moving towards the altar and the cult statue, holding a tray with pine cones; on the left side, a naked cupid plays the aulos, standing on a high rock. On the right side of the volute, there is a scene of offering to a herm of Priapos: the god is naked, but for a mantle on the chest and around the shoulders, and holds a mantle with fruits in front of him. A cupid is approaching the altar, holding a tray in the raised left arm; on the altar and on the base of the herm, we can discern fruits and pine cones. From the tree, probably a pear tree, a tympanum and cymbals hang down. On the right end, a psyche is seated on a rocky area and plays a Phrygian aulos (*tibiae impares*): one pipe is straight and the left one ends in a curved portion. Another psyche is easily discernable on the left upper side: winged, she is seated and moves the head to the right. On the narrow side, a slender, muscled Satyr is standing on a rock with the left foot, holding a mask in his raised right hand and a cupid in the left one (Fig. 12a)<sup>18</sup>.

These objects have been interpreted as religious tools rather than luxury furnishings, since the figurative volutes show scenes depicting bloodless sacrifices<sup>19</sup>.

Looking at a variety of media (mainly painting and luxury objects) and domestic contexts, however, it is worth noting that Erotes and Psychai are closely associated with Dionysos, Priapos and his lively community, and, from my perspective, it is not necessary to link their presence and iconography to religious practices and rituals. In the following paragraphs, exploiting visual and textual evidence, it is my purpose to demonstrate that the iconography on the ivory veneers is not only related to bloodless sacrifices, but to the main character, Priapos, who is strictly intertwined with Dionysian motifs and, in particular, with Erotes and Psychai. In order to understand the meaning of the scenes on the ivory veneers more deeply, we will focus on and investigate some specific topics: 1) the sacred landscape and the offering to Priapos; 2) the presence of Erotes and Psychai, and Priapos in the domestic context of the Villa dei Papiri; 3) Priapos and Cupids in other domestic context (i.e., the House of the Vettii); 4) Priapos and protection. These aspects will be highlighted by literary sources, in particular the *Carmina Priapea*, offering an ekphrastic and intellectual perspective to the archaeological evidence.

## 2. PRIAPOS: HORTORUM CUSTOS ET TUTELA

First of all, I would like to concentrate on the sacred landscape and sacrifice scenes carved on the ivory veneers<sup>20</sup>. These are a very common subject in Pompeian wall-painting, usually classified as “pittura di

<sup>15</sup> See HIMMELMANN 1980 and LAUBSCHER 1982. On a first inspection, I was inclined to recognize in these figures a sort of parody of Attis and his activities, as already proposed by GUIDOBALDI 2010. This impression has been dismissed since the Erotes do not exhibit specific iconographic traits to be linked to Attis, namely the Phrygian cap and the long-sleeved vest. Since the two patterns are not represented on the Erotes carved on ivory veneers, it is not possible to support this hypothesis.

<sup>16</sup> Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco F1 (leg and hoop), I4, and O4; cm 6x5.5x6.9; GUIDOBALDI 2010, 93-94; LAPATIN 2019, 220 [F. Sirano].

<sup>17</sup> Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco R4, L4; cm 6.5x5.5x8.4.5; GUIDOBALDI 2010, 95-96.

<sup>18</sup> I differ from the identification proposed *ibid.*, 96 «un Satiro con in braccio Dioniso bambino, che egli intrattiene facendolo giocare con una maschera tragica; la composizione si ispira evidentemente, con varianti, al gruppo prassitelico di Hermes con Dioniso bambino da

Olimpia» and *Ead.* 2019, 123: «a nude satyr holding in his arms the baby Dionysos, teasing him with a mask of tragedy». To my analysis, the baby is not Dionysos, since he is winged. The combination of the figures is attested on a ring from Copenhagen.

