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*The Backward-
Looking Head*

BASAITI'S CALLING OF THE SONS OF ZEBEDEE
AND ARISTOPHANES' MYTH IN PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

The Backward-Looking Head Basaiti's *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee* and Aristophanes' Myth in Plato's *Symposium*

Marco Basaiti's painting of the *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee* held in the Picture Gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna (inv. 116, signed and dated '1515. marcus. baxaitj. .f.') incorporates a remarkable additional element: flanking an architectural frame are grisaille figures which at first sight bear no relation to the New Testament scene in the centre and have hitherto been inexplicable to art historians. One of the two grisaille figures also displays a curious feature that appears in two passages from the literature discussed in cultivated circles in Basaiti's day. The intention of the present essay is to pursue these intriguing tracks.¹ One of the two literary tracks leads us to a colourful pavilion under a rainbow in that humanistic intellectual garden where Renaissance scholars simultaneously cultivated their knowledge of the foremost texts both of classical pagan antiquity and

of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. It was a garden that some representatives of the time's spiritual authorities – that is to say, the Roman Catholic clergy – regarded with distrust, only setting foot in it themselves with great care, for fear of pagan misdoings and the zest for dispute shown by humanists critical of the Church. If we venture to follow this track into the real world, we are led into an area of human life with which both the spiritual and the secular authorities of the day had great problems, and which even now some such authorities are still not able to approach in a spirit of freedom and tolerance: same-sex relationships.

State of research and topic under examination

As the oil painting on a poplar panel (fig. 1)² is not large – 124 × 60 cm, and thus perfectly portable – it can be assumed that it was made not for a church but for private devotion. There is very little record of the life of Marco Basaiti (c.1470–1530), who came from an Albanian or Greek family and worked in Venice.³

The principal subject of the painting is clear: in the centre we see Jesus' calling of James and John the sons of Zebedee, as narrated in almost the same words by the evangelists Mark (1:16–20), Luke (5:10–11), and Matthew (4:21–22), which are quoted here in Mark's version, where it is preceded by the calling of Simon (later to be called Peter) and Andrew:

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting nets into the

1 The text is based on a lecture that I gave on 22 June 2015 at the Institut für Klassische Philologie of the University of Salzburg and on 25 June 2015 in the framework of the 'Eranos Vindobonensis' at the University of Vienna. For in-depth discussions in the preparatory phase I thank Harald Jurkovič *buonanima* (Vienna), and for their critical reading of the lecture manuscript and helpful comments Vera Bachmann-Ernsting and Bernd Ernsting (both Cologne). My thanks also go to Guido Caneto (Borgo d'Oneglia), Alice Hoppe-Harnoncourt (Vienna), Manuela Laubenberger (Vienna), Frank C. Möller (Hamburg), Georg Plattner (Vienna), and Andreas Prater *buonanima* (Munich) for their critical reading of the present version in various stages of its development; to Christine Harrauer *buonanima*, supervisor of my *Diplomarbeit* (degree dissertation), and Eugen Dönt *buonanima*, supervisor of my doctoral thesis (both Vienna) for inoculating me with the ideas of Platonism and syncretism in the Renaissance; to Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (Vienna) for inoculating me with the spirit of Venetian Renaissance painting; to Michael Odlozil (Vienna), who restored Basaiti's painting, for specialist technical advice and thoughts related to composition; to the physicians Wilhelm Aschauer and Wolfgang Fürst (both Vienna) for anatomical information in response to my questions; to Sabine Haag, Peter Kerber, Guido Messling, and Franz Pichorner (all Vienna) for kindly granting the text a place amongst the publications of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna; to Rainer Murauer (Rome) for his kind initiative in publishing the essay in the *Römische Historische Mitteilungen*; to three anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments; to Ramona Heinlein (Vienna) for the copy-editing; to John Nicholson (Vienna) and Sophie Kidd (Cardigan) for the English translation; to Rafael Kopper for his organizational role, Rita Neulinger for the layout, and Jakob Gsöllpointner (all Vienna) for the processing of the illustrations; and, last but not least, for constant fraternal encouragement, to Michael Hochedlinger (Vienna).

2 On the scientific analysis of the painting process see Sylvia Ferino-Pagden and Michael Odlozil, 'Zur Konservierung und Restaurierung von Marco Basaitis Berufung der Söhne des Zebedäus', *Technologische Studien Kunsthistorisches Museum*, 6 (2009), 215–37.

3 Mauro Lucco, 'Basaiti', *Paragone. Arte*, 25 (1974), 297, 41–55; Bernard Bonario, *Marco Basaiti* (Berlin, 1974).



Fig. 1: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, signed and dated '1515. marcus. baxaitj. .f.', poplar panel, 124.3 × 80.4 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery, inv. 116



Fig. 2: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, 1510, wood panel, 386 × 265 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. 39 (formerly Sant'Andrea del Lido)

sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And having gone a little further on he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in a boat mending nets, and immediately he called them. And having left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, they followed him.⁴

4 This and all other Bible passages are quoted and translated from the Vulgate, because this was the version of the Bible used – in spite of their criticism of its unclassical Latin – by the humanists of the time. The Vulgate was available in various printings; quotations in the present essay are taken from *Biblia cum concordantijs veteris et noui testamenti necnon et iuris canonici: ac diuersitatibus textuum: canonibusque euangeliorum ac quibusdam temporum incidentibus in margine positus et accentu singularum dictionum per venerabilem patrem fratrem Albertum castellanum venetum ordinis praedicatorum studiosissime reuisa correcta emendata ...* (Venice: Lucamantonus de Giunta, 1511). Here fol. 431v: 'Et preteriens secus mare galilee: vidit symonem et andream fratrem eius mittentes retia in mare. Erant enim piscatores. Et dixit eis iesus. Venite post me: et faciam vos fieri piscatores hominum. Et protinus relictis retibus secuti sunt eum. Et progressus inde pauillum vidit iacobum zebedei et iohannem fratrem eius et ipsos componentes retia in naui: et statim vocauit illos. Et relicto patre suo zebedeo in naui cum mercennarijs secuti sunt eum.'

The central pictorial scene of the Vienna painting shows Simon (Peter) and Andrew, the first two disciples to be called, already standing at Jesus' side. Zebedee is still in the boat; James, the elder of the two sons, has gone down on one knee on the bank, while John, the younger, still beardless son, looks about to follow suit in kneeling and is pointing to his breast with his right hand, which could convey 'Do you really mean me?' or alternatively be a gesture of reverence, possibly combined with astonishment and immediate warm-hearted acquiescence. The scene takes place in a mountainous landscape that is similar neither to Galilee nor to the Venetian lagoon; it presumably came out of the painter's imagination and from his familiarity with standard elements of Northern landscape painting.

A few years earlier, in 1510, Basaiti had painted the same subject in a much larger format (386 × 265 cm) as an altarpiece for the church of the Carthusian monastery of Sant'Andrea del Lido. Sant'Andrea was a functioning charterhouse until the dissolution of religious foundations that took place in the wake of Napoleon's military campaigns and the downfall of the Republic of Venice. The painting (fig. 2) has hung in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice since 1806, and the church no longer exists.⁵ In the Venice painting the scene is likewise set in a fantasy landscape, but one that is markedly stronger, more 'unnatural', and very much more Northern than the Vienna landscape. Furthermore, while the painting is similarly composed, the image is in reverse. Peter, Andrew, and Zebedee have different physiognomies, and John stands upright, though making the same gesture towards his breast with his right hand.

There is one further conspicuous difference between the two paintings. In the small devotional work, the scene is enclosed in a painted architectural frame in the form of a classical aedicule, which is inserted as a separating element between the gospel scene and the black void that surrounds the whole structure, or, alternatively, between the gospel scene and the viewer's space arguably suggested by the signed *cartellino* that hangs over the bottom of the frame and curls outwards into the covered space. Central-perspective, illusionistic architectural frames, richly adorned with shadows to enhance the trompe-l'oeil effect, had been common in painting since the Middle Ages.⁶ In this and other such cases, the

5 Alessandra Ottieri, 'Laguna di Venezia, mare di Galilea: la Vocazione dei figli di Zebedeo di Marco Basaiti', *Artibus et historiae*, 5/9 (1984), 77–89.

6 Mela Escherich, 'Die Architekturmalerei in der mittelalterlichen Kunst', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 12 (1917), 425–58; Anja Sibylle Steinmetz, *Das Altarretabel in der altniederländischen Malerei: Untersuchung zur Darstellung eines sakralen Requisites vom frühen 15. bis zum späten 16. Jahrhundert*, Diss. University of Cologne, 1993 (Weimar, 1995), 24.



Fig. 3: Aedicule. Rome, Pantheon



Section of fig. 1

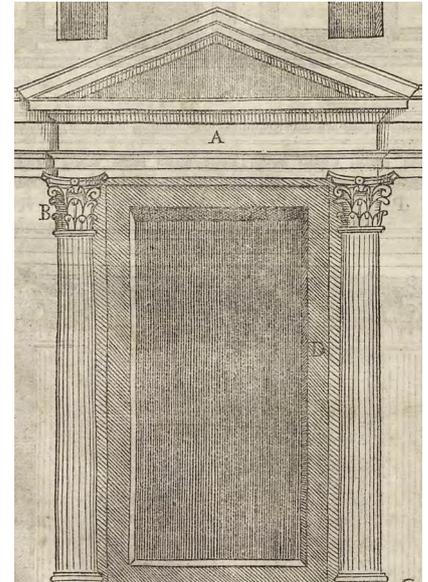


Fig. 4: Sebastiano Serlio, *Il terzo libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese, nel qual si figurano, e descrivono le antichità di Roma, e le altre che sono in Italia, e fuori d'Italia*, Venice (Francesco Marcolino da Forlì) 1540, XVI, detail: aedicule in the Pantheon

Fig. 5: Marco Basaiti, *The Agony in the Garden with SS Louis of Toulouse, Francis, Dominic, and Mark*, 1516, wood panel, 369 × 222 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. 69



intention was clearly to evoke the freestanding marble columns and tympanum of an altar or altar superstructure in *all'antica* Renaissance style. What is more, the yellowish marble (*giallo antico*) of Basaiti's columns, Corinthian capitals, tympanum, and decoration with suggested intarsia in red marble (*rosso antico*) are strikingly reminiscent of certain antique monuments that still exist today, in particular the aedicules in the Pantheon in Rome (completed between 125 and 128 under Emperor Hadrian and later used as a church under the name *Sancta Maria Rotunda* or *Sancta Maria ad Martyres*, see figs. 3, 4);⁷ interestingly, as one can see from the underdrawing that is visible with the naked eye, the columns originally had fluting, which was however omitted in the application of the paint (cf. below figs. 15, 16).⁸

Architecture within the painting performs an illusionistic function in relation to the real space of the church in Basaiti's likewise large-format *Agony in the Garden* (now Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice; fig. 5), which was made as an altarpiece for San Giobbe. In this case, the painted architecture – seen behind life-size depictions of St Louis of Toulouse, St Francis, St Dominic, and St Mark – simulated a chapel or loggia on the right wall of the

⁷ Sebastiano Serlio, *Il terzo libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese, nel qual si figurano, e descrivono le antichità di Roma, e le altre che sono in Italia, e fuori d'Italia* (Venice: Francesco Marcolino da Forlì, 1540), V–XVII; Kjeld de Fine Licht, *The Rotunda in Rome. A study of Hadrian's Pantheon* (Copenhagen, 1968).

⁸ See Ferino-Pagden and Odlozil 2009 (n. 2), 223 with figs. 11, 12.

nave and led the beholder's eye through to a mountainous landscape with the rendering of the gospel scene.⁹

A function of this kind, the intention of which was to effect an optical continuation of a three-dimensional space, would appear not to play a role in the *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, as the space between the aedicule and the edge of the painting is filled with a black void that precludes any possible continuity. One could however imagine it being used to similar effect on a smaller scale – about the size of a window – if hung unframed on a black wall or incorporated into a piece of black furniture, but had this been done, the effect would have been nullified by the two colourless male figures on the outsides of the columns.

In accordance with the theme of the calling of disciples, there could be a link between the columns and a verse in the Letter to the Galatians (2:9) that refers to 'James and Cephas and John, who were seen to be columns',¹⁰ that is to say, metaphorical pillars of the original Christian community in Jerusalem. Precisely these three very prominent disciples – Simon Peter (Cephas) and the sons of Zebedee, who were all particularly close to Jesus – were the ones privileged to be present at two memorable gospel episodes in which Jesus communicated with his divine Father: the Transfiguration,¹¹ at which Yahweh proclaimed 'This is my beloved son',¹² and the Agony in the Garden, in which Jesus, 'sorrowful, even unto death', prayed to the Father, and the three disciples fell asleep in spite of their master having entreated them to watch with him.¹³

It is of interest that St John's Gospel never mentions John by name but, rather, refers to an anonymous favourite disciple – always 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'¹⁴ – who

is traditionally identified with John, which will become important for us below. In the final chapter of the gospel, it is stated that the disciple whom Jesus loved is the author,¹⁵ on account of which it has been assumed that John referred to himself in the third person throughout.¹⁶

The verse in the Letter to the Galatians in which Peter, James, and John are referred to as 'columns' could thus by association have provided the idea for the architecture in the painting. One very strange and as yet unexplained element in the work, however, is the pair of nude figures which, painted *en grisaille* without life-evoking flesh tones, make such an outlandish and lively impression on the outside of the columns. What is the significance of these ghostly beings seen in classical nudity on the fringes of what is otherwise a perfectly orthodox depiction of a scene from the gospels? Might these naked figures perhaps represent marble sculptures of saints, of the kind often placed in churches alongside real painted altarpieces? But if they were, would such saintly figures be shown disporting themselves in the architecture in the frivolous manner of adolescent youths free of adult supervision? And could we ever imagine an early sixteenth-century painting showing Christian saints entirely naked with their genitals clearly visible? Hardly.

The figures are not to be thought of as three-dimensional elements in the painted frame; on the contrary, alongside the scene from the gospels and the likewise polychrome trompe-l'oeil altar, they introduce a further level of reality in which they have a life of their own in monochrome and act autonomously. This, however, they presumably do – though in a manner that requires interpretation – in relation to the biblical theme of the central depiction, the seriousness of which would not lead us to expect any such bizarre additions. Whoever meditates before the picture can thus immerse himself in two different 'stories': in the calling of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, and in the story conveyed by the grisaille men in the apparently undefined space which encloses the aedicule with the gospel scene and which they – as is suggested by the signed *cartellino* – in a certain sense share with the viewer. While the depiction of the gospel scene may need no further philological investigation once the relevant gospel passages have been identified, the puzzling frame cries out for us to engage in deeper research on its behalf.

