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## Phikola, a Mysterious Goddess at Phlya

### Abstract

A gnostic Christian writer (called 'Sethian' by the author of the *Refutation of All Heresies*) describes a painting showing an old man with an erect penis chasing a dog-shaped or dog-faced woman (*Refutation* 5.20.7). For a long time in scholarship the old man has been identified with the Orphic god Phanes. In contrast, this paper presents evidence for identifying him as a form of Hermes. In turn, the woman (called 'περη Phikola') is identified with a Thessalian version of the goddess Hekate (Eino-dia). Accordingly, it is suggested that περη should be emended to Φεραίη, the Pheraian goddess. The sexual encounter of the Thessalian Hekate and Hermes (the 'Word') proved useful for depicting the Word's entry into the dark and watery womb in Sethian soteriology.

**Keywords:** Hermes, Hekate, Brimo, Hippolytos, Gnosis (Gnosticism), Sethians, Orphism, mysteries, Thessaly (ancient), Phlya

### 1 Introduction

The mystery cult traditions of Phlya in Attica would be entirely unknown were it not for an anonymous Gnostic writer who was copied by an equally anonymous, but fiery Roman churchman shortly after 222 CE. The latter is the author of the *Refutation of All Heresies* (hereafter *Refutation*), who can now no longer be safely identified with the bishop and biblical commentator Hippolytos.<sup>1</sup> The Gnostic writer (called 'Sethian' by the author of the *Refutation*) describes a painting showing an old man with an erect penis chasing

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<sup>1</sup> Currently, a two-author theory for the Hippolytan corpus is widely held. In Allen Brent's reconstruction (1995), the author of the *Refutation* is an anonymous early third-century bishop who dies, leaving the community to a member of the same school – in fact the 'real' Hippolytos who reconciles with the successors of Kallistos. Cerrato 2002 vouches for an eastern Hippolytus, probably from Asia Minor, who composed the exegetical commentaries. All links are severed between this genuine Hippolytos and the author of *Refutation*. For helpful surveys, see Simonetti 2000, 88–139; Castelli 2012, 34–46; Litwa 2016, xxvii–liii.

a dog-shaped or dog-faced woman (*Refutation* 5.20.7).<sup>2</sup> For a long time in scholarship the old man has been identified with the Orphic god Phanes. In part, this is because the author of the *Refutation* tendentiously tried to derive ‘Sethian’ thought *en toto* from the fluid traditions of Orpheus. This paper presents evidence for identifying the old man with a form of Hermes, and for identifying the woman (called ‘Phikola’) as a version of the goddess Hekate.

## 2 The rites at Phlya

The ‘Sethian’ writer’s source for the painting seems to have been Plutarch’s ten-volume study *On Empedocles* (now lost).<sup>3</sup> It was Plutarch who presumably visited a Phlyan sanctuary in the early second century CE and described some of the paintings in its portico.<sup>4</sup> The rites performed in Phlya are called ‘the Bacchic [rites] of Orpheus’ (τοῖς Βακχικοῖς τοῦ Ὀρφέως, *Refutation* 5.20.5).<sup>5</sup> It is Plutarch, presumably, who related that these rites ‘were performed and handed on to the people in Phlya of Attica before the rites of Eleusis’ (*Refutation* 5.20.5). Such a claim would seem ultimately to derive from the competitive spirit of the local Phlyan informants.

The Eleusinian rites were in honour of Demeter and Persephone. The mystery rites in Phlya were those of the ‘Great Goddess’ (Μεγάλη, *Refutation* 5.20.5). Pausanias, not far from Plutarch in time, says that the people of Phlya worship a Great Goddess (Μεγάλην θεόν). He identifies her with Earth (Γῆ; *Descr.* 1.31.4).<sup>6</sup> Phlyos, the eponymous ancestor, was said to be the son of Earth in a hymn (attributed to Musaios) written for Demeter (*Descr.* 4.1.5).

2 The text is also printed in Bernabé 2004–7, 2.105–108. The ‘Sethians’, also summarised in *Refutation* 10.11, are an otherwise unknown group not to be confused with the modern scholarly category of ‘Sethians’ promoted by H. M. Schenke and others. The fact that our author derived his information from a *Paraphrase of Seth* may be the sole reason why he calls their myth ‘Sethian’. Löhr 2006, 1066 observes that our author seems to know nothing ‘about distinct Sethian ethics, group organisation, liturgy or sacramental practice.’

3 *Refutation* 5.20.6. The Lamprias catalogue (no. 43) includes a ten volume work of Plutarch, Ἐἰς Ἐμπεδοκλέα. See further Osborne 1989, 92–94.