<sup>19</sup> LAPATIN 2019, 224: «The surviving ensemble suggests that these pieces of furniture represent religious *instrumenta* rather than mere luxury furnishings. Despite the incomplete state of the excavation of the monumental hall, it should be noted not only that the furniture is united by material and type, but also that all the volutes bear figurative scenes depicting the celebration of a bloodless sacrifice. Moreover, the remains of the two statues found nearby in the same hall (the *Peplophoros*, or so-called Demeter, and the head of an Amazon) contribute to the evocation of a sanctuary atmosphere, as they are replicas of works originally displayed in renowned Greek places of worship, Eleusis and Ephesus, respectively» [F. Sirano].

<sup>20</sup> On sacred landscape in Pompeian wall-painting thorough analyses in BERGMANN 1991, 1992, 2002.



Fig. 11. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco R4, L4. Leg 8: left side (a) and drawing (b)  
 (a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b: © G. Rignanesi).



Fig. 12. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco R4, L4. Leg 8: frontal plaque (a) and drawing (b)  
 (a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b: © G. Rignanesi).

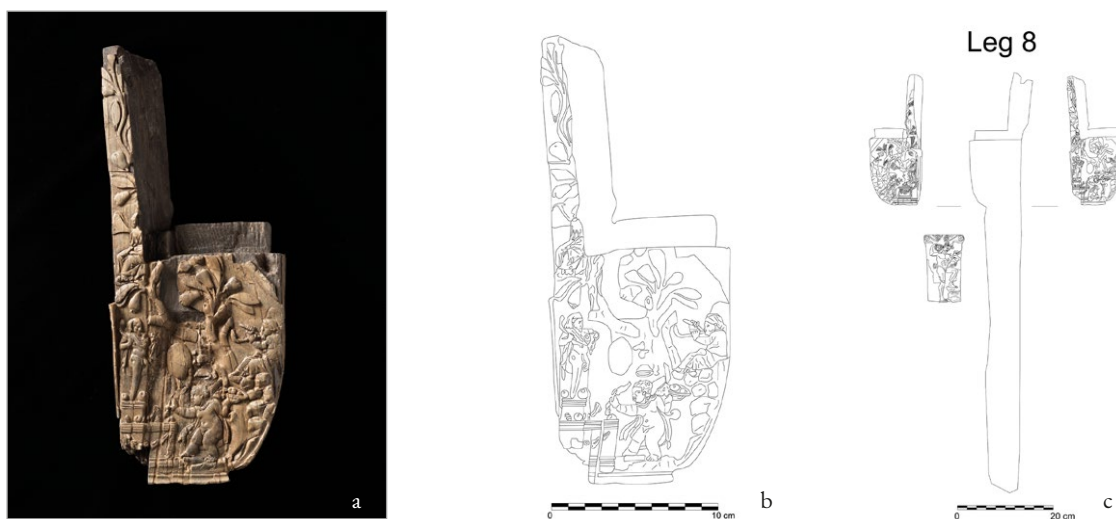


Fig. 13. Ercolano, Parco Archeologico, inv. PA-Erco R4, L4. Leg 8: right side (a) and drawings (b-c)  
 (a: © Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Ercolano; b-c: © G. Rignanesi).

genere”<sup>21</sup>: in an idyllic atmosphere populated by countrymen and animals we find architectural (small temples, aedicules, columns) and natural elements (trees, rivers); sometimes the god or the goddess worshipped in the sacred space is present and easily recognizable thanks to the iconographic attributes; in other cases, the divinity is not represented<sup>22</sup>.

In the Villa dei Papyri two frescoes with architectural and sacred landscape were discovered: a yellow, Second Style monochrome (Fig. 14)<sup>23</sup> shows a staircase, a gateway, and a sanctuary with a tower and an enclosed shrine; on the left a square structure and a column supporting a vessel. A second, Fourth Style fresco (Fig. 15)<sup>24</sup> depicts a harbor scene with two shrines on the left side; on the opposite side, a herm of Priapos is easily recognizable; in the middle, one peasant, one crooked figure, and a third man. On the Herculaneum ivory veneers, in particular on the left volute of leg 5 and on both volutes of leg 8, the worshipped deity Priapos is easily identifiable thanks to his prominent genitalia: in two instances, he wears a long garment and the genitalia are discernable beneath the clothes; in one case, the deity is entirely naked and the penis is clearly visible.