9 On the interpretation of this altarpiece in a frame of fictive architecture see Denise Zaru, 'Creating a Devotional Space. Architectural Metaphors in Venetian Renaissance Altarpieces', in Carlo Corsato and Juliette Ferdinand, *Art and Culture North and South of the Alps from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century. Essays in Honour of Bernard Aikema*, Artibus et Historiae 78 (XXXIX) (2018), 21–37, on this point 32.

10 Biblia 1511, fol. 480r: 'iacobus et cephas et iohannes qui videbantur colonne esse'.

11 Luke 9:28–36; Mark 9:2–9; Matthew 17:1–8.

12 Biblia 1511, fol. 424v (Matthew 17:1–5): 'Et post dies sex assumpsit iesus petrum et iacobum et ioannem fratrem eius: et duxit illos in montem excelsum seorsum: et transfiguratus est ante eos. ... ecce nubes lucida obumbravit eos. Et ecce vox de nube dicens: Hic est filius meus dilectus in quo mihi bene complacui: ipsum audite.' (And six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain. And he was transfigured before them. ... behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them. And behold, a voice from the cloud, saying: 'This is my son, the beloved, in whom I pleased myself well; hear him!')

13 Biblia 1511, fol. 429r (Matthew 26: 37–8): 'Et assumpto petro et duobus filiis zebedei: cepit contristari et mestus esset [sic]. Tunc ait illis. Tristis est anima mea vsque ad mortem.' (And having taken with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be grieved and dejected. Then he said to them: 'My soul is sad, even to death.'). Ibid., fol. 437r (Mark 14:32): 'Et assumpsit petrum et iacobum et ioannem secum: et cepit pauere et tedere.' ('And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be afraid and feel disgusted.'). The passage on the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane at Luke 22:39–46 does not make special mention of the three disciples, nor does the very brief reference to the episode at John 18:1.

14 Biblia 1511, fol. 461r (John 13:23, at the Last Supper): 'vnus ex discipulis ... quem diligebat iesus'; ibid., fol. 464v (John 19:26, at the Crucifixion):

'discipulum ... quem diligebat'; ibid., fol. 464v (John 20:2, at the tomb): 'discipulum quem amabat iesus'; ibid. fol. 464r (John 21:7, at Jesus' appearance at the Sea of Tiberias): 'discipulus ille quem diligebat iesus'; ibid. fol. 465v (John 21:20): 'discipulum quem diligebat iesus ... qui et recubuit in cena super pectus eius'.

15 Biblia 1511, fol. 465v (John 21:24): 'Hic est discipulus ille qui testimonium perhibet de his: et scripsit hec.' (This is the disciple who is testifying to these things, and he has written them.)

16 On the traditional identification of the disciple John with the writers of St John's Gospel and Revelation, see generally Martin Hengel, *Die Johanneische Frage. Ein Lösungsversuch, mit einem Beitrag zur Apokalypse von Jörg Frey* (Tübingen, 1993).

Composition

First of all it must be established whether the architectural frame with the grisailles is actually an original part of the painting and thus relevant for the interpretation of the whole, or whether it was perhaps partly added by a later hand. On this matter I quote Michael Odlozil, who restored the painting and whom, as a specialist for technical matters, I approached with this question. I am indebted to him for his account, which he composed as an addition to the findings he published in 2009:

Both the X-ray image and the infrared reflectogram of the painting show us the step-by-step procedure Basaiti followed on his way through to the final composition.

Not only the poplar panel support, to which a second piece was added to create space for the pediment of the aedicule, but also numerous pentimenti attest to Basaiti's search for the best positions and postures for the figures, and even for the execution of the background.

The infrared reflectogram (fig. 6) shows Basaiti's underdrawing (with graphite pencil or silver-point). For the picture's architectural surround, straight lines and an arc for the arch were at the very outset scored with a ruler and compasses into the priming layer before it had completely dried. In all figures, the positions of the heads, arms, legs, and feet were changed between the first variant of the underdrawing and the painting in its final state. Feet that were originally bare were subsequently shod, and whole fishing boats in the background were discarded. The massive rock formation that rises on the left in the large altarpiece on the same subject held at the Accademia is still visible in the underdrawing but was obliterated in favour of an expanse of open sky.

During the underdrawing a start was made on decorating the frieze of the architectural frame with ox skulls (bucrania) linked with swags, presumably imagined as a relief (fig. 7); however, it is clear that it was rejected before this phase was completed, as the underdrawing only covers half of the frieze.

This being the case, it comes as no surprise to find that certain parts were only given their final

Fig. 6: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, infrared reflectogram



Fig. 7: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, infrared reflectogram, detail: frieze





Fig. 8: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, infrared reflectogram, detail: the left-hand grisaille man

form in the course of the painting process: most notably, the two grisaille figures were clearly painted over the architecture once it had been finished. The underdrawing of both figures corresponds both in technique and in style to that of the other parts of the painting; one particularly audacious feature of the underdrawing is Basaiti's sketching of the left-hand man's ear over the column (fig. 8). We cannot say for certain at what point Basaiti did the underdrawing of the figures on the columns. It is possible that the two men formed part of the original underdrawing, but that they were only actually painted after the completion of the architecture. It is also conceivable that the underdrawing of the men was done only after the architecture had been painted. The image in the infrared reflectogram would be similar if the underdrawing were done over the light layer of paint depicting the architecture.

In my opinion, that the two grisaille figures appeared later than the rest of the painting fits in with the genesis of the work. There is no doubt that they were painted by Basaiti. The final version was only arrived at after numerous steps and changes.



Fig. 9: Frieze of bucrania. Tivoli, Temple of Vesta

It is thus confirmed that the architectural frame and the grisailles – which are the principal concern of the present essay – were executed by the same hand as the central painting. Furthermore, the relief of swags linking three ox skulls, begun in the left half of the frieze but neither carried on to the right nor carried out in the painting, is also of interest because the motif was, like the classical aedicule, a familiar characteristic of antique architectural monuments.¹⁷ Examples in and around Rome known in Basaiti's time included friezes of bucrania on, for example, the tomb of Caecilia Metella¹⁸ (Via Appia) or the so-called Temple of Vesta¹⁹ (Tivoli; fig. 9), which like the Pantheon was used as a church, and with the same name, Sancta Maria Rotunda. We do not know why Basaiti jettisoned the frieze. Was it that the association with the antique practice of animal sacrifice seemed to him too pagan for the gospel scene? Was a role played by the fact of these two temples having been given the same name by the ruling religion of Christianity?

To recapitulate: When the 'inventor of the picture' – 'Bilderfinder', literally 'picture-inventor', a term well established in German art history that can apply to whoever originated the pictorial concept, whether the artist himself or the patron who commissioned the work – laid down the composition of the painting, he from the very beginning gave his depiction of the calling of the two

¹⁷ On the history and significance of this originally Hellenistic form of decoration see Ralf Grüßinger, *Dekorative Architekturfriese in Rom und Latium. Ikonologische Studien zur römischen Baudekoration der späten Republik und Kaiserzeit*, Diss., University of Heidelberg (2001), http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/10946/1/Gruessinger_Diss.pdf (accessed 14.4.2024), 20–36, here in particular 33–4: 'Like all remains left over from sacrificial acts, the skulls of sacrificed cattle were regarded as sacred and were not allowed to be simply removed from the sacred site. From this there developed the custom of affixing the skulls as signs of the sacrifice around the *temenos* [temple precincts] and to consecrate them to the respective deity. ... The inclusion of cultic utensils in the motivic repertoire of the architectural decoration thus amounts to a making permanent of an ephemeral and secondary item, intended to define the temple in its function and impart to it a solemn and elevated character.'

¹⁸ Grüßinger 2001 (n. 17), 290–1, cat. 10.

¹⁹ Serlio 1540 (n. 7), XXVII–XXIX; Grüßinger 2001 (n. 17), 282–3, cat. 1.



Fig. 10: Rogier van der Weyden, *Virgin and Child*, c.1451, oak panel, 18.9 × 12.1 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery, inv. 951

disciples an ‘antique frame’, which for a short time – in a phase that was to be revised – contained pagan elements in the form of ox skulls drawn on the frieze. Antiquity is thus clearly relevant to the pictorial idea.

Grisailles

The motif of the painted frame with grisaille figures emerged in the Netherlands in the fifteenth century.²⁰ As

²⁰ On the grisaille in general see Hans Holländer, ‘Steinerne Gäste in der Malerei’, *Giessener Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, 2 (1973), 103–31; Marion Grams-Thieme, *Lebendige Steine; Studien zur niederländischen Grisaillemalerei des 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, 1988); Michaela Krieger, *Grisaille als Metapher. Zum Entstehen der Peinture en Camaieu im frühen 14. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 1995); Michaela Krieger, ‘Die niederländische Grisaillemalerei des 15. Jahrhunderts. Bemerkungen zur neueren Literatur’, *Kunstchronik*, 49 (1996), 575–88; Sabine Blumenröder, *Andrea Mantegna – die Grisailles: Malerei, Geschichte und antike Kunst im Paragone des Quattrocento* (Berlin, 2008); Till-Holger Borchert (ed.), *Jan van Eyck. Grisailles* (Contextos de la colección permanente 23), exh. cat. Madrid (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza) 2009; Almut Schäffner, *Terra verde. Entwicklung*



Fig. 11: Hans Memling, *St John Miniature Altar*, 1485/1490, central panel, oak, 69.3 × 47 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery, inv. 939

an example we may take a *Virgin and Child* by Rogier van der Weyden (fig. 10), in which Yahweh looks down with pleasure upon his family, and Adam (with the Angel of the Expulsion from Paradise) and Eve are seen standing on the left and right respectively. On the interpretative level, the painted frame imitating stone sculpture is a semantic device, as through a juxtaposition of this kind the inventor of the picture was able to bring into the painting a motif that in terms of time and place does not actually belong there but is associated with the subject allegorically. The mythical sense is self-evident: according to the Old Testament book Genesis, sin came into the world through the first pair of human beings (not born of woman but created by Yahweh), Adam and Eve; and according to the Christian faith, Jesus (born of Mary and son of Yahweh) was chosen to redeem mankind from sin through his Passion and death on the Cross.

While the grisaille figures in the frame appear to be statues of figures standing still, in another example they come to life, acting out their respective Bible story. In

und Bedeutung der monochromen Wandmalerei der italienischen Renaissance (Weimar, 2009).

the central panel of the *St John Miniature Altar* by Hans Memling (fig. 11), Abraham is depicted top left raising his sword to slay his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1–4), and at top right Jephthah is seen with his already beheaded daughter (Judges 11:30–40). Both these biblical myths give accounts of human sacrifice carried out on the perpetrator’s own child – in one case demanded by Yahweh and prevented at the last moment, and in the other case rashly promised by Jephthah and carried out with divine approval. In the Christian tradition they are regarded as Old Testament prefigurations of another paternally imposed execution: Jesus’ sacrificial death on the Cross. Through these two grisaille scenes in the architecture, the inventor of the picture thus alludes to the Passion to be suffered by the little child, who in the main panel is seen in his mother’s lap cheerfully reaching for the apple that a friendly smiling angel is holding out to him after presumably interrupting his heavenly music-making on the bowed lyre. As a decorative addition, grisaille putti – equally animated in effect but on a larger scale than the prefigurations – are holding colourful swags of flowers and fruit diagonally over the baldachin above Mary’s throne.

Basaiti’s grisaille men are also active: animated ‘stone guests’, as it were, on their columns. Their hair, for example, is very realistically painted. The sparse strands of hair over the right-hand figure’s bald head could not have been done in stone by any sculptor on earth: such things can only be represented in painting.²¹

With the monochrome white and grey tones, however, the impression given is indeed of stone, which by association brings to mind durability, permanence, and great age, even ‘antiquity’, as for example in Mantegna, whose art often reflects the influence of antique sculpture. For Mantegna, too, the biblical tradition offered the opportunity to emphasize the enduring validity and elevated character of a scene by painting it as a stone relief, as for example in his *Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 12). In that work, the scene in which Abraham is on the point of obeying God’s command that he slay his son (Genesis 22:1–4) thereby acquires an unshakably rigorous but at the same



Fig. 12: Andrea Mantegna, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, c.1490/1495, oil on canvas, 48.5 × 36 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery, inv. 1842

time impassive character that suits it well as a prefiguration of Christ’s Passion. Mantegna has taken us on to Italian soil, but Netherlandish grisaille paintings were certainly well known in Venice too, as it was a trading city and artistic centre that attracted many northern European artists.

The possible motives behind this iconographical device may be summarized as follows. The appearance of grisaille figures and normally painted polychrome figures together in one painting can express the present and enduring significance of something from the past, or it can introduce a further plane of reality. In any case, the grisaille provides the viewer with additional information concerning the main artistic subject.

This begs the question as to whether the two naked grisaille men in Basaiti’s painting may be figures from the Old Testament tradition that in some way provide additional information or serve an allegorical purpose. The painting by Rogier van der Weyden has given us an example of this in the form of Adam, who when shown in Paradise is usually seen naked but after the Expulsion often with a fig leaf or at least a hand in front of his genitals. The right-hand grisaille in Basaiti’s painting could thus be interpreted as Adam before the Fall. But

21 An analogous example of a painter playing with material impressions is the panel of around 1473 by Francesco del Cossa showing John the Baptist (originally part of the Griffoni Altar in San Petronio, Bologna, now preserved in Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera). In this painting, John holds his hermit’s staff, which features a gold ring about the size of a head positioned under the cross at the top of the staff. Seen in the ring on a cross-piece is an entirely lifelike lamb with its rear end facing the viewer. It is clearly the Lamb of God, one of the Baptist’s traditional attributes. The contradiction between the material and the scale is disconcerting, because the depiction is too small for a real live lamb, but the woolly coat is too naturalistic for it to be intended as a piece of goldsmith’s work like the rest of the staff – in the latter case one would expect light reflexes as if on metal or enamel. An in-depth account of this detail with comparative examples is provided by Anna Degler, *Parergon. Attribut, Material und Fragment in der Bildästhetik des Quattrocento* (Paderborn, 2015), 148–53.

on the left we see no likewise naked or sparingly covered Eve. On the contrary, what we see is a second man embracing his column: could *he* perhaps be Adam once again, but *after* the Expulsion, ashamed of his nakedness and endeavouring to hide it behind the (phallic) column? However, the two men are not similar in appearance, and whereas the left-hand figure has thick curly hair, his counterpart on the right has a bald head and beard. If they were one and the same person, it would be strange to find the traumatized, post-Expulsion Adam looking younger than his carefree earlier self. This solution would thus seem improbable.

