

CHAPTER SIX

*Rites for Melikertes-Palaimon in the
Early Roman Corinthia*

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In memory of Oscar Broneer, on the fiftieth anniversary of his excavations at the Isthmus, and of John Hawthorne, who first addressed the problems raised for the cult of Melikertes-Palaimon by those excavations.

INTRODUCTION¹

It is generally believed that the shrine of Melikertes-Palaimon, uncovered on the Isthmus, represents a new, Roman version of his cult, created by the settlers some time after the foundation of the colony at Corinth. Marcel Piérart has recently argued that the rites described by second-century C.E. authors were the product of learned inquiry.² Helmut Koester, following John

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²M. Piérart, "Panthéon et hellénisation dans la colonie romaine de Corinth: la 'redécouverte' du culte de Palaimon à l'Isthme," *Kernos* 11 (1998) 85–89.

Hawthorne, saw no direct connection to an earlier cult; he took the view that the rites were a manifestation of the general enthusiasm for mystery cult in the empire.³

The literary sources for the myth are well known.⁴ Recent studies of the texts and archaeological remains of the shrine suggest that a more nuanced interpretation of the cult is in order.⁵ Two aspects of Melikertes-Palaïmon may be distinguished: a child who died in the sea, was buried on the Isthmus, and received heroic honors including the Isthmian Games; and an immortal sea-god and savior who was associated with Poseidon. He joins other figures, such as Heracles and Asclepius, Achilles and Trophonius, who began as mortals and received apotheosis at their death but were also worshipped as heroes. With respect to the Isthmian Games, it is his heroic aspect that most concerns us, but there are elements in his Roman shrine that suggest also his worship as an immortal deity of the sea. I shall argue that not only did the essential elements of his rites exist before 146 B.C.E., but that they were continued by

³J. Hawthorne ("The Myth of Palaemon," *TAPA* 89 [1958] 92–98) reviews the primary ancient sources; Helmut Koester, "Melikertes at Isthmia: A Roman Mystery Cult," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 355–66.

⁴Basic studies: Lewis R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921) 35–47; Albin Lesky, "Melikertes," *PW* 29 (1931) cols. 514–21; Edouard Will, *Korinthiaka: recherches sur l'histoire et la civilisation de Carinthe des origines aux guerres médiques* (Paris: de Boccard, 1955) 168–80, 210–12, 217–19; and Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (trans. Peter Bing; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 196–204.

⁵Recent publications: Archaeology: Elizabeth R. Gebhard, "The Isthmian Games and the Sanctuary of Poseidon in the Early Empire," in *The Corinthia in the Roman Period* (ed. Timothy E. Gregory; *JRASup* 8; Ann Arbor, Mich.: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1993) 89–93; Elizabeth R. Gebhard, F. P. Hemans, and J. W. Hayes, "University of Chicago Excavations at Isthmia, 1989: III," *Hesperia* 67 (1998) 428–54; Gunnel Ekroth, "Altars in Greek Hero-Cults: A Review of the Archaeological Evidence," in *Ancient Greek Cult Practice from the Archaeological Evidence* (ed. R. Hägg; Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 1998); and Elizabeth R. Gebhard and D. Reese, "Sacrifices to Poseidon and Melikertes-Palaïmon at Isthmia," in *Greek Sacrificial Ritual, Olympian and Chthonian: Proceedings of the Sixth International Seminar on Ancient Greek Cult, Göteborg University, April 1997* (ed. R. Hägg; *ActaAth* 8, 17; Stockholm: 2004) 125–54. Cult: Elizabeth R. Gebhard and M. W. Dickie, "Melikertes-Palaïmon: Hero of the Isthmian Games," in *Ancient Greek Hero Cult: Proceedings of the Fifth International Seminar on Ancient Greek Cult, Göteborg University, 21–23 April 1995* (ed. R. Hägg; *ActaAth* 8, 16; Stockholm, 1998) 159–65; R. A. Seelinger, "The Dionysiac Context of the Cult of Melikertes/Palaïmon at the Isthmian Sanctuary of Poseidon," *Maia* 50 (1998) 271–80; Piérart, "Panthéon et hellénisation"; and C. Bonnet, "Le Culte de Leucothéa et de Mélécertes en Grèce, au Proche-Orient et en Italie," *Studi e Materiali* 10 (1986) 33–71.

the colonists of Roman Corinth when they assumed administration of the Isthmian Games. By claiming the city's right to host the Panhellenic festival and by reinstating worship of the Isthmian deities, the settlers reaffirmed one of the city's most ancient traditions.⁶

Melikertes-Palaimon, the sea-god, seems to have been known at Corinth from the archaic period; he was also worshipped at Tenedos. At Rome, Ovid links him with the harbor god, Portunus; the poet connects his mother, Ino, with the Italian goddess Mater Matuta. Both mother and son are at all periods associated with the infant Dionysos.⁷ References to his mysteries (*teletai*) appear in the first century C.E. and grow more explicit in the second.⁸ Although his myth and rites stretched from Italy to the coast of Asia Minor, his principal shrine and the only one yet discovered belongs to the Sanctuary of Poseidon on the Corinthian isthmus. Its identification with the god rests on Pausanias and on representations of the boy, his dolphin, and his temple on second-century Corinthian coins. The traveler also saw his altar by a pine tree on the shore of the Saronic Gulf, not far from the sanctuary (2.1.3; figs. 6.1a and 6.1b, p. 168).

⁶Jason König, "Favorinus' Corinthian Oration in its Corinthian Context," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 47 (2001) 148–53. The city's early response to its Isthmian heritage is an indication that the process of hellenization began at once, even as the colony established itself as a Roman city. The Argive complaint about Corinthian pleasure in less traditional forms of entertainment and sport shows another side (Ps.-Julian, *Letters* 198); see A. J. S. Spawforth, "Corinth, Argos, and the Imperial Cult, Pseudo-Julian, *Letters* 198," *Hesperia* 63 (1994) 211–32.

⁷See Nonnos, who is drawing from the earlier traditions; Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (2 vols.; Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 176–80; and Robert Sharrock, *The Challenge of Epic: Allusive Engagement in the Dionysiaca of Nonnos* (Mnemosyne Supplement 210; Leiden: Brill, 2001) ch. 2. Images of Ino and Athamas receiving the infant Dionysos occur from ca. 460 B.C.E.; LIMC 5/2, s.v. "Ino," nos. 10–12. T. H. Carpenter identifies Ino, Melikertes, and Athamas as the figures accompanying Dionysos and Ariadne on the Derveni krater (third quarter of the fourth century B.C.E.), arguing that they and the imagery of the vase as a whole belong to an iconographic tradition reaching back to the fifth and perhaps the sixth century B.C.E. but without explicit reference to mysteries of Dionysos; see his "Images and Beliefs: Thoughts on the Derveni Krater," in *Periplous: Papers on Classical Art and Archaeology presented to Sir John Boardman* (ed. G. R. Tsetskhadze, A. J. N. W. Prag, and A. M. Snodgrass; London: Thames and Hudson, 2000) 54–58. Compare Seelinger, "Dionysiac Context."

⁸Plutarch, *Flav.* 25.4; see discussion below. See also Koester, "Melikertes," 364–66.