Priapos is a minor god<sup>25</sup>, originating from Lampsakos, son of Dionysos and Aphrodite, according to Pausanias (9.31.2), and, according to some literary sources, a symbol of the sexual instinct, its generative power for humans, and the fecundity of nature. An ornament and guardian of fields, gardens, and vineyards (*hortorum custos et tutela*), as the Augustan poet Ovid calls him<sup>26</sup>, his image was carved from a wood<sup>27</sup>, in contrast to the fine art of the most famous sculptors, as attested in the *Carmen Priapeum* 10<sup>28</sup>:

*Insulsissima quid puella rides?  
Non me Praxiteles Scopasve fecit,  
Nec sum Phidiaca manu politus;  
Sed lignum rude vilicus dolavit  
Et dixit mihi “tu Priapus esto”.  
Spectas me tamen et subinde rides:  
Nimirum tibi salsa res videtur  
Adstans inguinibus columna nostris*

Why do you laugh, most tasteless girl?  
Praxiteles or Scopas did not make me,  
Nor was I given polish by Phidias’ hand,  
But a slave overseer hacked a log  
and said to me: “You, be Priapus!”  
Yet you look at me and immediately laugh:  
No doubt this seems an amusing thing to you,  
The column standing up in my groin<sup>29</sup>.

Priapos is venerated as protector of sheep-farming and fishing, against birds and thieves: thanks to his supervision gardens are prosperous (*CP* 23).

<sup>21</sup> *Ead.* 1991.

<sup>22</sup> This subject finds a counterpart in the Pompeian wall-painting of secluded sacred area, as in the case of Boscoreale, for instance, where the temple is located in the middle of a portico, separated and hidden by a sort of curtain. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 03.14.13.

<sup>23</sup> Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9423, LAPATIN 2019, 180.

<sup>24</sup> Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9399; *ibid.*, 144-145.

<sup>25</sup> Descriptions and information regarding Priapos are in *A.P.* 9.437 (Theocritos) and 7.192, 10.8.1-4 (Archias). An inscription from Thera (*IG* XII.3.421), dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, declares: «I, Priapos, came to this city of Thera from Lampsakos, and brought enduring prosperity. I came to aid and succor you all, both citizens and strangers». Priapos was part of the procession of Ptolemy Philadelphos (ATH. 5.210d); Strabo (8.6.24) recalls that the Priapean meter was invented by Euphorion; Pausanias (9.31.2) associates Priapos with

agriculture and herds. As god of the garden, Priapos is first described by Furius Bibaculus (103 BCE): «if you, by chance, should see my Cato’s lair, its shingles painted with red lead, its garden in Priapos’ watchful care».

<sup>26</sup> Ov. *Fasti* 1.415: «ruber, hortorum custos et tutela, Priapus»; Tib. 1.1.15-17: «*pomosisque ruber custos ponatur in bortis, / terreat ut sacva falce Priapus aves*».

<sup>27</sup> HOR. 1.8: «*olim truncus eram ficulnus, inutile lignum, / cum faber, incertum scamnum faceretne Priapum, / maluit esse deum. Deus inde ego...*». *Truncus* means “tree-trunk”, but also “a headless human body” or “mutilated”; *ficulus* or figwood was proverbially easy to carve, as Pliny (*Nat.* 16.209) attests in «*in sculpturis facilitatem*».

<sup>28</sup> COL. 10.29-34: «*nec tibi Daedaliae quaerantur munera dextrae, / nec Polyditea nec Phradmonis aut Ageladae / arte laboretur, sed truncum forte dolatum / arboris antiquae numen venerare Priapi / terribilis membri, medio qui semper in horto / inguinibus puero, praedoni falce minetur*».