Two other possible candidates as naked figures from the Bible are Noah found drunk in his tent by his son Ham (Genesis 9), and Lot (Genesis 19), who was forced by his daughters to make himself drunk with wine so that he would not resist when they made moves to have him make them pregnant. But nothing in Basaiti's painting suggests a connection with Noah or Lot, or indeed with any other myths from the Bible.

Anatomy

The left-hand grisaille figure displays a number of conspicuously unusual features. The head looks as if the face were turned round by 180° like that of an owl (fig. 13), which – as physicians have assured me – is not possible for a normal cervical spine in a living human being. In addition, the viewer's eye is positively drawn to the head by a spatial paradox: while the column covers the rear part of the head, it is itself overlaid by the ear, which astonishingly is positioned in front of it. How could a cylindrical column with a diameter of around fifty centimetres fit into the narrow gap between the auricle and the cranium, where in real life there is only room for such slender objects as pens and pencils? The column almost gives the impression of being a flat piece of stage scenery on which the grisaille man is scratching the skin behind his ear, but this impression is contradicted by the position of the forearm hugging the distinctly rounded form of the shaft. The ear, we must conclude, far from being a major artistic aberration, was deliberately placed in front of the column by the artist – as is shown by the infrared reflectogram in which the clearly contoured underdrawing stands out against the light-coloured background (see above, fig. 8). What is the point of this strange feature? The answer to this puzzle will be given at the end of the essay and will confirm the thesis that is to be proposed.

To make the point absolutely clear, the depiction of the left-hand grisaille man appears to contradict artistic



Fig. 13: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, detail: head of the left-hand grisaille figure

consensus: while the arms, torso, and leg are clearly comprehensible in their posture (the toes show without any doubt that it is his right foot that we can see – if, that is, we consider, on account of the orientation of the arms and shoulder area, that it is his stomach side that is turned toward the column), the backward-looking head at first sight makes an unnatural impression and is in any case incompatible with the figural logic we expect from a Renaissance painting.

Although Basaiti was admittedly not an outstandingly brilliant figure-painter, he was fully capable of making plausible depictions of human anatomy, as is shown by all his other known paintings, none of which contains another being so mis-drawn as the left-hand grisaille man. As a good painter simply does not make such blatant 'mistakes', we may assume that the figure was given its backward-looking head and paradoxical ear deliberately, so that these conspicuous features would offer a clue to the column-hugger's identity. The question of whether Basaiti did this independently of or under instruction from a patron cannot be answered without the aid of further source material; however, the literary implications considered below indicate that the inventor of the picture was a person of humanistic culture and involved in the associated contemporary philological debates.

The backward-looking head in Dante's *Inferno*

As far as I can see, the literature accessible to Basaiti's contemporaries contains only two passages featuring beings with backward-looking faces. One of these comes from the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) published in 1317, in *Inferno* (XX, 7–15). Guided by Virgil through the Underworld, the poet comes to the 'Malebolge' (the 'evil ditches' of the Eighth Circle of the *Inferno*), where he meets with a procession of tormented souls who, as he hears, are prophets, magicians, and others who violated divine law by seeing into the future and were thus condemned to walk backwards with their heads turned back to front so that they looked into the past:²²

And I saw people coming through the round valley,
They were silent and weeping, advancing at the pace
Penitential processions use in the world.

And my gaze sank more deeply into them,
Each one of them seemed to be twisted round
Between the chin and the point where the thorax
begins;

So that the head was turned, back to front,
And they were therefore obliged to walk backwards,
No longer being able to look the other way.²³

The conception is one with pictorial potential, and the contemporary illustrated Dante editions contain a woodcut devoted to Canto XX of the *Inferno* (fig. 14). One could possibly establish a connection between the theme of soothsaying, which was in fact prohibited by Moses on pain of death,²⁴ and the calling of the sons of Zebedee through the person of the beloved disciple John, as he was traditionally regarded as the visionary author of the Book of Revelation, or 'Apocalypse', the final book in the New Testament as canonized by the Catholic Church.²⁵ The prophets named

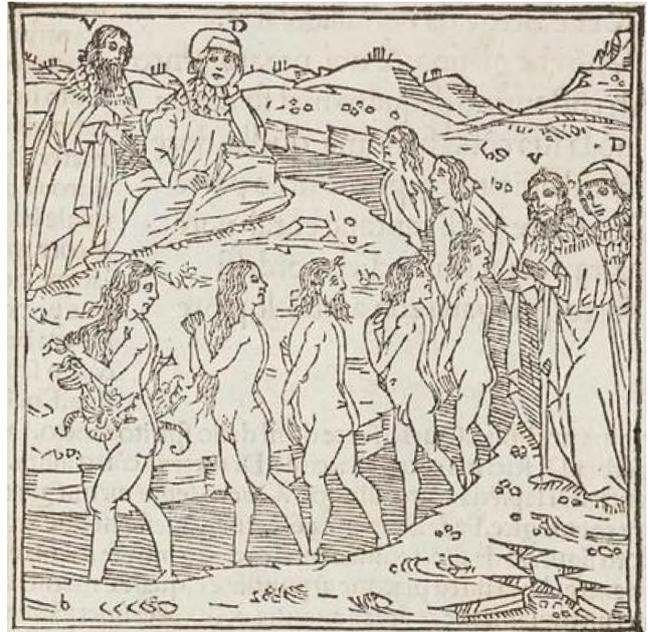


Fig. 14: *Procession of the Punished Prophets*, from: Dante Alighieri, *La Comedia*, Venice (Per Zuanne di Quarengii da palazago bergamasco) 1497, fol. 88v

by Dante come in part from the literature of antiquity, for example, Amphiaraus (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 4, 65, 5–8), Tiresias (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3, 316–38), Aruns (Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1, 584–638), Manto (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 10, 199), and Eurypylos (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 2, 114), and in part from the medieval West, for example, Michael Scot, Bonatti, and Asdente. On the premise of grisaille figures being pre-figurations or characterizers of the polychrome protagonists of their respective painting, John, as the presumed author of an impressive vision of the future, the book of Revelation, could be put into the ranks of these prophets. According to the gospels, Jesus himself prophesied several times, for example, the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem (Mark 13:1–27; Luke 21:5–28), or his own death and resurrection (Mark 8:31). In that case, the backward-looking head in Basaiti's painting could be interpreted as an indication that at least one of the protagonists in the central scene from the gospels was a soothsayer. That seems most extraordinary, however, and would cast a strange light upon these irreproachable and exemplary figures of the Christian myth, as in Dante the prophets were punished for their offence against the prohibition that according to Moses was imposed by Yahweh (*Inferno*, XX, 37–9).²⁶

22 Dante, *Inferno*, XX, 7–15, quoted here from Dante, *La Comedia* (Venice: Piero de Zuanne di Quarengii, 1497): 'Et uidi gente per lo uallon tondo | uenir tacendo & lachrymando al passo | come fanno letanie in questo mondo | Comel uiso miscese in lor piu basso | mirabilmente apparue esser traualto | ciaschun tra mento el principio del casso | Che dale rene era tornato el uolto | & indrieto uenir lor conuenia | perchel ueder dinanzi era lor tolto.'

23 Quoted from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, transl. Charles Hubert Sisson (1980), introduction and notes by David H. Higgins (Oxford World's Classics, 1998).

24 Biblia 1511, fol. 46v (3 Mose [Leuiticus] 20:6): 'Anima que declinauerit ad magos et ariolos: et fornicata fuerit cum eis: ponam faciem meam contra eam: et interficiam illam de medio populi sui.' (A soul that has turned to magicians and fortune-tellers, prostituting itself to them: I will set my face against it, and will kill it out of the midst of its people.) Ibid. fol. 46r (3 Mose 20:27): 'Vir siue mulier in quibus phitonicus vel diuinationis fuerit spiritus: morte moriantur. Lapidibus obruent eos. Sanguis eorum sit super illos.' (A man or a woman who has the spirit of a medium or of fortune-telling: let them die with death. They shall be stoned. Their blood shall be upon them.)

25 Amongst the church fathers who confirm this are Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis*, 25; Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 3, 14, 3; 4, 5, 2; Origen, quoted by Eusebius in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, 6, 25, 9 (here Eusebius quotes from the fifth book of Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel*

of John); and Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 4, 18, 8. Eusebius himself endeavours to distinguish between the apostle John (the son of Zebedee) and the presbyter John, to whom he ascribes the book of Revelation: Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3, 39, 5–6. On the book of Revelation and its origins in general see most recently Jacob Thiessen, *Die Johannesoffenbarung. Eine Verständnishilfe mit biblischen und außerbiblischen Hintergrund- und Paralleltextrn sowie mit einigen Kommentaren zu den einzelnen Versen und Abschnitten*, Basel 2021, https://sthbasel.ch/wp-content/uploads/Johannesoffenbarung_Skript_JT.pdf (accessed 24.5.2021).

26 Dante 1497, fol. 89r: 'Mira che facto pecto delle spalle | perche uolse ueder tropo dauante | diretto guarda & fu ritroso calle.'

Look how he has made a chest of his shoulders:
Because he wanted to see too far ahead,
He looks back and makes his way backwards.²⁷

Amongst his ancient prophets Dante of course only listed ones from pagan antiquity and did not mention the many Old Testament prophets, to whom and to whose visions of the future the divine prohibition clearly did not apply.²⁸ Is this a reference inspired by Dante to the notion that Yahweh's treatment of soothsayers and interpreters of signs discriminated between them according to respective field and theme? Or, by analogy with the theme of human sacrifice in Memling's *St John Miniature Altar*, is it – given that in Deuteronomy prophecies and human sacrifice are both proscribed as abominations and as signs of idolatry²⁹ – an allusion to the consummation and abolition of an abominable practice by Jesus and his chosen ones? But if that were the case, why did the inventor of the picture choose the scene of the calling of the disciples and not a soothsaying scene? While the associative connection between the pictorial planes based on Dante and the theme of soothsaying would thus seem to be possible, it would not appear to have any convincing sense to it. And it is an explanation that would take no consideration at all of the right-hand grisaille man with his entirely normal anatomy.

27 Dante transl. Sisson 1980 (n. 23), *Inferno*, XX, 37–9.

28 In the book of Deuteronomy, however, Yahweh does give Moses an exact instruction as to how prophets are to be judged: *Biblia* 1511, fol. 73r (5 Mose 18:20–22): 'Propheta autem qui arrogantia deprauatus voluerit loqui in nomine meo que ego non praecepi illi vt diceret: aut ex nomine alienorum deorum interficietur. Quod si tacita cogitatione responderis: quomodo possum intelligere verbum quod dominus non est locutus: hoc habebis signum. Quod in nomine domini propheta ille praedixerit et non euerit: hoc dominus non est locutus: sed per tumorem animi sui propheta confinxit: et idcirco non timebis eum.' (But a prophet who, corrupted by arrogance, wants to speak in my name things that I have not commanded him to say, or to speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall be put to death. If you say to yourself, 'How can I recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?', you shall have this sign: if a prophet has predicted in the name of the Lord but the thing has not taken place, the Lord did not speak it; rather, the prophet has invented it presumptuously and you shall not be frightened by him.)

29 *Biblia* 1511, fol. 73r (5 Mose [Deuteronomy] 18, 9–13): 'Quando ingressus fueris terram quam dominus deus tuus dabit tibi: caue ne imitari velis abominaciones illarum gentium: nec inueniatur in te qui lustret filium suum: aut filiam ducens per ignem: aut qui ariolos sciscitetur: aut observet somnia: atque auguria: ne sit maleficus nec incantator: neque phitones consulat: nec diuinos et quaerat a mortuis veritatem. Omnia enim hec abominatur dominus: et propter istiusmodi scelera debet eos in introitu tuo: Perfectus eris et absque macula cum domino deo tuo.' (When you come into the land that the Lord your God will give you, beware of imitating the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who purifies his son or daughter by making them pass through fire, or who questions fortune-tellers, or who takes note of dreams or auguries, so that there be no magician or necromancer, or one who asks for advice from sorcerers or clairvoyants, or seeks the truth from the dead. For all these things are abhorrent to the Lord, and on account of such wickedness he will destroy these people at your entry. You shall be perfect and stainless with the Lord your God.) See also Ezekiel 16:19–21 and 20:30–31.

The backward-looking head in Plato's *Symposium*

The second passage featuring backward-looking heads has much more potential for cogent correlation. In Plato's *Symposium*, a literary account of a banquet – or rather a carousal – in which the revellers enter into a far-reaching debate on the subject of love, the notoriously foul-mouthed comic playwright Aristophanes relates a myth of the origin of mankind, a kind of Genesis, and in so doing gives an explanation of how loving desire and sexuality came to be: presumably to provide a counter-account as background to Diotima's conception of eros, which accords with Plato's.³⁰ Appropriately, given the character of the speaker, the myth contains satirical elements, and it is not clear how seriously even Plato took his creation. For example, one of the principal motives behind the action of the gods – in addition to the intention of punishing humanity for a misdeed, which is analogous to the biblical expulsion from Paradise – is that of a totally un-godlike and un-sovereign craving for more victims. What is more, Plato's dialogues *Protagoras* and *Timaeus* have further myths of the creation of mankind that are different from the one in the *Symposium* and have no burlesque elements. However, the myth contained in Aristophanes' speech was indeed taken seriously by the Renaissance humanists, as is shown by their efforts to interpret and comment upon it, which will be considered below.

According to Plato's Aristophanes, the original human beings were spherical, with four arms and four legs, just one head but with two faces looking in opposite directions, four ears, two sets of genitals, and so forth. There were three sexes: one doubly male, one doubly female, and one mixed male-female. The double males were descended from the sun, the double females from the earth, and the androgynes from the moon. Being very strong and high-spirited, these original human beings rebelled against the gods, who were naturally displeased, and as a punishment Zeus divided the spherical human beings in half, resulting in a phase in which each new individual being's face looked backwards. Subsequently Zeus had each half-being's face rotated by 180° from the plane of the cut – stomach-wards, as it were, into the normal present-day position – so that they would have their separation eternally before their eyes and, if they ever had rebellious or even possibly theoclastic desires, would bear in mind what the consequences would be.

30 A detailed interpretation of Aristophanes' speech is offered by Bernd Manuwald, see 'Die Rede des Aristophanes (189a1–193e2)' in Christoph Horn (ed.), *Platon: Symposion* (Berlin 2012, 89–104).

Here is a translation of the relevant passage (Plato, *Symposium*, 190b–192c) as given on the website of the Foundation for Platonic Studies:³¹

Now their [the original spherical humans'] strength and power was terrifying, and they had such enormous ambitions that they even turned upon the gods, and what Homer says about Ephyialtes and Otus relates to these humans:³² that they attempted to make an ascent to heaven so as to grapple with the gods.