4 There is doubt about the location of these mysteries. *Refutation* 5.20.5 reads φλοιοῦντι which could suggest Φλιοῦς, a town in Achaia where there was an initiation rite (τελετή) in honor of Demeter (Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.14.1). I accept Duncker and Schneidewin’s emendation (1859) Φλυῆ (‘in Phlya’), an Attic deme, because the author of the *Refutation* (or more likely his source) explicitly says that it is in Attica.

5 Some scholars understood τοῖς Βακχικοῖς τοῦ Ὀρφέως as referring to a specific work. This view is opposed by Herrero de Jáuregui 2010, 161.

6 See further Loucas 1990, 85–96.

Plutarch tells us that the Lykomidai, an Athenian priestly family, had an initiation hall (τελεστήριον) in Phlya.<sup>7</sup> It was Themistocles, famous scion of the Lykomidai, who built the hall after its predecessor was destroyed by the Persians. Significantly, Themistocles had the hall decorated with paintings (γραφαῖς ἐκόσμησεν; Plutarch, *Them.* 1.4). Are these the same paintings to which Plutarch refers in his lost study *On Empedocles*? Perhaps. In *Refutation* 5.20.6, at any rate, we learn that the paintings were located in a portico (παστάς) – possibly of the initiation hall.<sup>8</sup>

In one of the paintings, there was depicted ‘a grey-headed male with wings and an erect penis chasing a woman depicted like a dog [or: a dog-faced woman] running away’ (πρεσβύτης τις ἐγγεγραμμένος πολιός, περωτός, ἐντεταμένην ἔχων τὴν αἰσχύνην, γυναῖκα ἀποφεύγουσαν διώκων κυνοειδῆ; *Refutation* 5.20.6). The old man is labelled Φάος ῥυέντης (apparently: ‘Streaming Light’) and the woman περηφικόλα” (*Refutation* 5.20.7).

The bizarre name of the female may be a casualty of a confused copyist.<sup>9</sup> Regrettably, we possess only a single manuscript of the *Refutation of all Heresies* books 4–10, namely Parisinus supplément grec 464. Miroslav Marcovich – editor of the most recent critical edition – characterised this codex as ‘plagued with huge textual gaps, countless word omissions, displacement of words and even entire clauses, intrusive marginal glosses, and above all many scribal errors.’<sup>10</sup> In this situation, then, we might expect some kind of corruption. Since the woman’s name soon appears simply as Φικόλα (*Refutation* 5.20.7), it seems best to see περη Φικόλα as two separate words.

It is instructive to review the proposed emendations of this strange name. If the Great Goddess is a Demeter-type figure, we might expect περη φικόλα to represent some form of Περσεφόνη (Persephone). Ten Brink proposed Περσεφόνη Φλυά.<sup>11</sup> Maass conjectured ἐριέντου κόρη.<sup>12</sup> Marcovich, who distinguished περη and Φικόλα, suggested γεραρή (‘reverend, venerable,

7 Pausanias refers also to a κλίσιον (‘chapel’? ‘clubhouse’?) of the Lykomidai (*Descr.* 4.1.7). On the Lykomidai, see further Loucas 1990, 55–66; Parker 1996, 305.

8 On the meaning of παστάς here, see Casadio 1997, 60; Herrero de Jáuregui 2010, 160–164.

9 Burkert 2011, 416 saw the name as garbled (‘die beigeschriebenen Namen sind durch die Überlieferung entstellt’).

10 Marcovich 1986, 6–7.

11 Brink 1853, 384.

12 Maass 1895, 303.

august') for the first word (taken as an epithet).<sup>13</sup> Edwards proposed 'Péh (Rhea),<sup>14</sup> while Herrero de Jáuregui opted for ἱερῆ ('holy').<sup>15</sup>

Even if one of the latter emendations is accepted, we are still at a loss about the name Φικόλα. G. W. H. Lampe, in his *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, conjectured 'jar, water-pot,' comparing the modern Greek βικούλλα.<sup>16</sup> Michael C. Astour proposed a Semitic etymology: 'pî-kôl "the mouth of all."' He took the 'mouth' as a 'metaphoric designation of an open and bottomless abyss' that he found in Ugaritic poetry and biblical passages (not cited in his text). Using an Akkadian cognate word, he identified the mouth as a womb, and thus understood pî-kôl as 'the womb of all.' He noted that in several biblical passages (again, not cited) the underworld or earth is compared to a mother's womb.<sup>17</sup>