<sup>29</sup> Trans. ELOMAA 2015, 100.





Fig. 14. Yellow monochrome, from the Villa dei Papiri. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9423 (© Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale).



Fig. 15. Fourth Style painting, from the Villa dei Papiri. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9399 (© Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale).

*Hic me custodem fecundi vilicus horti  
mandati curam iussit habere loci.  
fur habeas poenam, licet indignere feram que  
propter holus' dicas 'hoc ego?' propter holus'*

Here has the bailiff, now of this plentiful garden the guardian,  
Bidden me care for the place he to my service entrusts.  
Thief! you shall suffer the pain albeit crying in anger--  
'What! for a cabbage all this? This for a cabbage I bear?



Fig. 16. London, British Museum, inv. 1923,0401.71.  
Seal of glass paste imitating banded sardonyx  
(© The Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 17. London, British Museum, inv. 1923,0401.130. Hellenistic gem  
(© The Trustees of the British Museum).

His cult statue represents him sometimes as an old, bearded, lascivious man, wearing a cap and a long tunic according to the Eastern fashion, and holding a thyrsus, as his father Dionysos does; sometimes he looks younger and shaved: this oscillation is also attested in literary sources and archaeological evidence<sup>30</sup>. Set in the gardens, he is generally naked, but for a (red, *ruber*) mantle full of fruits, showing his genitalia and holding a tool. Scenes of offerings are attested on different media: in small-scale objects, for instance, we can mention a seal of glass paste (Fig. 16) imitating banded sardonyx<sup>31</sup>, an Eros is engraved pouring a libation on a flaming altar, above which is a figure of Priapos. On a Hellenistic elongated gem (Fig. 17)<sup>32</sup>, a draped woman holds an amphora in front of Priapos. On a fragmentary chalcedony intaglio (Fig. 18), three female figures (one is sacrificing at the altar) are set in a sacred landscape, on the tree an ityphallic Priapos stands on the left, and cymbals on the right<sup>33</sup>.

Musical instruments, like the cymbals and the tympanon, are attested not only here and on the ivory plaques (cymbals, tympanon, syrinx, tibiae impares, auloi), but also in literary sources, as a poem testifies (*CP* 26):

*Deliciae populi, magno notissima circo  
Quintia, vibratas docta movere nates,  
cymbala cum crotalis, pruriginis arma, Priapo  
ponit et adducta tympana pulsa manu.  
pro quibus, ut semper placeat spectantibus, orat,  
tentaque ad exemplum sit sua turba dei.*

Well-known darling of folk in the Circus Maximus far famed,  
Quintia, tremulous hips trained and artful to wag,  
Cymbals and castanets (the wanton arms) to Priapus  
Offers and tambourine struck with the hand to self drawn.  
Wherefore prays she that aye she please her mob of admirers;  
Let one and all stand stiff after the wont of her god.

<sup>30</sup> *LIMC* VII, s.v. «Priapos» [W.-R. Megow].

<sup>31</sup> London, British Museum, inv. 1923,0401.71.

<sup>32</sup> London, British Museum, inv. 1923,0401.130.

<sup>33</sup> London, British Museum, inv. 1814, 0704.1522.





Fig. 18. London, British Museum, inv. 1814, 0704.1522. Fragmentary chalcedony intaglio (© The Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 19. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 17.194.2038. Fragment of a sigillata vase (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

A more interesting iconographic comparison to the Herculaneum ivories is a fragment of a sigillata vase (Fig. 19)<sup>34</sup>, showing a Priapos statue on a tall base and a central seated figure playing the double pipes; on the right, a cupid and a psyche stand on a rock, looking toward the god; a festoon runs above the scene. From an iconographic point of view, these three figures present the same visual patterns attested on the Herculaneum ivory veneers.