Zeus and the other gods deliberated as to what they should do, and they were at a loss, for they were not in a position to slaughter them and obliterate the race with thunderbolts as they had done to the Giants, since the honours and sacrifices that came from humanity would be obliterated too. Neither could they tolerate this outrageous behaviour. Then Zeus, having considered the matter at length, said, 'I think I have come up with a device whereby human beings may still exist, and yet their unrestrained behaviour may cease because they will be weaker. For I shall now split each of them in two, and they will immediately be weaker and, at the same time, of more use to us gods, because their number will increase. They will walk upright on two legs, but if they still seem to be behaving outrageously and are unwilling to be peaceful, I shall split them in two once more, so that they will have to get around by hopping on one leg.'³³

Once he had said all this, Zeus split the humans in two, in the same way that people cut sorb-apples when they are going to preserve them or cut eggs with hairs.³⁴ He instructed Apollo to turn the face and the half-neck around towards the cut so that the person, on seeing their own cut, would be more orderly. He also directed him to heal everything else. He turned the face around, drew the skin together from all sides over what is now called the

stomach, as though he were tying a purse, and he tied up the single opening in the middle of the stomach to make what they call the navel. He also smoothed out the many other wrinkles and articulated the chest using an instrument like the one that leather workers use when smoothing out the wrinkles in the leather with a last. A few wrinkles were left around the stomach itself and around the navel as a reminder of that ancient affliction.

Now since our nature had been cut in two, each half, longing for the half of itself, would go back to that and, throwing their arms around each other, embracing in an effort to grow back together again, they were dying out due to hunger and their general inactivity, because they had no wish to do anything without one another. And whenever either of the halves died, the remaining half looked for another and embraced it, either encountering half of a woman, which we now refer to as a woman, or encountering the half of a man. Consequently, they were dying out.

But Zeus took pity on them, came up with an alternative arrangement, and repositioned their genitalia to the front, for until then these were on the original outside, and they used to procreate and bear children not upon one another but upon the earth like the cicadas.³⁵ So he relocated their parts to the front in this way and thereby brought about generation in one another, by the male, in the female. This ensured that if male were to meet female in this embrace, there would be procreation and their race would continue. And, at the same time, if male were to meet male, at least there would be satisfaction from their intercourse. Their search would cease, and they could return to their activities and get on with the rest of their lives. So, love of one another is inherent in humanity from those past ages, reconstituting our ancient nature, endeavouring to make one out of two and cure the defect in the nature of humanity.

Therefore, each of us is a counterpart of a human being,³⁶ since we have been cut in half and are like flat-fish,³⁷ two produced from one, each

31 Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by David Horan, in 'Translations of the Dialogues of Plato' (2008–2021), published on the website of the Foundation for Platonic Studies: <https://www.platonicfoundation.org/translation/symposium/> (accessed 4.10.2024).

32 See Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 307ff.

33 Footnotes 33–37 are translator's notes taken from the German-language version of Plato's *Symposium* by Frnaz Susemihl in *Platon's Werke. Erste Gruppe: Gespräche zur Verherrlichung des Sokrates. Drittes Bändchen* (Stuttgart, 1855), 255–387, the present excerpt 320–4. 'On the feast of the rural Dionysia a ram was sacrificed to Dionysus. From its hide a skin was made, which was filled with wine and brushed with oil, and they endeavoured to hop around on one leg upon it. Virgil, *Georgics*, II, 383ff.'

34 Susemihl, see n. 33: 'There may well be some truth in Hommel's conjecture, endorsed by H. Müller, that there was a game played at carousals that involved cutting a hard-boiled egg in two with a horse-hair, the goal possibly being to slice the egg exactly down the middle.'

35 Susemihl, see n. 33: 'In this connection Wolf comments that the female cicadas drill a hole in the earth with a long spike that they have in their backside, and then lay their eggs in the hole, where they are then incubated by the warmth of the sun.'

36 Susemihl, see n. 33: 'It was the custom for two families who practised mutual hospitality to distribute amongst themselves the two halves of one and the same object, usually a dice, in order to use them as recognition tokens.'

37 Susemihl, see n. 33: 'H. Müller recalls that Plato took this simile from Aristophanes himself, from *Lysistrata*, V. 115. But flatfish – plaice or left-eye flounders, for example – are the only living beings that have both their eyes, both their nostrils, etc. on one side of their head, and

constantly searching for the particular counterpart of itself. Now, those men who are a section cut from the combined type, the one that was then called a man-woman, they are lovers of women, and most adulterers have arisen from this type. So also have any women who love men and those who are adulteresses. Any women who are a section cut from the female type do not pay much heed to men but are more inclined towards women. Female companions have arisen from this type. Those who are sections cut from the male type, pursue males and, while they are still boys, they love men and delight in lying with and being embraced by men, since they are slices of the male. These indeed are the very best of boys and youths, since they are by nature extremely manly. And although some people refer to them as shameless, this is a lie, for they do not behave as they do out of shamelessness. No, it is out of daring, courage and manliness that they cleave to those who are like themselves. There is ample proof of this. In fact, on reaching maturity, it is only this sort who prove themselves as men when it comes to civic affairs. Once they reach manhood they are lovers of boys and they do not, by nature, have an interest in marriage and begetting children, although they are forced into this by convention. Yet they are content to live with one another without marrying. Such a person indeed becomes, in every respect, a lover of boys or a boy who is affectionate to his lover, constantly cleaving to his own kind.

Now, whenever the lover of boys, or of anyone else, encounters the very person who is the half of himself, they are wonderfully overcome by friendship, affinity and love, and are scarcely willing to be parted from one another even for a short time.

This famous passage in Plato's *Symposium* thus provides not only a genesis story of humanity but also an explanation of love – and in particular of homosexual love, which for Plato's Aristophanes is a characteristic of very best and most noble men.

Now we come to the most important point. The myth of the two half-beings that once formed a whole human being, were separated, and thereafter lovingly long to find each other again has a much more telling relationship to the calling of the disciples than Dante's procession of prophets does, for in that gospel scene he who according to the Christian faith is the noblest of all men – and, what is more, Son of God – seeks out other noble men and calls

likewise a slanted mouth, so that one could almost imagine them to be half-fishes or fishes cut in two (as noted by Blumenbach in Wolf).'

upon them to follow him, amongst them being the disciple 'whom he loved', as is stated several times in St John's Gospel in the clearest terms.³⁸ Could the obvious anatomical impossibility apparent in Basaiti's painting – the left-hand grisaille man's backward-looking head and paradoxical ear – be a deliberate allusion to this literary myth, made for the benefit of those familiar with Plato's *Symposium*? This is the question that is now to be discussed. In the discussion, for clarity's sake, 'spherical-man myth' will from now on be used as a translation of the German-language expression 'Kugelmenschenmythos' when Plato's myth is dealing with the androgynous sex and/or the other two variants, but the expression 'double-male myth' ('Doppelmännermythos') for the special case of the spherical man descended from the sun, in whom both constituent parts are of the male sex and possess the most excellent and manliest character. In my opinion, it is to this special case and to homosexual attraction that the two grisaille men in Basaiti's painting allude.

Caveats

The elements related to sexual love in Plato's text make my hypothesis potentially very controversial. In recent times we have been somewhat overfed with popular literature raising the epoch-making question of whether Jesus was not perhaps married to Mary Magdalene and had children with her – one only has to think of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. Naturally, secular-minded novelists take the greatest pleasure in shaking religious traditions about and watching to see what new conclusions come out – and this can apply not only to texts but also to pictures. However, when in a scholarly investigation into a historical painting one comes up against a delicate and sensitive matter, one has to be absolutely serious in searching for an explanation. To return to the present case, if we suppose that with the depiction of the backward-looking head the inventor of Basaiti's painting in all probability wished to establish a link between the double-male myth and the story of the calling of the disciples – and in this case the *tertium comparationis* can only be the element of mutual attraction between the protagonists – then he can be assumed to be implying that Jesus entered into a Platonic relationship with the disciple whom he loved and who at the Last Supper lay on his breast (or in his lap)³⁹ – which would be in accord

³⁸ See n. 14.

³⁹ Biblia 1511, fol. 461r (Joh [John] 13:23–25): 'Erat ergo recumbens vnus ex discipulis eius in sinu iesu quem diligebat iesus. Innuuit ergo huic symon petrus: et dixit ei. Quis est de quo dicit? Itaque cum recubisset ille supra pectus iesu: dicit ei. Domine quis est?' (One of his disciples – the one whom Jesus loved – was reclining in Jesus's lap. Simon Peter

with Aristophanes' statement in Plato's *Symposium* that men who feel attracted to men are the noblest, because they are by nature the most masculine and would be 'content to live with one another without marrying'.

For conservative Christians then and now, however, the very thought of a (possibly sexually consummated) relationship between Jesus and the beloved disciple John would be a *skandalon* of the first order, and before this essay ends up on some kind of index of prohibited writings or, God forbid, the painting itself is burned on the order of some theocratic government of the kind we in Austria are happily still spared, a number of matters must still be subjected to critical and objective consideration. For clarity's sake, however, I wish to present one finding in advance: ultimately, as I will show, the picture's backward-looking head, however strange it may seem, in all probability does not contain any inherent deliberate blasphemy but, rather, was a private, encoded declaration of acceptance of homosexual love and a noble and courageous demonstration of humanistic erudition. Viewers who were or are willing and able to understand the picture had or have before them a non-verbal, pictorial response to 1) a printed commentary much read at the time of the painting (by Marsilio Ficino, see below), and 2) that commentary's idiosyncratic (and to our minds unsatisfactory) interpretation of a Platonic myth containing elements that were considered offensive in the contemporary Christian world. What viewers who do not have the requisite background knowledge have before them is a riddle that they are not compelled to go into and that they perhaps do not even perceive as puzzling. I thus cordially invite my readers, if they will, to pick up my thread and follow me fearlessly into a historical labyrinth that for us today – fortunately – has lost the element of real terror it so long possessed.

Homosexual love

Although for Jews and Christians alike homosexuality was traditionally an abomination,⁴⁰ in real everyday life it was an undeniable fact. Nonetheless, like soothsaying, it was, in accordance with the book Leviticus,⁴¹ punishable with death. The moving Bible story of the love

(traditionally considered purely a 'love of the soul') and covenant between David and Jonathan contains elements that are clearly homoerotic: Jonathan takes off his entire clothing and arms and makes a gift of them to David;⁴² at their farewell they kiss and weep, and Jonathan recalls their covenant, in which an important role is played by their 'seed';⁴³ and for David, Jonathan is more lovable than the love of women.⁴⁴ While the story was never excised from the Biblical canon (presumably because the two heroes had progeny with their wives, in David's case also with concubines), it was never a strong enough factor to overcome the rejection of homosexuality, presumably because of the respective authorities' interest in their subjects being blessed with children in as full a measure as possible, in which respect the 'sin of sodomy' was counter-productive and thus prohibited. Preserved in Venice and Florence are large archival holdings of Renaissance records documenting trials for homosexual acts that have been the subject of scholarly research in recent years.⁴⁵ Many

42 Biblia 1511, fol. 109r (1 Regum [= 1 Samuel] 18:1-4): '... anima ionathae conglutinata est anime dauid et dilexit eum ionathas quasi animam suam. ... Inierunt autem dauid et ionathas fedus. Diligebat enim eum quasi animam suam. Nam expoliavit se ionathas tunica qua erat indutus: et dedit eam dauid et reliqua vestimenta sua vsque ad gladium et arcum suum et vsque ad baltheum.' (... the soul of Jonathan was joined together to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ... Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, for he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and the rest of his clothing, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.)

43 Biblia 1511, fol. 110v (1 Regum [= 1 Samuel] 20:41-42): 'Et osculantes se alterutrum: fleuerunt pariter: dauid autem amplius. Dixit ergo ionathas ad dauid. Vade in pace. Quecumque iurauimus ambo in nomine domini dicentes: dominus sit inter me et te: et inter semen tuum et semen meum vsque in sempiternum.' (... and they kissed each other, and wept in the same way, but David wept the more. Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, whatever we have both sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, Let the Lord be between me and you, and between your seed and my seed for all eternity.')

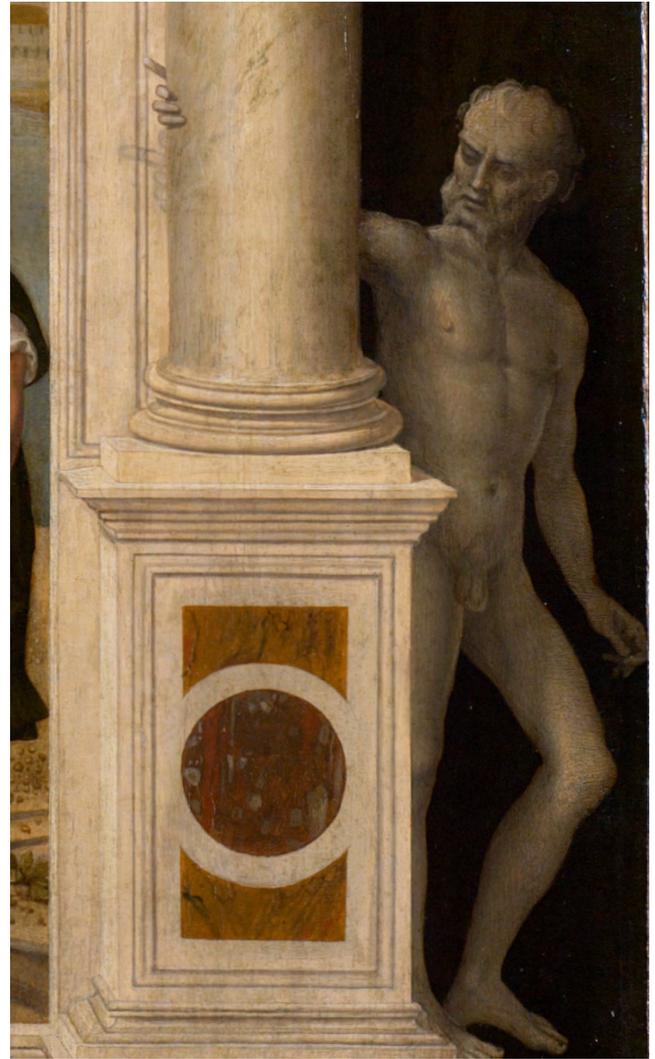
44 Biblia 1511, fol. 115v (2 Regum [= 2 Samuel] 1:26): 'Doleo super te frater mi ionatha decore nimis et amabilis super amorem mulierum.' (I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; exceedingly rich in beauty, and more lovable than the love of women.) In his treatise *De Officiis*, book 3, chapter 9, Ambrose quotes the even more poetically evocative version from the *Vetus Latina (Diui Ambrosii Mediolanensis Ecclesiasticorum scriptorum litteratissimi: tres officiorum libri totam viuendi rationem complectentes, Würzburg [Baccalaureus Martinus] 1510)*: 'Doleo in te frater Jonatha / speciosus mihi valde. Ceciderat amor tuus in me sicut amor mulierum.' (I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; exceedingly beautiful you are to me. Your love had fallen into me like the love of women.)