Marcovich also suggested a Semitic background for Phikola. He compared the commander of Abimelech's army, Phikol (Φικολ), in the Septuagint (Gen 21:22. 32; 26:26). He also noted that Φικόλα was the name of a village in the Transjordan associated with the Tobiads (Josephos, *Ant.* 12.160).<sup>18</sup> These leads, though enticing, do not take us very far. Ultimately Marcovich concluded that the name Phikola was a Gnostic 'invention or reinterpretation.'<sup>19</sup>

Giovanni Casadio identified Phikola with Baubo, largely on the basis of a late text, *On Demons* by Ps.-Psellus: 'A night demon named Babo (Βαβώ) is present somewhere in the Orphic epics. She looms tall and consists of shadows.'<sup>20</sup> Casadio connected Baubo to dogs by following an etymology proposed by Erwin Rohde: Baubo comes from *bau-bau*, the dog bark. He envisioned her as a 'kind of nocturnal phantasm with canine characteristics ... a barking demon in the circle of Hekate.'<sup>21</sup> According to Hesychios, Empedocles understood Baubo to signify the womb (κοιλία).<sup>22</sup> For Casadio, this

13 Marcovich 1988, 91.

14 Edwards 1991, 32.

15 Herrero de Jáuregui 2010, 164 n. 63.

16 Lampe 1961, 1475.

17 Astour 1967, 125.

18 Marcovich 1988, 91.

19 Marcovich 1987, 592. What the Gnostic writer was reinterpreting, Marcovich does not say.

20 Bernabé 2004–7, 1, § 391 (iv); see further Olender 1985, 46.

21 Casadio 1997, 62 (*una specie di fantasima notturna dalle caratteristiche canine ... un demone latrante del corteggio di Ecate*). For the association of dogs and women, see Franco 2014, 121–154.

22 Latte 1953, 1.318, s. v. βαυβώ.

word indicated female genitals. In iconography, so-called Baubo statuettes prominently display their vulva.<sup>23</sup>

More recently Wolfgang Fauth proposed understanding Phikola as a form of Hekate. He suggested emending *περη* to ‘Perse, a short form of Hekate’s epithet Persia, Perseis.’ He understood Phikola to represent not the Hebrew *pî-kôl* (as Astour), but *pî qôl*, ‘the mouth of the voice’ – that is, a mouth endowed with voice. He compared this etymology to *PGM* 4.2810, where Hekate has a puppy’s voice (*σκυλακώδεα φωνήν*).<sup>24</sup>

### 3 A new proposal

These proposed understandings for the name *περη Φικόλα* are suggestive, but none of them really illumine the action of the painting described in *Refutation* 5.20.6–7. What is portrayed there is a rape – or an attempted one. An old man runs after ‘Phikola.’ His erection shows his erotic intent. Casadio’s interpretation obviously highlights the sexual aspect of what is going on, but the story behind the painting is left unaddressed.

Who the male figure is we will deal with later in this essay. For now, we focus on Phikola. I would like to propose, in agreement with Fauth, that Phikola is a form of Hekate. But instead of seeing *περη* as a corruption of ‘Perse,’ I would suggest *Φεραία* (or *Φεραϊνή*), the Pheraia goddess (i. e., from Pherae in Thessaly).<sup>25</sup> This goddess, also known as *Εινόδια*, was introduced to Athens as a foreign goddess, and, since the fifth century BCE, was identified with Hekate.<sup>26</sup>

Hekate was also called ‘Brimo.’ In an Orphic gold tablet from Pherae (fourth century BCE), ‘Brimo! Brimo!’ is mentioned as an apparent password.<sup>27</sup> The words, ‘Save me, great Brimo’ (i. e., Persephone) occur in the third century BCE Gurob papyrus from Egypt (line 5). In the *Greek Magical Papyri*, Brimo is an epithet of Hekate.<sup>28</sup> In Apollonios Rhodios’ *Argonautika*

23 Casadio 1997, 63. For images, see Olender 1985.

24 Fauth 2006, 136; cf. 32–33.

25 My thanks to Sarah Iles Johnston for first suggesting this emendation to me.

26 *Φεραία*. Ἀθήνησι ξενικὴ θεός. οἱ δὲ τῆν Ἐκάτην (‘The Pheraia goddess: a foreign goddess in Athens. Others identify her as Hekate.’ Hesychios, *Lexicon*, s. v. *Φεραία* in Hansen and Cunningham 2009, 4.152). For Einodia (or the Pheraia goddess) as Hekate, see Sophocles, *Antig.* 1199; frag. 535 (Radt); Eur., *Ion* 1048; *Helen* 570; Plato, *Leg.* 914b; Lucian, *Nav.* 15; Artemidoros, *Oneir.* 2.37; *Orph. hymn.* 1.1; *Refutation* 4.35.5. See further Chrysostomou 1998, 220. 270; Mili 2015, 147–158.