### 3. PRIAPOS, EROTES, AND PSYCHAI

The iconographic analysis of small-scale objects allows us to better understand the narrative and the meaning of the scenes depicted on the volutes of the tripod legs and is a confirmation of the close, apparently unusual link between Priapos and Eros. This association has never been properly addressed in scholarship and appears more evident and stronger in the case of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii<sup>35</sup>. At the main entrance, Priapos is weighing his huge penis on a balance against a bag of coins (Fig. 20); on the floor, there is a large basket with grapes, apples, pears, pomegranates. In the peristyle a fountain-statue of a beardless and young Priapos (Fig. 21) was displayed in axis with the entrance and the Room with the Cupids. Comments particularly arose from the observation of a frieze in this room, notably representing Cupids and Psychai at work<sup>36</sup>. Most scholars linked the choice of such a theme to decorate a reception room with the supposed social status of the owners<sup>37</sup>; simultaneously, part of the Cupids was also subject of investigation in order to try to determine their supposedly precise productive activities or to furnish our understanding of activities such as fulling or perfume-making, as if the scenes were precise illustrations of these processes.

On the west wall, two naked Cupids are busy filling a patera with wine poured from an amphora; two standing Cupids exchange another cup with their right hand, each holding a stick with their left. This scene represents one of the Cupids, taking part in the thiasus, making the other taste wine before joining the procession. On the north wall, five characters surround a carriage drawn by two goats on the left; leading the procession, a Psyche is perched on a panther. The carriage, which is driven by a Cupid, carries Bacchus/Dionysos reclining on a couch. The procession ends with Pan, ithyphallic and playing the flute, and a final Cupid with a crater on his shoulder. Next a scene of grape harvesting is depicted, which is difficult to interpret because of its advanced deterioration. The last panel has been interpreted as a banquet. On the east wall, cupids and psychai are preparing clothes. On the other frieze, cupids are intent on metalwork, on the preparation of perfumes and garlands. Very convincingly, Nicolas Monteix concluded that the Cupids and the Psychai of the friezes produce or test objects used in the framework of a banquet and do

<sup>34</sup> New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 17.194.2038.

<sup>35</sup> On the House of the Vettii see the most recent contribution by MONTEIX 2016, whose analysis is focused on the painted friezes.

<sup>36</sup> See the thorough investigation *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> For a historiographic overview DE ANGELIS 2011.



Fig. 20. Pompeii, House of Vettii. Painting of Priapos (© Archivio Fotografico Araldo De Luca).



Fig. 21. Pompeii, House of Vettii. Fountain statue of Priapos (© Archivio Fotografico Araldo De Luca).

not necessarily have a connection with the owners' activities. Indeed, the scheme and the scenes indicate a reinterpretation of the Greek banquet, strongly marked by Dionysian ideals: the panels illustrate the whole process, from preparation to celebration by evoking very generic scenes<sup>38</sup>.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In Pompeian wall-painting, the association of Erotes and Psychai with Dionysian iconographic patterns is very common<sup>39</sup>, even though it has never thoroughly been addressed. Just to mention but few examples, a fresco from the Villa dei Papiri depicts a flying cupid (Fig. 22), holding a torch in his right hand and a small silver crater in his left, like a member of Dionysos' entourage. This visual motif is well-attested, for instance, in the fresco from the House, Regio IX, Ins. 3, 5, 24 (Fig. 23): under a tent, a Cupid is playing a lyre on the left, another one is holding a metal amphora; a Psyche is leaning on pillow, showing her half-naked back; in the background, an imposing statue of Dionysos stands on a column. In other case, Cupids hold vases and garlands for the banquet, sometimes they are reclining on a couch as real symposiasts.