45 For example: Giovanni Scarabello, 'Devianza sessuale ed interventi di giustizia in Venezia nella prima metà del XVI secolo', in *Tiziano e Venezia. Convegno internazionale di studi, Venezia, 27.9.-1.10.1976, Università degli Studi di Venezia* (Vicenza, 1980), 75-84; Giovanni Dall'Orto, 'La fenice di Sodoma. Essere omosessuale nell'Italia del Rinascimento', *Sodoma*, 4 (1988), 31-53; Giovanni Dall'Orto, "'Socratic Love' as Same-Sex Love in the Italian Renaissance", in Kent Gerard and Gert Hekma (eds.), *The Pursuit of Sodomy. Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe* (New York and London, 1989), 33-65; Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford, 1997); Amanda Gavin, 'Youthful Transgressions: Same-Sex Male Sexuality and Hierarchies of Masculinity in Renaissance Italy', *Engendering the Past*, 1/1 (2018), 1-11. On homoerotic tendencies in Venetian painting, on the one hand in the field of the male portrait and on the other in the reception of classical pastoral poetry and the myth of Arcadia, see Marianne Koos, *Bildnisse des Begehrens. Das lyrische Männerporträt*

therefore nodded to him [that disciple] and said to him: 'Who is it, of whom he is speaking?' And so the one leaned back on Jesus' breast and then said to him, 'Lord, who is it?')

40 Biblia 1511, fol. 45v (3 Mose [Leviticus] 18:22): 'Cum masculino non commiscearis coitu femineo: quia abominatio est.' (You shall not mix yourself with a male in female congress, for it is an abomination.)

41 Biblia 1511, fol. 46v (3 Mose [Leviticus] 20:13): 'Qui dormierit cum masculino coitu femineo vterque operatus est nephas: morte moriantur. Sit sanguis eorum super eos.' (If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death. Let their blood be upon them.)



Figs. 15 & 16: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, details: the two grisaille men

men who faced charges in these trials were imprisoned, tortured, and sent into exile, and a number were even burned at the stake, even in Venice;⁴⁶ homosexual love was something that could only be enjoyed with the greatest caution.

The thesis of the present essay is that the left-hand grisaille man (fig. 15) represents an antique half double-male who, filled with desire for his lost other half, is

desperately embracing the left-hand column, while the right-hand grisaille man (fig. 16) represents a companion figure who has been fully operated upon, is making himself familiar with his new form and unexpected state of liberation from compulsive desire (as one might very plausibly interpret his self-possessed, open posture), and is looking with an amiable and benevolent air at his column, from which he is perhaps intending, with a positive spring in his step, to depart. It is proposed that the figures were thus invented in allusion to the Platonic myth because the inventor of the picture saw a connection between Plato's myth and the Christian story seen in the central panel. First of all, however, this hypothesis needs to be backed up by being presented in the context of contemporary Venetian thought. Only once that has been done will it be possible to think of an interpretation.

in der venezianischen Malerei des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts (Emsdetten, 2006), in particular the chapters 'Effeminierung als Problem: Der Subjektentwurf des lyrischen Männerporträts in historischer Beurteilung' and 'Homosexuelle Identitäten? Zur "Sodomie" in der frühneuzeitlichen Gesellschaft Venedigs', 121–63, and Christophe Brouard, 'Tradition and gender transgression: The iconography of the shepherd couple in Venetian pastoral landscape during the sixteenth century', in Melanie L. Marshall, Linda L. Carroll, and Katherine A. McIver (eds.), *Sexualities, Textualities, Art and Music in Early Modern Italy. Playing with Boundaries* (Farnham, 2014), 133–54.

⁴⁶ A harrowing list of the executions of homosexuals in Italy is maintained by Stefano Bolognini and Giovanni Dall'Orto, see http://www.wiki-pink.org/index.php/Condanne_capitali_per_sodomia_in_Italia-#Quattrocento (last accessed 14.4.2024), with further literature.

Reception of Plato

While the text of Plato's *Symposium* was rediscovered in the West in the fifteenth century, in the Byzantine East it had been read uninterruptedly since ancient times.⁴⁷ In the middle of the fifteenth century there was a notorious dispute amongst humanists:⁴⁸ Georgios Trapezuntios (1395–1472/86), a native of Crete who became active as a teacher of Greek in various Italian towns, wrote a treatise in which he vehemently criticized Plato and his praise of homosexuality in the *Symposium*, very likely in order to take revenge upon the Platonist Cardinal Bessarion (1403–1472) for having identified a large number of mistakes in his translation of Plato's *Nomoi* (*Laws*, his last dialogue). Bessarion in his turn responded to the treatise by writing his *In calumniatorem Platonis*, printed in Latin in 1469, in which he demonstrated that Plato's understanding of love had much in common with that of the Christian authors. This line of thought was taken up by the most renowned Neoplatonist of the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) of Florence, who translated the entire *Symposium*, including the problematic passages on homosexuality, and published it in 1484, thus making it available to all who understood Latin. In addition, he wrote a Latin commentary on the *Symposium* entitled *Commentarium in Platonis convivium*, also known as *De amore*; likewise printed in 1484, it will be of great interest to us in the present context. Some thirty years later it was followed by the first edition of Plato's writings in the original Greek, which was edited by humanist Marcus Musurus, likewise a native of Crete, and printed in Venice in 1513 by Aldus Manutius.⁴⁹ At the time when Basaiti painted the work presently under consideration, Plato's *Symposium* was thus accessible to all those in Venice who were interested in it, not only in Ficino's translation but also in the original Greek – and was certainly the subject of thorough in-depth discussions.

Around 1549, Marco Antonio Passeri, known as Genua and De Ianua (1491–1563), who taught philosophy at the university of Padua, commissioned Giovanni da Cavino (1500–1570/71) to strike the medal with the famous depiction of an androgyne 'spherical man' before the



Fig. 17: Giovanni da Cavino, Portrait medal of Marco Antonio Passeri, c.1549, non-ferrous metal, diam. 38.2 mm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Coin Collection, inv. MK 14411bβ



Fig. 18: Numisma Marci Antonii Genuae Eminentissimi Philosophi Patavini, from: *Iacobi Philippi Tomasini Patavini Illustrium Virorum Elogia Iconibus Exornata*, Padua (Apud Donatum Pasquardum, & Socium) 1630, 104

cutting in half, with a Janus-like double head and eight limbs (with the male genitals clearly visible on one pair of buttocks) and the inscription 'Philosophia duce regredimur' ('We go back under the guidance of philosophy') or, alternatively, 'Philosophia comite regredimur' ('We go back with philosophy as our companion') (figs. 17, 18).⁵⁰ As this medal shows, Renaissance artists' vision of spherical man was not tied to a strictly geometrical spherical form,⁵¹ but was closer to the familiar form of two real human beings, which would also be valid in the case of Basaiti.

47 For general accounts of the transmission and reception of Plato's *Symposium* see Brockmann, *Die handschriftliche Überlieferung von Platons Symposion* (Wiesbaden, 1992); Achim Aurnhammer, *Androgynie. Studien zu einem Motiv in der europäischen Literatur* (Cologne and Vienna, 1986); James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (3rd printing: Leiden, 1994); Sabrina Ebbersmeyer, *Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft* (Munich, 2002); Achim Wurm, *Platonikus amor* (Berlin, 2008).

48 Peter Schulz, 'Georgios Gemistos Plethon, Georgios Trapezuntios, Kardinal Bessarion. Die Kontroverse zwischen Platonikern und Aristotelikern im 15. Jahrhundert', in Paul Richard Blum (ed.), *Philosophen der Renaissance* (Darmstadt, 1999), 22–32.

49 *AIANTA TA TOY PAATΩNOΣ. Omnia Platonis Opera* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1513).

50 See Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven, 1959), 165–6, 185, in which fig. 68 shows the woodcut of the medal from *Iacobi Philippi Tomasini Patavini Illustrium Virorum Elogia Iconibus Exornata* (Padua, 1630), 104, with the inscription variant 'Philosophia duce regredimur'. I am obliged to Heinz Winter (Vienna) for drawing my attention to the Vienna example (KHM, inv. 14411bβ) with the variant 'Philosophia comite regredimur' and the London example in the British Museum (inv. 1880,1103.4, likewise with 'comite'), which Philip Attwood dates to around 1549, see Philip Attwood, *Italian Medals c.1530–1600 in British Public Collections* (London, 2003), 194, no. 289a: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1880-1103-4 (last accessed 14.4.2024).

51 Some *Symposium* scholars are of the opinion that one should regard primordial man's form not as spherical but cylindrical; on the associated discussion and the meanings of Plato's chosen adjective *strongulos* see Manuwald 2012 (as quoted in n. 30), 92, n. 11. Manuwald himself argues with good reasons in favour of the assumption that Plato was indeed thinking of a spherical form. See also below in the comments upon 'rotundus' and the evidence from Renaissance lexis presented in the section 'Philological postscript'.

Academic syncretism

In humanist circles of the time, there was already a long-standing tradition of comparing pagan and Christian myths in the framework of philosophical syncretism. From 1484 the historian Marcantonio Coccio, known as Sabellicus (1436–1506), lived in Venice, where he exerted a significant influence in the world of learning and scholarship.⁵² In his youth he had been a pupil of Pomponius Laetus (1428–1498), who taught rhetoric at the university in Rome, collected antiquities, and privately founded the so-called Accademia Romana.⁵³ Much to the displeasure of the anti-humanist Pope Paul II (Pietro Barbo), this informal group of humanists wished to put classical culture on the same level as the Christian tradition, with equal rights. In 1468 the members of the Accademia were accused of wanting to murder the pope and introduce a republican constitution, and a number of them were arrested and tortured on the grounds of conspiracy and heresy. At the time, Pomponius himself happened to be in Venice, where he was giving private instruction to two young patricians who greatly revered him. As a result of his writing a few poems to one of them, a young Contarini who was the brother-in-law of the son of Doge Niccolò Tron, Pomponius was arrested and accused of sodomy. This, however, in no way impaired his good relations either with the Contarinis or the Trons, who clearly did not consider that the young man had come to any harm. Nevertheless, Pomponius was extradited to Rome and held prisoner in the Castel Sant'Angelo, whence he was only released following petitions on his behalf from, among others, Giovanni Tron and Cardinal Bessarion. In 1478, under the next pope, Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere), the Academy received papal approbation and the 'pagan misdoings' were resumed. In April, for example, they celebrated the Parilia, the ancient feast of the foundation of Rome, which they legitimized by associating it with the saints commemorated on the same day in the Roman liturgical calendar.⁵⁴

52 Giuseppe Pomponi, 'La vita e le opere di Marcantonio Sabellico', in: *La storia di Vicovaro nel quadro delle vicende della Valle dell'Aniene, di Roma, della Chiesa e d'Italia*, ii (Vicovaro, 1995), 213–55; Ruth Chavasse, 'The Studia Humanitatis and the Making of a Humanist Career: Marcantonio Sabellico's Exploitation of Humanist Literary Genres', *Renaissance Studies*, 17/1 (2003), 27–38.

53 Marcus Antonius Sabellicus, 'Pomponii Vita', in Pomponius Laetus, *Romanae historiae compendium* (Venice: Bernardinus de Vitalibus, 1500) at the end of the unpaginated volume; Josef Delz, 'Ein unbekannter Brief von Pomponius Laetus', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 9 (1966), 417–40; Maria Accame, *Pomponio Leto. Vita e insegnamento* (Tivoli, 2008).

54 Paola Farenga, 'Considerazioni sull'Accademia romana nel primo Cinquecento', in Marc Deremaix et al. (eds.), *Les académies dans l'Europe humaniste. Idéaux et pratiques* (Geneva, 2008), 57–74.

After fleeing north to escape the persecution, Sabellicus became a professor in Udine in 1475. From 1484, as noted above, he was in Venice, where he taught rhetoric at the Scuola Grande di San Marco, was head of the Biblioteca Marciana, delivered public lectures, and disseminated the ideas of the Accademia Romana; in addition, he wrote lengthy historical works in which he treated biblical miracles with no less scepticism than he did pagan myths. One work of his published in 1507, a year after his death, were the ten books of the *Exempla*, or *De memorabilibus factis dictisque*,⁵⁵ in which figures from the Christian and pagan traditions are set in relation to one another on account of features common to their biographies, with a short text.⁵⁶

At the time under consideration, Venetian humanists were thus thoroughly familiar with comparisons between historical and mythical figures from the pagan and Christian traditions: when Basaiti completed his *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, Sabellicus had only been dead for nine years, and anyone with an interest in such matters had had ample opportunity to attend the humanist scholar's public lectures.⁵⁷

55 Marcus Antonius Coccius Sabellicus, *Exemplorum libri decem* (Venice: Ioannes Bartholomeus, 1507).

56 For example, individuals who departed this life in a special way (lib. 1, cap. 8): Jesus, Elijah, John the son of Zebedee, the Virgin Mary, and St Catherine of Alexandria, found amongst the pagans are Romulus, Alcmena, Kleomenes of Astypalaia, and Aristeas of Proconnesus; or those who proved ungrateful: (lib. 7, cap. 2): Lucifer, Adam, Jacob, a Pharaoh, the Israelites, Saul, and Judas Iscariot, amongst the pagans are Jason, Theseus, Laomedon, Paris, the Athenians, the Syracusans, and others. As, by contrast with Sabellicus' historical works, the *Exempla* contain numerous miracle stories and pious statements, the reader cannot escape the impression that the author wrote them with a satirical purpose in mind.