27 Graf and Johnston 2013, 216–217.

28 *PGM* 4.2247–2248; 4.2291; 4.2611–2612; 4.2270; 7.692; 70.20.

3.1211, Jason calls upon Hekate Brimo (cf. 3.861: Βριμὼ Κουροτρόφον). Lykophron calls upon the ‘maiden daughter of Perseus’ (Περσέως δὲ παρθένος, i. e., Hekate) as Βριμῶ (1175–1176), and makes clear that she is the Pheraian goddess (Φεραίαν, 1180).<sup>29</sup>

#### 4 The Pheraian goddess and the primal Hermes

There is one particular story of this goddess that proves significant for our painting. Lake Boebeis lies near Pherae in Thessaly. There Hermes and the Pheraian goddess met in an erotic encounter. Propertius refers to ‘Brimo, who as legend says, by the sacred waters of Boebeis laid her virgin body at Mercury’s side’ (*Elegies* 2.2.11–12).<sup>30</sup> Cicero, speaking through the character of Cotta, says that ‘Mercury ... is said rather obscenely to have his penis erect (*excitata natura*) because he was aroused by the sight of Proserpina (*quod aspectu Proserpinae commotus sit*, ND 3.56).<sup>31</sup> Cicero evidently identified the Thessalian goddess with Proserpina (Persephone). He is followed by Arnobius in the early fourth century CE, who says that, ‘according to tradition, the first (*primus*) Mercury voluptuously pursued (*adhinnivisse*) Proserpina with his penis erect (*genitalibus subrectis*). This Mercury is the offspring of highest Heaven (*supremi ... Caeli*)’ (*Adv. gent* 4.14; cf. schol. *Dan. Aen.* 4.577).

In his scholia on Lykophron, *Alexandra* 698, John Tzetzes (ca. 1110–1180 CE) gives another version of our story from ancient tradition: ‘Hermes attempted to force her [Obrimo/Persephone] while hunting. She growled (ἐνεβριμήσατο), making him stop his attempt.’<sup>32</sup> The growl was presumably similar to that of a dog. Lucian jokes about Brimo’s dog-like noises in *Menippos, or Descent to Hades*: ‘Brimo growled (ἐβριμήσατο ἢ Βριμῶ) and Kerberos barked (ὕλάκτησεν)’ (§ 20). In the *Orphic Hymn to Hekate* (1.6), Hekate is called θηρόβρομον, which apparently means ‘she who growls like a wild animal.’<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> John Tzetzes explains that the ‘goddess of Pherae’ (Φεραίαν) is another or second Hekate (Εκάτη ἑτέρα, schol. Lykophron 1180 [Scheer 1881–1908, 341]). Artemis was also identified with the goddess of Pherae in Sicyon, Athens, and Argos (Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.23.5). In his hymn to Artemis, Kallimachos calls her Φεραίη (*Hymns* 3.259). See further Graf and Johnston 2013, 250 n. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Here accepting Turnebus’ emendation of *Brimo* for *primo*.

<sup>31</sup> For *natura* as ‘penis,’ see Pease 1955–58, 2.1108.

<sup>32</sup> Scheer 1881–1908, 2.229.

<sup>33</sup> Alternatively, Ricciardelli translates θηρόβρομον as *annunciate dal ruggito delle belve* (2000, 13).

The Persephone/Brimo referred to in the story of attempted rape was widely identified with Hekate. In the *Etymologicum (magnum) genuinum* 263 (s. v. Βριμώ), we read that Brimo is Persephone who is 'also called Hekate.'<sup>34</sup> In the same text, we hear another version of our story: 'It is said that Hermes, who fell in love with her as she came out to hunt, wanted to have sex with her by force. But she growled at him (ἐνεβριμήσατο). Terrified, he turned away. Hence she is called 'Brimo.'<sup>35</sup>

## 5 Evaluation

Is this the story of the rape depicted in the portico at Phlya? Hermes has, according to Cicero, an erect phallus (*excitata natura*; cf. Arnobius: *genitalibus subrectis*) and chases a female – whom he apparently intends to rape. This description corresponds to the figure with an erect penis (ἐντεταμένην ἔχων τὴν αἰσχύνην) chasing Phikola in the painting (*Refutation* 5.20.6).<sup>36</sup>

But can Hermes be depicted as an old man? Not every Hermes perhaps, but the primal Hermes in Cicero's story is the offspring of Caelus (Heaven) and Dia (Bright Day). This ancient Hermes might suitably be depicted with grey hair, as in the painting.<sup>37</sup> As son of Heaven and Day, Hermes may well have had an aura of light (hence his name 'Streaming Light'). Wings also commonly appear on Hermes's feet.<sup>38</sup> We are not told exactly where the wings are attached to the figure in the Phlyan painting. In this context, however, the wings might only illustrate the speed of the god's pursuit.