As on the wall-painting in Pompeii, Erotes and Psychai on the ivory veneers from the Villa dei Papiri act as human beings: offering fruits to the god, gathering pine cones, playing instruments, adorning a tree. On the left side of a second-century marble sarcophagus (Figs. 24-25)<sup>40</sup>, a woman stands in front of a Priapos' herm, offering a pine cone on the altar, as a man is preparing the *parapetasma* for rituals. The visual evidence coincides with literary information regarding dedications to Priapos by women praying for virility and fecundity, as Columella attests to Priapos' importance in marriage (10.158-159: "who brings fruit... will stimulate reluctant husbands to the amorous deed"). *Carmen Priapeum* 37, for instance, describes a painting of the male member dedicated to the god by a man who has been cured of his impotence. It is not a coincidence that on a first-century marble relief an erotic intercourse between Herakles and Omphale happens in front of a Priapos' herm on a pillar; the scene is framed by trees on both sides and a curtain hangs from them (Fig. 26)<sup>41</sup>. An iconography already attested on a late Hellenistic relief with a satyr, a nymph and Priapos from Prusias ad Hypium<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> MONTEIX 2016, 211-214.

<sup>39</sup> E.g., *PPM* Regio I 6 14; I 7 19; I 10 10.11; V 2 10; VI 14 20; VII 2 6; VII 16 22; VIII 2 26-27; VIII 3 24; VIII 7 28; IX 8 3.7. For a different iconographic and cultural context, it is worth mentioning a relief with Amor and Psyche from the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere, see MARTIN 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 27710; to my analysis, the woman is not a maenad and the man is not a satyr, as suggested in *LIMC* VII, s.v. «Priapos» 120 [W.-R. Megow].

<sup>41</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. RES.08.34d.

<sup>42</sup> Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. Sk 1841.





Fig. 22. Painting from the Villa dei Papiri. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9319 (© Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale).



Fig. 23. Painting from the House IX, 3, 5, 24. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9207 (© Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale).



Fig. 24. Farnese sarcophagus, main panel. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 27710 (© Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale).



Fig. 25. Farnese sarcophagus, left panel. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 27710 (© Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale).



Fig. 26. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. RES.08.34d. Relief with Herakles and Omphale (© Boston, Museum of Fine Arts).

In this perspective, Erotes and Psychai on these unique ivory veneers acquire a new visual and semantic dimension: honoring and celebrating the god of prosperity and abundance, asking for protection of the house, preservation of the family, and increase of the richness thanks to the physical force and presence of the god Priapos. As father of Priapos and god of the wine, Dionysos celebrates the joy of the banquet and its participants within the domestic context. Dionysos himself appears on a tripod, crowned and naked, showing his boyish body, in contrast with the explicit exposure of Priapos' phallus and his aged figure. The association of Dionysos and Priapos is also attested on a first-century marble altar<sup>43</sup>: on the main side, beneath the dedication Priapos stands on the left, holding a thyrsus with the right hand and fruits in the mantle with the left one; on the side of the altar, a half-naked Dionysos leans on a pedestal, holding a thyrsus and a kantharos in the right hand, and grape in the left one; on his left side, a panther is looking at him. It is worth mentioning a wall painting from Herculaneum, with a young Dionysos in the center and an ithyphallic Priapos on the right<sup>44</sup>.

Priapos "physically" protects gardens and property against the hostile circumstances, bad luck, misfortune, and adversity. As consequence, plants, trees, and fruits are prosperous, and exalt the regenerative and fertile power of Priapos. It may seem that on the ivory panels different seasons are depicted in connection with trees and fruits: the celebration of Priapos and richness of nature is clearly underlined by the presence of a variety of fruits from different seasons. This abundance is displayed on a fresco from the Casa del Bracciale d'Oro in Pompeii: here vine branches are intertwined with ivy, corymbs, wild roses, oleanders, apples, pinecones, a satyr mask, a syrinx, a situla, a phallus hang down from the tree.

Indeed, fruits and flowers are dedicated to the god according to the seasons, as we learn from the *Carmen Priapeum* 86, and for this reason the sacrifice depicted on the ivory veneers is bloodless:

*Vere rosa, autumno pomis, aestate frequentor  
Spicis; una mihi est horrida pestis hiems.  
Nam frigus metuo et vereor, ne ligneus ignem  
Hic deus ignavis praebeat agricolis*

«In spring I am worshipped with roses, in autumn with apples, in summer with corn-wreaths, but winter is one horrid pestilence for me. For I fear the cold, and am apprehensive lest I, a wooden god, should in that season afford a fire for ignorant yokels».