57 Chavasse 2003 (see n. 53), 30.



Fig. 19: Giorgione, *The Three Philosophers*, 1509/1510, oil on canvas, 125.5 × 146.2 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery, inv. 111

An example of academic syncretism in Venetian Renaissance painting: Giorgione's *The Three Philosophers*

The same academic spirit provides the key to explaining another work painted in Venice shortly before Basaiti's *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, namely, *The Three Philosophers* by Giorgione (1473/78–1510) (fig. 19). In it are depicted three philosophers and astronomers traditionally considered to be the earliest such figures in Greek antiquity: Pythagoras (seated) and his two teachers, Thales of Miletus (right) and Pherecydes of Syros (middle).⁵⁸ What is interesting about the painting

⁵⁸ Polydori Vergilii Vrbinatis *de rerum inuentoribus libri tres*, (Venice: Ioannes de Cereto de Tridino, 1507), 19r (lib. 1, cap. 17): 'At Iosephus ... in primo contra Appionem dicens Sed eos etiam qui de caelestibus & diuinis primitus apud graecos philosophati. idest Pherecydem Syrum: & pythagoram & Thaletem omnes concorditer confitentur: aegyptiorum & chaldaeorum fuisse discipulos.' (But Josephus says in

the first book against Apion: However, all are in agreement that those of the Greeks who were the first to philosophize about heavenly and divine things – namely, Pherecydes of Syros and Pythagoras and Thales – were pupils of the Egyptians and the Chaldaeans.) This statement of Flavius Josephus (C. Ap. 1, 14) is previously quoted by Eusebius (Praep. ev. 10, 7, 9). On the interpretation of the painting, which I only summarize here, see among others Karin Zeleny, 'Drei Philosophen und drei Humanisten', *Wiener Humanistische Blätter*, 49 (2007), 40–69; *Vom Mythos der Antike*, exh. cat. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, ed. Wilfried Seipel (2008), cat. 23, 74–5 (Karin Zeleny).

When I wrote the 2007 dialogue and the 2008 catalogue entry I already knew that the *Three Philosophers* had in accordance with the protagonists' clothing to have two further levels, an 'Islamic level' and a 'cabbalistic level', and that to look for only one 'story' in it, as is usual in modern art history, could not do justice to the full meaning of this elaborate syncretic invention. But I was of course under pressure to produce a finished version, and the identity of the philosophers and the 'level of Christian transfiguration' seemed sufficiently mature for me to proceed to publication. Since then I have taken my time, and I am currently extending my dialogue through a second scene with all the missing parts only half understood earlier, namely, elements from the myth of al-Khidr in the 18th surah of the Quran, from the Alexander Romance, and from the Sefer Yetzilah. The scheme of every level of the painting featuring some elements that obviously do not fit was clearly thought out and commissioned deliberately by the inventor to avoid any viewer being satisfied with just one story. I am looking forward to presenting my hypothesis that Giorgione's painting had a well-hidden political intention, easily

in our present context of syncretism is the way Giorgione stages the scene with the three celebrated thinkers. He shows them in front of Apollo's oracle at Didyma, which is identified as such by the fact that the light radiates from it, that is to say, not from the sun in the central distance but – as indicated by the shadows it casts – from the distinctly anthropomorphic rocky outcrop on the left. According to the biography written by Jamblichus (240/45–320/25 CE), Pythagoras was considered by some to be the son of Apollo. In Giorgione's painting his face is shown in profile frontally illuminated by the rays of light emanating from the rock – accordingly, he is in a certain sense communicating with his father, Apollo, god of the sun and master of the famous oracle.

Composed around the year 300 CE, Jamblichus' biography is in certain details strongly reminiscent of the Jesus myth of the Bible.⁵⁹ It tells of Pythagoras' birth being foretold by Pythia, just as Jesus' birth was foretold by Isaiah;⁶⁰ while Jamblichus denies that Pythagoras' mother, Parthenia (a name that calls to mind Mary's epithet 'parthenos'), was made pregnant by Apollo, this in itself demonstrates the existence of the belief that Pythagoras was son of a god. Later, Pythagoras gathers around himself a group of disciples, with whom he like Jesus lives the common life with community of property. Like Jesus, he is regarded as divinely sent and supremely wise, performs miracles, is persecuted by the authorities, and is betrayed by one of his disciples. Finally, he prefers to be murdered by henchmen on the edge of a bean field rather than running for his life and trampling down the bean plants – a death calmly accepted of his own free will, like Jesus' death on the Cross. Jamblichus clearly recognized how greatly a number of elements in the myth of Jesus were influenced by much older accounts concerning Pythagoras, and as a convinced pagan he countered with his own biography, which was accessible to all in Venice who were interested in reading it, as in 1472 the Republic had inherited Cardinal Bessarion's precious book collection, which became the basis of the Biblioteca Marciana and is recorded as

having contained two manuscripts with Jamblichus' life of Pythagoras, both of which are still preserved today.⁶¹

In my opinion, an important role is played in Giorgione's *The Three Philosophers* by the analogies between the figures of Jesus and Pythagoras, as the painting's iconography contains reflections of the Transfiguration, in which Moses and Elijah appear to Jesus, Jesus' face shines like the sun (Apollo), his clothing becomes white as the light, or as the Vulgate puts it, 'alba sicut nix', 'white as snow' (according to Jamblichus, Pythagoras always wore white), and Yahweh calls Jesus his beloved son.⁶² Fundamentally, the type is the same: a divine father is communicating with his earthly son, and two additional figures appear, in Jesus' case two figures who prefigure him, and in Pythagoras' case his teachers. What we see in Giorgione's painting, therefore, if we so will, is a 'pagan Transfiguration', absolutely in accordance with the Accademia Romana's philosophical syncretism, which as a result of Sabellicus' teaching had taken firm root in Venetian intellectual life. This association, however, is not one that a viewer of the painting was or is compelled to see, nor at first sight would an inquisitor in search of heresy have suspected that *The Three Philosophers* was drawing a comparison between the ancient astronomers and figures from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, let alone that it harboured any 'pagan misdoings'.

Given the strange detail of the backward-looking head in the *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, we may assume that whoever it was that invented Basaiti's composition was also a Venetian follower of the Accademia Romana. In view of the threat of being suspected of heresy it was ill-advised to commit any comparisons with questionable connotations to paper, because the written word laid one open to being pinned down. An 'enigmatic' picture or pictorial detail was less dangerous, as it could only be recognized and explained by a learned interpreter, who could also resort to obfuscation if necessary. This was all the more relevant when the interpretation raised a matter so emphatically condemned and brutally prosecuted by the religious and secular authorities as homosexuality.

understood through consideration of historical developments in the first decade of the 16th century, and that it was somehow inspired by and perhaps destined for Ismail I 'il Sophi', shah of Persia, who wrote in one of his poems, 'My name is Shāh Ismā'īl. I am God's mystery. ... I am the living Khidr and Jesus, son of Mary. I am the Alexander of [my] contemporaries', thus identifying himself with precisely the persons represented by Pythagoras on the various syncretic levels of the painting.

59 On this subject see David S. du Toit, 'Heilsbringer im Vergleich: Soteriologische Aspekte im Lukasevangelium und Jamblichs Vita Pythagorica', in Michael von Albrecht et al. (eds.), *Jamblich. Pythagoras. Legende – Lehre – Lebensgestaltung* (Darmstadt, 2002), 275–94; John Dillon, 'Die Vita Pythagorica – ein "Evangelium"?', in *ibid.*, 295–302.

60 Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 11:1–2.

61 Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Mg 243, Colloc. 619, and Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS graec. 146. See Lotte Labowsky, *Bessarion's Library and the Biblioteca Marciana. Six Early Inventories* (Sussidi Eruditi 31; Rome, 1979), 175, 219.

62 See n. 12.

Contemporary interpretations of Aristophanes' myth in Plato's *Symposium*: Ficino, Bembo, Equicola, Leone Ebreo

The spherical-man myth – like the myths of man's creation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in *Poimandres*, the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* – is an antique counterpart to the biblical creation story found in the first two chapters of the book Genesis, and it was regarded by the humanists as highly authoritative on account of having been written by Plato. Given that the passage from the *Symposium* contrasted so strongly with the dominant moral code of the time, it must be asked how Renaissance scholars interpreted it. Of the several interpretations of the spherical-man myth that have been preserved, four – all certainly well known in Venice at the time Basaiti painted his *Calling of the Sons of Zebedee* – are briefly considered below, in chronological order. All four authors – Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Bembo, Mario Equicola, and Leone Ebreo – unceremoniously ignore the problematic subject of homosexuality and, each in his own way, give an interpretation adapted to their own way of thinking.

In his commentary on the *Symposium* entitled *De amore* and published in 1484, at the same time as his translations of Plato,⁶⁵ Marsilio Ficino turns the spherical-man myth, which is nothing if not thoroughly physical, into a psychological drama.⁶⁴ In addition, he starts off by telling the story entirely anew, without the passages about genitals being moved round stomachwards or homosexuals being the best kind of men. He then observes that one has to read the ancient theologians allegorically in order to find the mysteries hidden under the shadow of the metaphors. Nonetheless, he points out, even Augustine recommended that not everything contained by a metaphor should necessarily be regarded

as meaningful.⁶⁵ In this, Ficino is also clearly justifying his own practice of omitting parts of the myth that seem inappropriate to him. Then – seemingly undisturbed by the fact that his readers were free to consult the original text in his translation, which was indeed complete and faithful to the Greek – he proceeds to interpret his 'purged' version as if it were a faithful rendering.

The first thing about his interpretation is that in it, man becomes the human soul.⁶⁶ All souls were originally 'whole' and had two lights: the innate light of reason and the light of divine radiance ('splendor'), instilled by God.⁶⁷ However, wishing to be like God off their own bat, the souls turned towards their own innate light and thus lost the light of divine radiance. In the process a kind of severance takes place, thus maintaining the central motif of the spherical-man myth but without retaining the cause Plato attributes it to, namely, divine punishment. When the human beings later recognize the loss they have suffered and there awakes in them the desire for the divine light, they endeavour to attain it through the search for truth – and when they succeed in this, they are healed and become whole once again.⁶⁸

63 I quote both texts from the edition *Diuus Plato* (Venice: 'per Bernardinum de Choris de Cremona et Simonem de Luero impensis Andree Toresani de Asula', 13 August 1491) (Hain 13063): *Commentarium Marsilii Ficini Florentini in conuiuium Platonis de amore*, fols. 133r–150r, and *Platonis Conuiuium de Amore*, fols. 150r–158r.

64 A detailed interpretation of this passage is provided by Sergius Koderá, 'Renaissance Readings of the Myth of Aristophanes from Plato's *Symposium* (189C–193D). Marsilio Ficino, Leone Ebreo, Giordano Bruno', *Quaderni d'italianistica*, 26/1 (2005): https://www.academia.edu/47605930/Renaissance_Readings_of_the_Myth_of_Aristophanes_from_Platos_Symposium_189C_193D_Marsilio_Ficino_Leone_Ebreo_Giordano_Bruno (accessed 14.4.2024), 21–58; republished as Chapter 7 in Sergius Koderá, *Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy*, Essays and Studies 23 (Toronto, 2010), 213–49 (218–28). Ficino's de-sexualizing interpretation of Aristophanes' speech is also a central topic in an extensive study on how under the influence of early modern morality the Eros of antiquity was purged of pederastic and homosexual tendencies in Renaissance translations, and how the concept of 'Platonic love' came into being, which differs greatly from Plato's understanding of love, see Todd W. Reeser, *Setting Plato Straight: Translating Ancient Sexuality in the Renaissance* (Chicago, 2016), in particular chapter 4, 'Ficino and the Practice of Purging Same-Sex Sexuality', 117–149.

65 Ficino 1491, 137r: 'Hec aristophanes & alia narrat per multa: monstris portentisque similia: sub quibus / quasi uelaminibus quibusdam diuina mysteria latere putandum. Mos enim erat ueterum theologorum sacra ipsorum puraque arcana ne a prophanis & impuris polluerentur figurarum vmbraculis tegere. Nos autem que in figuris superiorum: & alijs describuntur singula exacte ad sensum pertinere non arbitramur. Nam Aurelius Augustinus non omnia inquit: que in figuris finguntur significare aliquid putanda sunt. Multa enim propter illa / que significant ordinis & connexionis gratia sunt adiuncta. Solo uomere terra proscinditur. Sed ut hoc fieri possit / cetera quoque huic aratri membra iunguntur.' (Aristophanes tells about these and many other like prodigies and marvels under which, as though under some kind of cloth we must consider that divine mysteries are veiled, for it was the custom of ancient theologians to conceal their sacred, holy secrets in the shadowy guise of allegories lest they be desecrated by the profane and impure. But we do not think that every single detail of what has been represented in the allegories and other utterances of our predecessors is pertinent to their meaning. For Aurelius Augustinus says that not everything that is presented in an allegory must be thought to mean something, for many things are added for what they mean for the sake of order and connection. The earth is plowed up by the plowshare only, but in order that this may be done, the rest of the parts are also built into the plow.) *Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, transl. Sears Reynolds Jayne, University of Missouri Studies, xix, no. 1 (University of Missouri, 1944; reproduced here with slight adaptations), 155.

66 Ficino 1491, 137v: 'Ex his perspicuum esse potest. Cum homines aristophanes nominauit, more Platonico animas nostras significasse.' (From this it may be seen that when Aristophanes said 'men', he meant our souls, in the Platonic fashion.) Ficino 1491 (1944) (see n. 65), 157.

67 In my opinion he derived the light motifs from the cosmo- and anthropogony of *Poimandres*, the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which he had translated from Greek into Latin in 1463: *Mercvrii Trismegisti Liber de Potestate et Sapientia Dei per Marsilium Ficinum tractatus: ad Cosmum Medicem* (Venice, per Maximum de butricis Papiensem, 1491) (Hain 8460). Ficino thought that these late antique writings were ancient works of the Egyptian philosopher, priest, and king Hermes Trismegistos. For him, not only ancient philosophy but also the biblical text and tradition was nourished from the 'prisca theologia'. On the translation, see Christine Harrauer, 'Marsilio Ficino und der "Mythos vom Menschen"', in Maria-Christine Leitgeb, Stéphane Toussaint, and Herbert Banert (eds.), *Platon, Plotin und Marsilio Ficino. Studien zu den Vorläufern und zur Rezeption des Florentiner Neuplatonismus*, Wiener Studien, supplementary volume 33 (2009), 173–88.

68 Ficino 1491, 137r: 'Sectione facta dimidium amore ad dimidium trahitur. Animae iam diuise & immerse corporibus / cum primum ad annos

In addition, Ficino mixes in the myth of the fall of the soul into earthly carnality and the soul's striving to rise to the vision of divine ideas: in his *Phaedros*, Plato relates the well-known myth of the soul being a charioteer driving a chariot with winged horses, one obedient and one recalcitrant, and of the fall of the soul to earth. For Ficino, the state of severance thus also signifies the imprisonment of the soul in matter.