34 Βριμώ· ἢ Φερσεφόνη. ἢ δὲ αὐτὴ λέγεται καὶ Ἐκάτη (Berger 1972, 141). The 'scholiast to Oppian, *Hal.* Book 1 schol. 360 line 4 and the scholiast to Hesiod, *Op.* 144 also equate Brimo with Persephone' (Graf and Johnston 2013, 250–251 n. 6).

35 εἴρηται δὲ ὅτι Ἑρμῆν ἐρασθέντα ἐπὶ κυνηγεσίαν ἐξιούση θελήσαι βιαίως μιχθῆναι· ἢ δὲ ἐνεβριμήσατο αὐτῷ· ὁ δὲ φοβηθεὶς ἀπετράπη. καὶ ἐντεῦθεν Βριμώ προσηγορεύθη. For Hekate and Hermes, see further Zografou 2010, 153–201; Chrysostomou 1998, 257–261.

36 A secret story, which Herodotos does not tell (*Hist.* 2.51), explains the ithyphallic Hermes. Perhaps it had something to do with our tale. Suggestively, Pausanias mentions that in the temple of Artemis of Pherai at Sicyon, there was a Herakles whose lower parts resembled those of a herm (Ἡρακλῆς τὰ κάτω τοῖς Ἑρμαῖς τοῖς τετραγώνοις εἰκασμένος, *Descr.* 2.10.7). Is this an ithyphallic god associated with the Pheraian goddess?

37 Ithyphallic herms also typically depict an older, bearded Hermes: Ἑρμᾶ, τί τοι τὸ νεῦρον, ὦ Γενειόλα / ποττὰν ὑπήναν κού ποτ' ἴχνι[ον] ('Long-bearded Hermes, why is your penis (pointing?) to your beard and not to your feet ...?', Callimachus, *Iamb.* IX, frag. 199, trans. C. A. Trypanis).

38 Note, e.g., πτηνοπέδιλε ('wing-footed') in the *Orph. Hymn to Hermes* 28.4 (Quandt); *Anth. Plan.* 215.6 (πτηνὰ πέδιλ' Ἑρμοῦ).

We turn to Brimo/Hekate. It is true that she is associated with dogs, but can she actually be depicted as a dog (or dog-faced)? In Lucian's *Lover of Lies*, Hekate appears to a Hyperborean magician first as a woman, then as a bull, then as a puppy (σκύλαξ) (§ 14). Hesychios in his *Lexicon* (s. v. Ἐκάτης ἄγαλμα) says that 'some depict her [Hekate] as dog-headed' (ἐνιοὶ δὲ καὶ αὐτὴν κυνοκέφαλον πλάττουσιν).<sup>39</sup> In PGM 4.1435, 'Lady Hekate' (κυρία Ἐκάτη) is called 'black dog' (κύων μέλαινα). PGM 4.2880–2884 calls for a protective love charm in the form of a three-faced Hekate. The face on the left is that of dog (τὸ δὲ εὐώνυμον κυνός).<sup>40</sup> Hekate-Ereschigal is invoked as 'virgin, dog' (κύων) in PGM 70.9. A small scarab seal, probably from the Levant, depicts Hekate as a dog prominently showing its vulva.<sup>41</sup> Finally, in PGM 4.2611–2616, 'Hekate,' also called 'Queen Brimo' (Βασίλεια Βριμώ) and 'Lady Phaiara' (ἄνασσα Φαιαρά = Φεραία) is invoked as 'horse-dog' (ἵπποκύων). In the same passage, the writer invokes 'Hermes and Hekate together,' referring to one or both of them as 'androgynous scion' (ἀρσενόθηλυν ἔρνος, 2609–2611).

