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TONIO HÖLSCHER

*Augustus and Orestes*

WHEN OCTAVIAN\* AFTER HIS VICTORY against Antonius and Kleopatra began to lay the ideological foundations of his position within the *res publica*, he certainly was aware of the legitimizing power which Greek myths could obtain for this purpose. Alexander the Great had already chosen various gods and heroes as his models in order to present authoritative prototypes for the main aspects of his political role. The Hellenistic kings had taken over and enlarged these forms of selfrepresentation, and the political leaders of the late Roman Republic had followed their example.

For Octavianus, however, the possibilities in this ideological field were rather limited. The current models of Alexander and the diadochs, Dionysos and Herakles, had been occupied by Antonius and provided partly with negative connotations by Octavian's own political propaganda<sup>1</sup>. Achilles, whom Alexander had highly worshipped, had accomplished too few comparable achievements to become a convincing model for the princeps. Diomedes, who had saved and protected the palladium, presented more ideological affinities<sup>2</sup>, but thereby he came into rivalry with Aeneas by whom in the end he was overcome; so he survived only as a general model for military *virtus*. Other less famous figures were not taken into consideration because they would not have received the necessary diffusion in Rome. The most successful prototypes were the Roman heroes Aeneas and Romulus.

Nonetheless, Octavian exploited all possibilities in this field. He found a Greek hero who had never before been a model for any ruler: Orestes. This choice fitted exactly the specific situation of the heir of Julius Caesar: Orestes was the mythical prototype of revenge, as Octavian had made revenge the principal motif of his political ascent; Orestes had avenged his father Agamemnon who had been murdered, as Octavian had avenged his father Julius Caesar; Orestes had thereby become the antagonist of Klytaimnestra, wife of Agamemnon, as Octavian had been the antagonist of Kleopatra, who had lived with Caesar in marriage-like relations; Orestes, moreover, had thereby become the antagonist of Aigisthos, the lover of Klytaimnestra, as Octavian was the antagonist of Antonius, the lover of Kleopatra; Orestes had to fight for the rightful heritage of his father against the pretended claims of this couple, as Octavian had to fight for the political succession of Julius Caesar; Orestes had accomplished his revenge by order of Apollo, as Octavian had fought under the protection of this god; Orestes finally had shed the blood of relatives and had to be absolved; in the same sense the victory of Octavian over fellow-citizens was a pollution which needed purification<sup>3</sup>.

The mythical model fits so well that we should even postulate its existence — if it were not textually handed down. In the sanctuary of Hera at Argos Pausanias saw a statue of Orestes with an inscription saying that it represented Augustus<sup>4</sup>. It is difficult to say whether and old figure of the mythical hero was changed by this inscription into a representation of the emperor, or whether the statue was erected only in Augustan times and represented from the beginning Augustus in the guise of Orestes<sup>5</sup>. Whatever the case may be, already

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, 1987, p. 65 ff. See, however, R. M. Schneider, *Bunte Barbaren*, 1986, p. 32 ff.

<sup>2</sup> C. Maderna, *Iuppiter, Diomedes und Mercur als Vorbilder für römische Bildnisstatuen*, 1988, p. 56 ff.

<sup>3</sup> E. Simon, *Die Portlandvase*, 1957, p. 36 f.

<sup>4</sup> Pausanias 2, 17, 3.

<sup>5</sup> H. Blanck, *Wiederverwendung alter Statuen als Ehrendenkmäler bei Griechen und Römern*, 1969, pp. 19, 23 decides for the first of these possibilities.



Bachofen had noted the fact that the statue with its inscription was a prefiguration of Augustus as avenger<sup>6</sup>.

One might suppose that this association of Augustus and Orestes was an invention of the people of Argos, where Orestes had reigned in mythical times<sup>7</sup>. But evidently, the idea had originated from Rome: the bones of the hero, which according to the Roman tradition originally had been kept in the sanctuary of Diana at Nemi, later were transferred, in an act of programmatic significance, to Rome and buried near the temple of Saturnus at the Forum Romanum; since Hyginus knows of this event, it must have occurred not later than in Augustan times<sup>8</sup>. It has rightly been supposed that this was an act of Augustus himself. Its date must have been after the battle of Actium, when L. Munatius Plancus had gone over to Octavian, had built the new temple of Saturnus and by means of the decoration with tritons had connected this building with the victory over Antonius<sup>9</sup>. E. Simon has convincingly brought a relief in the Villa Medici from the times of Claudius into connection with this act of religious policy (Fig. 1)<sup>10</sup>. It shows in the background the temple of Saturnus; in front of it a big and richly decorated hydria, apparently the urn of Orestes; and at both sides Apollo and Diana the tutelary gods of the mythical hero as well as of Augustus, his actual equivalent.