That is clearly a most impressive theological interpretation of several Platonic myths at one and the same time – and Ficino fully deserved his fame – but very far removed from the concrete idea of the spherical beings in the *Symposium* and the brutal punishment inflicted on them by Zeus for their presumption. In Ficino, the two half-beings who in Plato are equal in birth and in rights become two lights that differ from each other greatly, the one being earthly and filled with desire and the other divine and attractive. And there is another serious difference, namely, that in Plato, sexual union only briefly hides the fact of severance but is not able to reverse it, because the two halves will never become an enduring whole again. In Ficino, by contrast, love allows spiritual-intellectual redemption, without any sexual act.⁶⁹ As a result, he consistently writes about the men – and his souls are always male – who are by nature destined to be creative on the spiritual-intellectual level and to pass on their learning amongst themselves (thoughts that he took from Plato's *Symposium*, from the speech of Socrates, who gives an account of the teaching of the wise visionary Diotima). That is for him the 'heavenly' form of love, and in this connection he also mentions love – sometimes unchaste love – between men. The great majority of men, of course, love in the common manner, to enjoy sexual pleasure and to beget children,⁷⁰

adolescentie uenerint naturali & ingenito lumine: quod seruauerunt: ceu sui quodam dimidio excitantur ad infusum illum diuinumque lumen / olim ipsarum dimidium: quod cadentes amisere studio ueritatis recipiendum. Quo recepto iam integre erunt: & dei visione beate.' ('When the division was made, half was drawn by Love to the other half.' When these souls, divided and plunged into bodies, first come to the age of adolescence, they are aroused by that natural and innate light which they have kept, like a kind of half of themselves, to win back, by the study of truth, that supernatural light, that former other half of themselves that they lost in the Fall. When this has been won back, they will then be whole and blessed with the vision of God.) Ficino 1491 (1944) (see n. 65), 156.

69 Ficino 1491, 138r: 'Tria igitur ut breui complectar amoris beneficia collaudabimus: quod nos olim diuisos in integrum restituendo / reducit in celum: quod suis quemque collocat sedibus facitque omnes in illa distributione quietos: quod omni expulso fastidio suo quodam ardore oblectamentum quasi nouum iugiter accendit in animo / redditque illum blanda & dulci fruitione beatum.' (Therefore, if I may sum up briefly, we shall praise three benefits of Love: first, by restoring to us the wholeness we lost when we were divided, He leads us back to heaven; second, He arranges us in our places and makes us all content with that distribution; and third, banishing all conceit, Love perpetually kindles by His own peculiar ardor a new delight, as it were, in the soul, and makes the soul happy with soft and sweet enjoyment.) Ficino 1491 (1944) (see n. 65), 163.

70 Ficino 1491, 145v: 'Ceterum alij uel propter naturam / uel propter educationem ad animi fetus sunt quae corporis aptiores. Alij quidem

for which women are necessary adjuncts, though in Ficino's world they play no further role than that.⁷¹

If one reads Plato's spherical-man myth, either in the original or in translation, in parallel with Ficino's commentary, one inevitably notices glaring discrepancies between the two.

plurimi contra. Illi celestem sequuntur amorem. Isti uulgarem. Illi natura iccirco mares & illos quidem iam pene adultos potius quam feminas / aut pueros amant. Quoniam in eis magis admodum uiget mentis acumen. Quod ad disciplinam: quam illi generaturi sunt propter excellentiorem sui pulchritudinem est aptissimum. Alij contra / propter congressus ueneri uoluptatem & corporalis generationis effectum. Quoniam uero genitilis illa vis anime / utpote cognitionis expertis sexuum nullum habet discrimen / natura tamen sua totiens incitatur ad generandum quotiens formosum corpus aliquod iudicamus. Contingit plerumque ut qui cum masculis conuersantur / quo genitilis partis stimulus sedent / illis se misceant.' (But some men either on account of their nature or their training, are better fitted for offspring of the soul than for those of the body. Others, and certainly the majority, are the opposite. The former pursue heavenly love, the latter, common love. The former, therefore, naturally love men more than women and those nearly adult rather than children, because men are much stronger in mental keenness, and this because of its higher beauty is most essential to knowledge, which they wish to generate. But the others are just the opposite, because of their passion for the physical union of love, and the sensuous effect of bodily generation. But, since that genital force of the soul has no power of cognition, it makes no discrimination between the sexes; but is, naturally, aroused for generation whenever we see any beautiful object, and it consequently happens that those who associate with males have intercourse with them in order to satisfy the urge of their genital parts.) Ficino 1491 (1944) (see n. 65), Sixth Speech (Socrates), chapter XIV, p. 207.

71 He himself appeared to have had erotic feelings for men only. His collection of letters first published in 1495 (the quotations come from the edition entitled *Epistolae Marsilii Ficini Florentini* (Nuremberg: Antonius Koberger, 1497) contains love letters full of warm desire, which he himself describes as 'litterae amatoriae', to the poet Giovanni Cavalcanti (1444–1509), who lived together with Ficino for many years in the latter's villa in Careggi; for example, Ficino to Cavalcanti, 5 January 1474 (ed. 1497, fol. XLIV): 'Sed vnum mihi molestum est prae caeteris: quod ideo scribis ad me: quia promiseris: ergo pactioni istud tribuo non amori. Amatorias posco literas non mercatorias. an es etiam pacto meus scilicet quia ego sum tuus: amore uolo sis meus.' (But one thing is more irksome to me than everything else: The reason you write to me is that you promised to do so. So I attribute it to a pact, and not to love. But I demand love letters, not business letters. Or do you perhaps belong to me on account of a pact, because I belong to you? I want you to belong to me out of love.) Cavalcanti, 30 August 1478 (fol. XLIIIr): 'Quid igitur faciam? Prior ne ego ad te scribam? An tuas literas expectabo? Equidem cum ad alios fere nunquam nisi lacessitus scribere soleam: tibi tamen venire obuiam cogor & prior inire certamen. Haec [sic, recte: Nec, corr. ed. 1561] silere diutius te permittam. Non potes enim sine meo languore silere. Huc me quod te non fugit inmoderatus impulit estus. Isthuc uentus intolerabilis retrahit: adeo ut vix hodie me contineam: quin ad urbem protinus aduolem. Potes uero hic me solus aliquot & illos quidem pauculos dies tuis literis retinere. Nam dum literis tuis legendis totus incumbam: nec ventorum procellas sentiam nec fulmina & tonitruum audeam [sic]. Sic ergo fit ut verba sedare ventos: & tempestates depellere valeant.' (So what should I do? Should I write to you first? Or should I wait for your letters? Though I almost only write to others when I am urged to, now I am forced to meet you half way and to be the first to take up the fight. Nor will I permit you to be silent any longer. For I languish when you are silent. I have been brought to this – as you will not have failed to notice – by an immoderate passion. An intolerable wind drives me back there: today I can hardly help myself fleeing to the city. Only you with your letters can hold me back for a small number of days. For while I devote myself to reading your letters, I will neither feel the stormy gusts of wind nor hear thunder and lightning. So it is that words are strong enough to calm the winds and dispel storms.) On the concept of friendship in the Renaissance, with examples from poetry and correspondence (including examples from Ficino's letters) see Robin Hodgson, *The Marriage of True Minds. Of the Rise and Fall of the Idealized Conception of Friendship in the Renaissance*, Diss., Universität Hannover (2005), in particular the chapter 'The reassessment of the classical notions in Renaissance humanism', 62–89, and, especially on Ficino, 'The community of friends: Humanistic "pen-pals" and the quest for real friendship', 119–33.

The author of the second extant Renaissance interpretation transforms Plato's myth into an edifying manifesto in favour of the patriarchal nuclear family. Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) was of Venetian patrician stock; his father, Bernardo Bembo, an envoy of the Republic, was interested in humanism, and a friend of Ficino's. From 1497 Pietro worked on the poetic dialogues on courtly love which he entitled *Gli Asolani* and first had printed in three books by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1505.⁷² In the second book, his protagonist Gismondo praises love as a cosmic power to which humanity owes its capacity for civilization. In addition, Bembo gives a short summary of the spherical-man myth (but without mentioning double-males or double-females), which – accompanied by a strongly admonitory excursus into the field of caravanology – only serves to explain the necessity of a certain division of labour for the satisfactory coexistence of man and woman, as their diverse tasks cannot be fulfilled by one sex alone.⁷³

In the first decade of the sixteenth century, Mario Equicola (c.1470–1525) – who had in his youth been a member of the Accademia Pontaniana in Naples before studying under Ficino in Florence and becoming a

courtier and confidant of Marchioness Isabella d'Este of Mantua – responded to Bembo's *Asolani* with his *Libro de natura de amore*,⁷⁴ in which the spherical-man myth does no more than provide background for a presentation of the doctrine of the four humours and four elements that lead to attraction and repulsion in human beings. In general, he writes, everyone is attracted by decency and beauty, as they are the result of a well-balanced character, which harmonizes with every temperament.⁷⁵ With this statement and even more so with the inclusion of the factor of repulsion he completely departs from the original sense of Plato's myth, which deals with attraction between two particular (half-) beings. But he gives a long series of examples of what elements in human character lead to harmonious or inharmonious coexistence, before then proceeding to the subject of planetary influence and astrology. Here too, however, Equicola does not touch upon the subject of sexuality (let alone homosexuality).

This is in stark contrast to our fourth author, a man who felt himself under no obligation to Christian prudery: the Jewish scholar and physician Jehuda ben Isaak

72 On his biography see Carol Kidwell, *Pietro Bembo. Lover, Linguist, Cardinal* (Montreal, 2004). On the *Asolani* in the context of Petrarchism and love treatises at the beginning of the sixteenth century, see Mariella Magliani and Vincenza Cinzia Donvito, 'L'amore per Petrarca, l'amore di Petrarca, l'amore', in Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo (ed.), *Labirinti del cuore. Giorgione e le stagioni del sentimento tra Venezia e Roma* (Naples, 2017), 59–71 (65–6). I use the edition *Gli Asolani di Messer Pietro Bembo* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1515), in which the passage on the spherical-man myth appears on fols. 58v–60v.

73 Bembo 1515, fol. 59r-v: 'Noi non siamo interi, ne il tutto di noi medesimi è con noi; se soli maschi, o sole femine ci siamo. Percio che non è quello il tutto, che senza altrettanto non puo stare; ma è il mezzo solamente, e niente piu; si come uoi Donne senza noi huomini, & noi senza uoi non possiamo. [...] Percio che se ben si considera; questa uita, che noi uiuiamo, di fatiche innouerabili è piena: allequai tutte portare nell'un sesso nell'altro [sic] assai sarebbe bastante da per se, ma sotto esse mancherebbe non altrimenti, che facciano la oltre l'Alessandria taleuolta e Cameli di lontani paesi le nostre mercanzie portanti per le stancheuoli arene; quando auiene per alcun caso, che sopra il scrigno dell'uno le some di due pongono i loro padroni: che non potendo essi durare cadono & rimangono a mezzo camino. Percio che come potrebbero gli huomini arare, navigare, edificare, gli studi delle lettere sequitare; se ad essi conuenisse anchora queglialtri cotanti exercitij fare, che uoi fate? O come potremmo noi dare ad un tempo le leggi a popoli & le poppe a figliuoli, & tra gli loro uagimenti le questioni delle genti ascoltare? [...] Che se noi huomini non possiamo & gli nostri uffici & gli uostri abbracciare; molto meno si dee dir di uoi; che di minori forze sete generalmente che noi.' (We are not whole, nor is the whole of ourselves with us if we are only men or only women. For what cannot exist without its counterpart is not the whole, but it is only the half and nothing more, just as you women cannot live without us men and we cannot live without you. ... And when you consider it properly, this life that we live is full of innumerable tasks that neither the one sex nor the other would be capable of fulfilling; under the burden of them it would perish, just as the camels sometimes do on the other side of Alexandria, carrying our wares from far off countries through the wearisome sands. Sometimes it happens that because of some failure the master weighs down camels by loading their packsaddles with burdens enough for two, and not being able to endure they fall and remain along the way. How could men be able to plough, sail the sea, build houses, pursue the study of letters, if they were expected to do the things that you women do too? Or how could we lay down the law for peoples and at the same time nurse our little babes, and amidst their noise also listen to the questions of the people? ... If we men are not able to carry out our tasks and yours as well, how much less can this be demanded of you, who generally have less strength than we do.)

74 On the dating see Laura Ricci (ed.), *La redazione manoscritta del 'Libro de natura de amore' di Mario Equicola* (Rome, 1999), 18–35, quoted from Stephen Kolsky, 'Mario Equicola's 'Libro de natura de amore' (1525): A New Interpretation', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 72/3 (2010), 593–620 (594). See also Magliani and Donvito 2017 (n. 72), 66. I use the *editio princeps*, namely, *Libro de natura de amore di Mario Equicola secretario del illustrissimo S. Federico II. Gonzaga Marchese di Mantua* (Venice: Lorenzo Lorio da Portes, 1525).

75 Equicola 1525, fol. 128r: 'E dunque ciascuno di noi mezo, & ciascuno cerca il suo resto, cioe quella stirpe donde fu seperato: Se questo per caso si scontra, di quelli e amore uehementissimo, & quelli se amano per tutto tempo di lor uita. Questa fabula che credemo altro ne apporte? Se non in amore esser necessaria conuenientia di Genio stella et idea? Chi e colui cosi mediocrementemente ne li studij phisici erudito, alquale non sia noto de la nobilissima parte del cielo prouenire mutatione & alteratione in li quattro corpi simplici, dicti elementi: da quali principij hauemo la complexione, non essendo altro, como sua diffinitione ne insegna, che effecto, ilquale resulta dalle qualita de li elementi: Da questa procede amore & odio naturale: questa ne parturisce & acquista beniuolentia, & lo contrario: Si comprende, che ad alcuni se piace compiacere, & semo non solamente inclinati a gratificarli, ma da non so che, quasi uiolentati obsequirli: De alcuni del solo aspetto si prende molestia: tutto credeno accasare da pari, ouero repugnante complexione. Molte uolte fra belle donne, una men bella con fermo uinculo liga: Vniuersalmente la bona gratia & bellezza ciascun tira, per procedere da temperata complexione: per che quel temperamento ad ogni humore e conforme.' (So every one of us is a half and each one is seeking his other part, that is to say, the stock from which he was separated. If he by chance meets his other part, there flares up the most vehement love between them and they love each other for the whole of their life. What therefore do we believe that this story tells us, if not that in love it is necessary that temperament, stars, and minds converge? Who is so poorly informed in physical studies not to be aware that from the noblest part of the heavens come changes and alterations in the four simple bodies, called the elements. From these principles we have our character, which is none other, as its definition teaches, than the effect that results from the qualities of these elements. From it proceed natural love and natural hate, and it bears and receives good will and the opposite thereof. Understandably, some are happy to please others, and we are not only inclined to bring them pleasure but by something we are positively compelled to obey them. In the case of some we are repelled even when we just see them. All that, it is said, comes from a similar or a repellent character. Amongst beautiful women there is often one who is somewhat less beautiful and yet she is the one who is the most enthralling. In general, good grace and beauty are attractive, because they come from a temperate character: this temperament harmonizes with every character.)