Yet possibly the scion refers to the child of Hermes and Hekate. Cicero, in *On the Nature of the Gods*, says that the son of Hermes and the first Artemis is Eros (*Cupido primus Mercurio et Diana prima natus dicitur*, 3.60). Who is this 'first Artemis'? If Cicero is using the same source as the story told in 3.56 (four sections earlier), the first Artemis is the 'Proserpina' chased by the ithyphallic Hermes. Yet this Proserpina is also identified with Brimo and Hekate. Tzetzes' scholium to Lykophron 679 indicates that Hermes had three daughters from Hekate (ἐπισηλθὼν τῇ Ἐκάτῃ τρεῖς ἔσχεν ἐξ αὐτῆς θυγατέρας).<sup>42</sup> If their son is Eros, it is significant that the Lykomidai sung short hymns to Eros – attributed to none other than Orpheus (Pausanias, *Descr.* 9.27.2; 9.30.12). Pausanias also notes that he saw an altar to 'Artemis Torch-bearer' in Phlya (1.31.4). There is reason to suspect that this Artemis is a form of, or was identified with Hekate (also a torch-bearer).<sup>43</sup>

Surviving iconography also supports the appearance of Hermes and the Pheraian goddess (i. e., Hekate) in our painting. At some period between 'post-classical times and late antiquity,' writes Ioannis Loucas, a group of statues representing the main deities of Phlya was set up in the initiation

<sup>39</sup> Latte 1966, 2.41.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Hekate as ἰσοπάρθενος κύων (apparently half-maiden, half-dog) in PGM 4.2251. See further West 1995, 207–210; Zografou 2010, 262–264.

<sup>41</sup> Reitler 1949, 29–31, with plate VI.A.

<sup>42</sup> Scheer 1881–1908, 2.225.

<sup>43</sup> Euripides calls Hekate 'torch-bearer' (φωσφόρ' Ἐκάτη, *Hel.* 569) and the *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 52 describes Hekate as σελασφόρος.



hall. These deities are represented on three taurobolian altars from Phlya, dated to the fourth century CE. There are four deities in all: the Great Goddess, Kore, Hekate, and a young god. According to Loucas, the young god could either be Dionysos-Iacchos, or Hermes ‘who was an important god in the local pantheon of Phlya.’<sup>44</sup> In fact, the Phlyan (Φλυήσιος) is an epithet of Hermes according to Hesychios (s. v. Φλυήσιος), appearing quite early in Hipponax (sixth century BCE, frag. 51 Degani).<sup>45</sup>

## 6 A suggested emendation

The evidence above supports, I believe, the emendation of περη in *Refutation* 5.20.7 to Φεραία or better Φεραίη, the Pheraian goddess. Yet what about Φικόλα? It is probably best to see her name as a secret, local designation of Hekate, known to the initiates in the mystery rites of Phlya. (The dieresis on φικόλα is characteristic of magical names, which are typically shrouded in secrecy.) In short, no emendation of Φικόλα is necessary.

## 7 Phanes?

We are now ready to return to the male figure in the painting. According to Marcovich, the ‘grey-headed, winged old man pursuing a fleeing woman is, most probably, the Orphic god *Phanes*.’<sup>46</sup> The proposal is not new. In 1853, ten Brink suggested emending Φάος of the manuscript to Φάνης.<sup>47</sup> Phanes had golden wings, and is so represented in art (cf. *Orphic hymn* 6.2: χρυσέαισιν ἀγαλλόμενον πτερύγεσσι; Bernabé *OF* 136; Aristophanes, *Av.* 697).

According to Marcovich, the old man’s penis is erect because ‘Phanes is the Orphic begetter of both gods and mortals: γένεσις μακάρων θνητῶν τ’ ἀνθρώπων (*Orphic hymn* to Πρωτόγονος 6.3, Quandt).’<sup>48</sup> But, as Edwards

<sup>44</sup> Loucas 1992, 82–83. Cf. Loucas 1986, 401; Loucas 1990, 98–100. Vermaseren, who describes two of the altars, identifies the god with Hermes or Iacchos (1982, 116–118).

<sup>45</sup> Hansen and Cunningham 2009, 4.169. A less clear, but tantalising piece of evidence is the preservation of a woman’s torso which comes, according to Chrysostomou (1998, 37 n. 64, 233), from the large sanctuary of Einodia in the northern part of Pherai. An arm wraps tightly around the waist of the woman, indicating that the original sculpture displayed a rape or abduction scene. For a photo, see Biesantz 1965, plate 31.

<sup>46</sup> Marcovich 1988, 90, emphasis his. This interpretation is supported by Casadio 1997, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Brink 1853, 384.