Beyond that, however, the Orestes theme makes clear, in which way the ideas originating from the court were taken up by the educated upper class. A much discussed relief from the region of Ariccia in Copenhagen shows, according to the widely accepted interpretation of F. G. Welcker, Orestes having murdered Aigisthos and turning abruptly back towards Klytaimnestra who implores him for mercy; behind her, apparently Elektra standing calmly, at both sides probably two servants with hectic gestures (Fig. 2)<sup>11</sup>. A. Furtwängler already had advocated the view that we are not dealing with a genuinely archaic or sub-archaic, but with an archaistic work, and H. Froning has recently corroborated this view with precise arguments:<sup>12</sup> the sculptural work and the relief style point to the epoch of Augustus. This date is confirmed by the provenience from a Roman building, probably a villa<sup>13</sup>, where pieces from older times than the late Republic are not to be expected. If this is right, however, the relief from Ariccia proves the new significance of Orestes under Augustus. In this sense Orestes is not represented, according to the traditional iconography, as pursued by the Erinyes, but as taking revenge: the myth therefore is shown in a specific aspect pointing to Augustus. An additional argument for this interpretation is the provenience

<sup>6</sup> J. J. Bachofen, *Gesammelte Werke* (ed. K. Meuli) VIII, 1966, p. 37 ff; Cf. H. Koch in: *Freundesgabe für E. R. Curtius*, 1956, p. 183 ff.

<sup>7</sup> So Bachofen, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Hyginus, *fab.* 261; Servius *Aen.* 2, 116; cf. also 7, 188; Bachofen, *op. cit.*, p. 47; F. Pfister, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*, 1912, p. 454; Koch, *op. cit.*; E. Simon, *WürzbJbAlt* 5 (1979), p. 264.

<sup>9</sup> K. Fittschen, *JdI* 91 (1976), p. 208 ff; P. Pensabene, *Tempio di Saturno*, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> M. Cagianò de Azevedo, *Le antichità di Villa Medici*, 1951, no. 13; Fittschen, *op. cit.*, p. 192 n. 76; Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 264 f; LIMC II, 413, no. 358 s. v. Apollon/Apollo; *ibid.*, 830, no. 276 s. v. Artemis/Diana (E. Simon).

<sup>11</sup> F. Poulsen, *Catalogue of Ancient Sculpture in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek*, 1951, p. 47 ff, no. 30; H. Froning, *Marmor-Schmuckreliefs mit griechischen Mythen im 1. Jh. v. Chr.*, 1981, p. 81 ff (with bibliography). The interpretation as Orestes, which has been recently corroborated by Froning, was first advocated by F. G. Welcker, *Heilderberger Jb. der Literatur für Philologie, Historie und schöne Literatur* 3 (1810), p. 4 ff; *id.*, *Antike Denkmäler* II, 1850, p. 166 ff.

<sup>12</sup> A. Furtwängler, *AG* III, p. 266 ff; Froning, *op. cit.*, p. 82 ff; cf. T. Hölscher, *JdI* 99 (1984), p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> On the provenience see Froning, *op. cit.*, p. 97 ff.



1. A relief from Villa Medici (after: M. Cagianò de Azevedo, *Le antichità di Villa Medici*, 1951, no. 13)

from the region of Ariccia to which the sanctuary of Diana at Nemi also belonged: from there Augustus had transferred the bones of Orestes to Rome; so in this region the idea of Orestes as a model for Augustus must have been especially obvious.

In a similar way the Orestes relief in Naples, which has rightly been dated in early Augustan times, might reflect the new significance of the hero (Fig. 3)<sup>14</sup>. Traditional iconography, still applied in contemporary Campana reliefs, had shown Orestes in defensive bearing, taking refuge against the Erinyes at the Delphic omphalos. Here, however, the Erinyes have fallen asleep, and the hero actively sets off to Athens in order to surrender himself to justice. For this purpose the artist took over with slight variations an iconogra-

<sup>14</sup> Froning, *op. cit.*, p. 72 ff (with bibliography).





2. A relief from the region of Ariccia, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen



3. Orestes relief, Naples

phical type which in these times was widely used for Diomedes with the palladium<sup>15</sup>. Both phenomena are comprehensible if Orestes figures as the prototype of Augustus: the active bearing demonstrates confidence that the slaughter of relatives will be purified; and by the assimilation to Diomedes, who as saviour of the palladium was an important model for Augustus,<sup>16</sup> Orestes too becomes a sort of religious protagonist.

In the long run, however, the role of the avenger of the father and the significance of Orestes turned out to be confined to a rather short phase of the political career of Augustus. Therefore, this theme had no great success and remained an episode in the building process of the political myth of the emperor. Correspondingly, the theme was not widely accepted in the private sphere. The main aspects of the emperor and the empire, stability and eternity, could be expressed much better by Aeneas and Romulus. The worship of Orestes is one of the many temporary experiments in the early years of Augustus. Generally, it demonstrates in this phase the short-winded, activist, and at the same time highly educated and elitarian, political style which keeps to the tradition of the republic and of which Augustus freed himself only gradually and partly<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> On typology: Froning, *op. cit.*, p. 73 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Maderna, *op. cit.* (n. 2).

<sup>17</sup> On the early ideological iconography of Augustus: Zanker, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 42 ff. Republican tradition and elitarian attitude of Augustus: T. Hölscher, *Staatsdenkmal und Publikum*, *Xenia* 9 (1984), pp. 12 f, 20 ff.