In this and other poems, however, it is worth noting that the wooden god Priapos is worshipped in every season, throughout the entire year. In this *Carmen*, however, there is a juxtaposition and opposition between the adjective *ligneus* (ligneous) and the substantive *ignis* (igneous), meaning that wooden god is scared by the winter and the fire. "The chief disadvantage as to life expectancy which distinguishes wooden statues from stone or metallic statues is their flammability, and therefore it come as no surprise to find that Priapos is pathologically pyrophobic"<sup>45</sup>.

This precarious condition is also underlined by Martial (8.40, 4-6):

*furaces moneo manus repellas  
et silvam domini focus reserves:  
si defecerit haec, et ipse ignum es...*

«I warn you to ward off thieving hands and to preserve the wood for your master's hearth: if it runs out, you yourself are wood».

If Priapos does not maintain the standards required by his role as firewood custodian he will be firewood himself<sup>46</sup>. It is not a coincidence, in my perspective, the choice to represent the sacrifice to the wooden Priapos on the ivories and its conceptual and visual connection with the tripod and its function.

<sup>43</sup> Tarquinia, Museo Archeologico Nazionale; *LLMC*, s.v. «Priapos» 124 [W.-R. Megow], the figure is wrongly interpreted as «Priapos mit Thyrsos».

<sup>44</sup> Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 9261.

<sup>45</sup> HUNT 2011, 48.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

In my view, the tripods from the Villa dei Papiri were not used as sacrificial instruments or votive offerings. On the contrary, the tripods were used and displayed in the Villa on special occasions (the ivory-veneered tripods are not pieces of furniture of daily use)<sup>47</sup>, to warm up open and closed spaces and to burn incense, as in a *triclinium*<sup>48</sup>. The symposiasts attending a banquet at the Villa seem to be part of the same Dionysian world, as sculpted on the ivory veneers: the offering of pine cones burning at the altar by Eros and Psychai is mirrored in burning real pine cones and incense into the tripods<sup>49</sup>. In this perspective, a large superimposed cauldron (in metal?) has to be imagined in the upper part of the furniture and supported by the tripod: wood, pine cones, charcoal and incense could be burnt in it, very similar to the depicted scenes of sacrifice and offerings to the god Priapos. This represents a sophisticated interplay between the wooden structure of the tripod, the elegantly carved ivory veneers, on which Priapos, Dionysos, Eros, Psychai and his companions are the main characters, and the lost cauldron in which the firewood is destined for fire. The sacrifices dedicated to the god Priapos on the ivory veneers imply the protection of the Villa dei Papiri against thefts and hostile circumstances, bad luck, misfortune, and adversity for the owner and his *familia*. At the same time, the owner asks for prosperity and future abundance, exalting the fertile power of Priapos in a physical way (plants, flowers, children) and/or in an economic perspective. As soon as his protection fails and/or the cold season approaches, the *ligneus* god Priapos will be burnt in the cauldron of the tripod, becoming *ignis*.

gianfranco.adornato@sns.it  
Scuola Normale Superiore

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<sup>47</sup> On luxury objects LAPATIN 2015; on taste, choice, art market, and prices see ADORNATO 2020; for a thorough discussion of the notion of "collection" in the ancient world see now the important contributions by CIRUCCI-CUPPERI 2020, and CIRUCCI 2020. In this perspective on the supposed collection of sculptures at the Villa dei Papiri see HALLETT 2019.

<sup>48</sup> It is not still clear whether these pieces fell from the upper floor or came from other inner rooms, dragged by the pyroclastic flow, or were in store during the works at the Villa; see GUIDOBALDI *et alii* 2009, 360-361. GUIDOBALDI 2010, 69.

<sup>49</sup> ZANKER 1998.



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