<sup>48</sup> Marcovich 1988, 90; cf. *PGM* 4.1749–1751.

points out, ‘Phanes, newly-sprung from his egg, does not bear any marks’ of old age (either in literary or iconographical depictions). Nor does the name ‘Phanes’ itself appear to be ancient.<sup>49</sup>

There is another even more serious problem. In the Orphic poetry that has survived, Phanes is never said to rape anyone. Indeed, it would be odd for Phanes to do so, since he is also said to be female (θηλυς, Bernabé, *OF* 134). To be sure, Phanes reportedly has a penis (αἰδοῖον), but it is said to be ‘in the area of the buttocks’ (περὶ τὴν πυγὴν, Bernabé, *OF* 135) – hardly the appropriate tool of a rapist (unless he mounts backwards).<sup>50</sup>

## 8 Summary

So far I have argued (1) that *περη* in *Refutation* 5.20.7 should be emended to *Φεραιή*, (2) that no emendation for *Φικόλα* is required, and (3) that her male pursuer is a form of Hermes, not Phanes. Interpreters seem to have preferred to see Phanes in the painting due to his Orphic pedigree. Yet Brimo/Hekate is an Orphic figure as well (indeed, the first Orphic hymn is dedicated to Hekate).<sup>51</sup> Although the story of Brimo’s coupling with the ancient Hermes probably arose in Thessaly, it may have been recorded in an Orphic poem. The free-floating verses of the poem could then have been chanted in the ceremonies at Phlya. The Lykomidai sang hymns of Orpheus (Pausanias, *Descr.* 9.30.12), and likely considered him to be the founder of their rites. Some of the stories they sung were apparently depicted in a portico seen by Plutarch. One painting that he described portrayed gods that were well-known at Phlya: Hekate and the primal Hermes. The sexual encounter of these gods, whose meaning was long forgotten, proved ripe for Gnostic allegory.

<sup>49</sup> Edwards 1991, 31. Edwards’ own proposal, that ‘Phicola’s pursuer is one of the many playful epiphanies of Love,’ (Edwards 1991, 33) has found, to my knowledge, no supporters. Edwards primarily supported his view by citing a description of ‘Priapus-Horus’ in Egypt (*Suda*, s. v. Priapus).

<sup>50</sup> The source describing Phanes’ genitals is Ps.-Nonnus’ commentary on Gregory Nazianzus’, *Or.* 4.78 (Nimmo Smith 1992, 151). To be sure, Phanes is not incapable of sex. In the *Rhapsodies*, he has sex with Night, but not by force (Bernabé 2004–7, 1. § 148).

<sup>51</sup> Fauth 2006, 19–25; Bremmer 2013, 40–41.

## 9 The Gnostic context

The painting at Phlya only provides a shadow image of the lived religion in an Attic deme at an indeterminate time between the fifth century BCE and the second century CE. What makes it more fascinating is how the painting was used in the lived religion of early Christian intellectuals in the late second and early third centuries CE. During this time, the gnostic ('Sethian') author found the painting in Phlya useful for explaining and sacralising his theology.

'Sethian' theology is tripartite. In the beginning, there was divine Light above, Darkness below, and Spirit in between (*Refutation* 5.19.3–4). Fatefully, particles of the Light were trapped in the lower waters of Darkness (5.19.5–6). A saviour was required to redeem them. That saviour is the Word, who has the nature of the higher Light (5.19.16–17). For the 'Sethian' writer, the Word is represented by the ithyphallic figure in the painting (5.20.7).

The physical world (the cleaved heaven and earth) was formed in the shape of a virgin womb (μήτραν) – possibly here meaning 'vagina' (*Refutation* 5.19.11–12). Into the darkness of this vagina or womb, the Word slithered in snake form (5.19.20). The snake is a phallic symbol, and the whole episode has an obvious sexual cast. The goal of the Word's penetration was not pleasure, however, but the redemption of the sparks of light that were mixed in the waters of the womb. This womb, according to the 'Sethian' writer, is represented by the dog-shaped woman in the painting (5.20.7).

The author of the *Refutation* wrote his work to prove that his opponents derived their ideas from Greek philosophers, astrologers, and mystery cult initiators (*Refutation* 1. *pref.* 8). One of his opponents was the anonymous 'Sethian' who composed his theology in a document called *The Paraphrase of Seth* (*Ref.* 5.22.1).<sup>52</sup> Coming upon this treatise, the author of the *Refutation* seized upon the 'Sethian' writer's description of the 'Orphic' painting. The 'Sethian' allegory of the painting was sure proof that 'their entire teaching about the Word is from the ancient theologians Musaios, Linos, and – the consummate revealer of initiations and mysteries – Orpheus' (*Ref.* 5.20.4). This statement, characteristic of the author of *Refutation*, tendentiously serves his overall thesis. Nevertheless, it is unlikely, to say the least, that the Sethian writer derived his Logos theology from the mysteries at

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<sup>52</sup> For the relation of *Paraph. Seth* to *Paraph. Shem* (NHC 7.1), see Roberge 2010, 84–93 (with earlier sources).

Phlya. Other, more familiar sources were ready to hand from both Jewish, Christian, and Homeric writings (*Ref.* 5.20.1–3; 8–9; 5.21.5–6).

Although the matter is disputed, the ‘Sethian’ writer appears to be a type of early Christian. His Christian identity is manifest in both his story of salvation and his use of Christian scripture. When the Word takes on snake form, this form is identified with ‘the form of the slave’ (*Refutation* 6.19.20; cf. 10.11.11), which is the form that Christ assumes in Phil 2:7. The subsequent entrance of the Word/snake into the virgin womb of the world (*Refutation* 6.19.20–21) probably alludes to Luke 1:34–35.<sup>53</sup> The Word relieves the birth pangs (λύσαι τὰς ὠδίνας) of the virgin womb (*Refutation* 6.19.21), which is likely an allusion to Acts 2:24 (λύσας τὰς ὠδίνας). After re-emerging from the womb, the Word drinks the cup ‘of living, bubbling water’ (a conflation of John 4:10 and 14), and then dons a ‘heavenly garment’ (cf. Matt 22:11). Jesus is directly mentioned by the Sethian writer as the one who comes to separate the blended elements of the world (*Refutation* 5.21.5, quoting Matt 10:34; cf. *Gos. Thom.* 16). Evidently Jesus is identical with the Word, as in John 1:1. Jesus separates spiritual people from the world so that they can enjoy their ‘commonwealth in heaven’ (*Refutation* 5.21.6, quoting Phil 3:20).

In sum, the Sethian writer was intimately familiar with Christian scriptures – specifically, Paul’s letters, the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John, and probably the Book of Acts. Why, if he was not a Christian, would the Sethian author quote these writings or describe Jesus as the saviour? There was no reason for the author of *Refutation* to introduce these Christian elements and ideas into the ‘Sethian’ report. Indeed, the author of *Refutation* was likely threatened by the ‘Sethian’ writer and impelled to attack him for the very reason that he perceived him to be a Christian competitor.

In the lived religion of two early Christian intellectuals, then, we witness profoundly different stances toward Hellenic authority. The author of the *Refutation* linked the ‘Sethian’ writer to Orpheus in order to delegitimise his views. In contrast, the ‘Sethian’ writer appealed to an ‘Orphic’ painting in order to authorise his theology. Perhaps Orpheus, the supreme Hellenic mystagogue, knew the mysteries of the Word entering the womb of the world. And what better figure to represent the Word than Hermes – the ancient god in the painting?<sup>54</sup> Moreover, what better figure could represent the

<sup>53</sup> See further Abramowski 1988, 141–142.

<sup>54</sup> The identification of Hermes and the Logos (or Word) is common in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts. See, e. g., Plato, *Crat.* 407e–408b; Herakleitos, *All.* 72; Philo, *Legat.* 94. 99; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 54 (*Mor.* 373b); Cornutus, *Nat. d.* 16.2, 11; Justin Martyr,

virgin womb than the dark, virgin goddess associated with the frightening underworld, dogs, and the womb (Hekate / Phikola)?<sup>55</sup>

Casadio was right in this respect: Phikola is Baubo, primal image of the vagina. But she is not Baubo, the dog woman, *in the company* of Hekate. She is Baubo *because* she is Hekate. Fauth's book *Hekate Polymorphos* richly shows how Hekate and Baubo merged in Late Antiquity, especially on the pages of the *Greek Magical Papyri*.<sup>56</sup> In a single spell of these papyri, Artemis, Persia, Hekate, Baubo, and Kore all appear as names of a single goddess (PGM 4.2708–2784). In such spells one might expect to find the name Phikola as well. But in vain. Whether corrupt or simply unattested elsewhere, Phikola's unexplained – or rather secret – name still retains its aura of mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> *Apol.* 22.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.15.132.1; [Hippolytos], *Refutation* 4.48.2; 5.14.1; 5.17.8; Ps.-Clem. *Rec.* 10.41.

<sup>55</sup> For Hekate as virgin, see Propertius *Elegies* 2.2.11–12 above; also PGM 4.2724; 70.9. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Fauth 2006, 32–40.

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