Abravanel, also known as Leone Ebreo or Leo Hebraeus (c.1460 – c.1521/30), who with his family had been forced into exile from their native Portugal.⁷⁶ While his father Isaak lived in Venice from 1503 until his death in 1508, Jehuda, who Italianized his name as Leone because of the lion's strong association with his Hebrew name, can be assumed to have moved from Naples to Venice in 1506; in 1515 he is recorded in Ferrara, following which he moved to Pesaro and then back to Naples. He had probably been working since the turn of the century on his *Dialoghi d'amore*,⁷⁷ in which Filone (Philon, the lover) and Sofia (Sophia, Wisdom) carry on a dialogue about love, considering in detail, among other things, Plato's *Symposium* and the spherical-man myth. By contrast with the three authors discussed above, Jehuda pursues the theme of sexuality inherent in Plato's text: for him, it is an important part of a normal and happy life.⁷⁸

For Leone Ebreo too, however, the desire for the 'other half' caused by the severance of the spherical being only exists between men and women: homosexuality is left out of the picture altogether. Of the three kinds of spherical being enumerated in Aristophanes' speech, only the third, androgynous 'sex' is accorded a truly dual nature in the *Dialoghi*, and is split in two. On the psychological level, Leone also focuses on the duality formed by the male aspect of the intellect and the female aspect of the body, or matter: for Leone, to put it somewhat crudely, sex is what holds body and soul together.⁷⁹

76 On his life and work see Sergius Kodera, *Filone und Sofia in Leone Ebreos Dialoghi d'amore. Platonische Liebesphilosophie der Renaissance und Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995); João J. Vila-Chã, *Amor Intellectualis? Leone Ebreo (Judah Abravanel) and the Intelligibility of Love* (Braga, 2006); Eugenio Canone, in *Leone Ebreo, Dialoghi d'amore*, ed. Delfina Giovannozzi (Rome and Bari, 2008), V–XIX. See also Magliani and Donvito 2017 (n. 72), 67.

77 Jehuda ben Isaak Abravanel, *Dialoghi d'amore di Maestro Leone Medico Hebreo* (Rome: Antonio Blado d'Assola, 1535).

78 See also the detailed interpretation of this passage in Kodera 2010 (n. 64), 228–45.

79 Abravanel 1535, fol. 93r: 'Onde li fece diuidere, cioè fece chel corpo fece resistenza al quanto a l'intelletto, & che l'intelletto s'inclinò a le cure necessarie del corpo e sue naturalità, perche la uita fusse piu presto humana che angelica, dice che da questa diuisione nacque l'amore, però che ogni mezzo desia & ama la reintegratione del suo mezzo restante, cioè che in effetto l'intelletto non haueria mai cura del corpo, se non fusse per l'amore che ha al suo consorte mezzo corporeo femminile, ne il corpo si governaria per l'intelletto se non per l'amore & affettione che ha al suo consorte & mezzo maschile, & in quello che dice unendosi l'un' mezzo con l'altro, per l'amore non cercauano le cose necessarie per il sostenimento loro & periuano; onde per rimedio Iuppiter li fece tornare li genitali de l'uno verso de l'altro, & satisfatti per il coito & generatione del simile si reintegrò la loro diuisione, significa che il fine de la loro diuisione de la parte intellettuale, & corporea, fu perche pigliando satisfattione de li dilette corporei si sostentassero ne l'indiuiduo, & generassero il simile per la perpetua conseruatione de la spetie.' (Therefore, he was divided, that is, his body was made to offer some resistance to the intellect and the latter to incline to the necessary care of the body and its material nature, so that the life of man might be human rather than angelic. And moreover, Plato says that from this division love was born, because each half desires and loves reintegration with its other half; in other words, the intellect would take no heed of the body save for the love that it bears its consort and female half, nor would the body be governed by the intellect were it not for the love and affection that it bears its husband and masculine half. Moreover, the story tells us that even when the

In addition, Leone's text, like Ficino's, has a theological component. While Ficino of course in general wishes to see Plato as a prophet and forerunner of Christianity, Leone sees him likewise as a prophet but as a successor to Judaism, as in his opinion the spherical-man myth was derived from the book Genesis, in which there are two different Creation narratives. In the first, 'priestly' narrative, at the end of his six days of work (Genesis 1:27), Yahweh creates man in his own image as man and woman, that is to say, androgynous, reflecting the fact that according to the Jewish understanding Yahweh has masculine and feminine aspects; in the second, 'Yahwist' narrative, Yahweh creates Adam in Paradise (Genesis 2:7) and Eve only much later (Genesis 2:22) from Adam's rib or side, as Leone emphasizes with reference to the Hebrew original.⁸⁰ For Leone, this corresponds to the

two halves came together in love, they did not seek the things that were necessary for their sustenance, and they perished; wherefore the god Jupiter caused their genitals to be turned facing each other, and so they remained satisfied and in union and in generation of their kind their division was healed. This signifies that the purpose of the division of the intellectual and corporeal parts was that man, in finding satisfaction in bodily pleasures, might take heed for the sustenance of the individual, and through the propagation of his kind for the preservation of the species.) *Leone Ebreo: Dialogues of Love*, transl. Cosmos Damian Bacich and Rossella Pescatori, Lorenzo da Ponte Italian Library (Toronto, 2009), 287.

80 Abravanel 1535, fol. 84v: 'Vuol dire che Adam cioè huomo primo, il qual Dio creò nel dì sesto de la creatione essendo un' supposto humano conteneua in se maschio, & femmina senza diuisione, & però dice che Dio creò Adam ad immagine di Dio, maschio & femmina creò quelli, una uolta il chiama in singulare Adam uno huomo, l'altra uolta il chiama in plurale maschio & femmina creò quelli, per denotare che sendo un' supposto conteneua maschio, & femmina insieme, però comentano qui li comentarij Hebraici antichi in lingua caldea dicendo, Adam di due persone fu creato d'una parte maschio, da l'altra femmina, & questo dichiara nell'ultimo il testo, dicendo che Dio Creò Adam maschio & femmina, & chiamò il nome loro Adam, che dichiarò solo Adam contenere tutti due, & che prima un' supposto fatto d'ambi due si chiamaua Adam, però che non si chiamò mai la femmina Eua, fin'che non fu diuisa dal suo maschio Adam, dal quale pigliarono Platone, & li Greci quello Androgeno antico mezzo maschio, & mezzo femmina, di poi dice Dio non è buono che l'huomo sia solo faccianli aiutorio in fronte di lui, cioè che non pareua che stessi bene Adam maschio, & femmina in un' corpo solo, colligato di spalle, con contra uiso, che era meglio che la femmina sua fosse diuisa, & che venisse in fronte, per poterli essere aiutorio, & per fare esperimento di lui, gli portò gl'animali terrestri, & uccelli per uedere se si contentaria con alcuna de le femmine de gl'animali per sua compagnia, & egli pose il nome a ciascuno de gl' animali secondo le sue proprie nature, & non trouò alcuno sufficientie per esser li aiutorio & consorte, onde, l'addormentò, & pigliò uno de li suoi lati, il quale in hebraico è uocabulo equiuoco a costella, ma qui et in altre parti ancora sta per lato, cioè il lato, o persona femminile, che era dietro a le spalle di Adam, & la diuisa da esso Adam, & suppli di carne la uacuità del luogo diuiso, & quel lato fece donna separata, la quale si chiama Eua poi che fu diuisa & non prima, che a l'ora era lato & parte di Adam, & fatta lei Dio la presentò ad esso Adam risuegliato del sonno, & egli disse questa in questa uolta e osso de mie ossa, & carne de mia carne, questa si chiamerà uirago, perche da l'huomo fu pigliata [...]. (It means that Adam, that is, the 'first man,' whom God created on the sixth day of the Creation, being a human individual, contained in himself male and female without division; and therefore the text says that God created Adam in His own likeness, 'male and female created He them.' And at one time it speaks of Adam in the singular as a man (Adam, one man), at another in the plural ('male and female He created them') to denote that being one individual, he contained in himself both male and female. Wherefore the ancient Jewish commentators in their Chaldean language here say, 'Adam was created of two persons, the one part male, the other female.' Moreover, the last text, which says that God created Adam male and female and called their name Adam, they interpret as meaning that Adam alone contained both sexes, and that there was first an

separation of spherical man, originally androgynous, into man and woman; Plato, Leone writes, took this idea from Genesis and elaborated upon it, in so doing completely confusing the Hebrew elements.⁸¹

All that – although it is interesting in terms of philology and religious studies if one wishes to investigate where Plato found the inspiration for his in fact very un-Greek spherical-man myth – has naturally led us too far away from the subject of this essay, because the two grisaille beings in Basaiti's painting are obviously men, though we are already familiar with Adam and Eve as typological figures in the painted architectural frames of Netherlandish gospel scenes as a second, anachronistic level and as a source of background information as to why in the biblical tradition the redemption of man through Jesus was necessary at all.

To recapitulate: At the time when the idea for Basaiti's *Calling* was maturing, in Venice it was possible to know of Leone's view that the Platonic myth of the androgynous spherical beings had been plagiarized from the biblical myth of the creation of Eve according to which she was separated off from an original androgyne. Given this evident similarity, anyone who had read Plato's original text would automatically think of the double males and double females – and ask the question where they were to be found in the biblical tradition. But Leone Ebreo does not mention them, nor do any of the Christian humanists who claim to interpret Plato's myth in their writings: *cum tacent clamant* – their silence speaks louder than words.

individual called Adam, because the woman was never called Eve until she was separated from the male, Adam. And this was the source of that ancient androgyne of Plato and the Greeks, who was half man and half woman. Then we come to the saying of God [Genesis 2:18]: 'It is not good that man should be alone. I will make a helper before him.' And this means that it did not seem good that Adam, male and female, should be contained in one single body, joined at the shoulders, with the faces turned in opposite directions; but it was better that the woman should be divided from him, and that they should come face to face, that she might be a helpmate for him. And God made trial of man by bringing all the beasts of the field and the birds before him to see if he would be content with any of the female species as his mate. And Adam named each of the animals after its own kind, but he did not find any satisfactory helper or consort. Therefore, [God] caused a sleep to fall upon him, and took one of his sides (the word in Hebrew being equivalent to rib, but here and elsewhere it stands for 'side'), that is, the side or feminine person that was behind Adam's shoulders. And he separated it from Adam, and filled up the place of the division with flesh. And of this side he made the woman, separate from man, who was called Eve only when she was divided from him and not before, when she was a side and part of Adam. When God had made her He presented her to Adam, awakened from sleep, who then said: 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called *woman*, because she was taken out of man.' Abravanel 1535 (2009) (see n. 79), 277–8.

⁸¹ Abravanel 1535, fol. 82v: 'La fauola è tradutta da autore piu antico delli Greci, cioè da la sacra historia di Moise, de la creazione delli primi parenti humani, Adam, & Eua. [...] Platone la prese da lui, & l'ampliò, & ornò secondo l'oratoria grecale, facendo in questo una mescolanza inordinata de le cose hebraice.' (The fable comes from a tradition that was referred by an author more ancient than the Greeks, that is, the sacred history of Moses concerning the creation of the first human parents, Adam and Eve. ... it was from him [Moses] that Plato took his fable, amplifying and adorning it after the manner of Greek oratory, thus creating a disordered and confused version of the Hebrew material.) Abravanel 1535 (2009) (see n. 79), 274–5.

Ficino's reinterpretation and the scene and subject of Christ's calling

While Ficino's interpretation of the spherical-man myth – which does not take Genesis into consideration and remains strictly within the bounds of the Neoplatonist tradition – is likewise highly eclectic when compared with Plato's purely human and hierarchically speaking absolutely equal half-beings, it shares unmistakable common ground with the subject of Jesus calling the sons of Zebedee to follow him. Ficino's mutually attractive divine and human lights can be seen as a prime typological equivalent of this scene, since in the biblical callings, Jesus – according to the Christian faith a man of divine descent – calls men to be his closest followers, firstly Simon Peter and Andrew and then James and John, as shown in the picture. In this context, a central position is occupied by the figure of John, who in the gospel traditionally attributed to him is never referred to by name but, rather, as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. This being the case, if a humanistically informed sixteenth-century Venetian recognized an allusion to Aristophanes' myth in the backward-looking head of the left-hand grisaille man, he – being thoroughly familiar with Ficino's interpretation and its elements influenced by *Poimandres* – will inevitably have seen the connection between that interpretation and the biblical scene of the calling of the disciples. The inventor of the picture gives him as it were a possible explanation as to why the celebrated scholar Ficino, who had departed so astoundingly far from the original text of the *Symposium*, decided – flagrantly contradicting Plato – to read into the myth a postulative mutual attraction between the divine and the human, and, what is more, to suggest why one can even regard his position as tenable, namely, by thinking of the – according to the Christian mind – highest and strongest of all powers of attraction, callings, or loves, that is to say, Jesus' love for his disciples and for all humans generally, proven in his redeeming Passion, and, conversely, the love of humans for Jesus and his divine Father – as enjoined long before by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5 (see also 10:12): 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.'⁸² According to the New Testament, Jesus called this the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37–38, see also Mark 12:29–31 and Luke 10:27) and expressly spoke of the mutual character of this love (John 14:21, see also 16:27): 'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And I will love

⁸² Biblia 1511, fol. 69v: 'Diliges dominum deum tuum ex toto corde tuo: et ex tota anima tua: et ex tota fortitudine tua.'

him and will manifest myself to him.⁸³ In a love of this kind, one can well imagine a believer looking forward trustingly to wholeness and salvation.

Tying up loose ends

This deeper-lying interpretation of the painting does not exclude the less 'spiritual' interpretation outlined in my section 'The backward-looking head in Plato's *Symposium*'. The person who invented and/or commissioned the painting was presumably a scholar familiar with the relevant ancient and more recent writings; perhaps he was himself homosexual, felt his sexual orientation to be completely natural, and had no wish to be threatened or prosecuted by the ecclesiastical or secular authorities. In his devotional image – I propose – he wanted not only a depiction of that overwhelming and deeply felt moment at which Jesus and John first set eyes on each other and conceived their desire to share the path through life, but also that it should have an architectural frame with grisaille men, in order to endow this encounter with an explanatory background underpinned by the double-male myth as interpreted by Ficino, thus enabling him – with the picture before his eyes and in the knowledge of being justified in his thoughts by well-respected literary authorities – to meditate upon the subject of love between men, whether on an erotic or 'Platonic' plane. But as long as we have no biographical information about the inventor of the picture, this hypothesis must perforce remain no more than an appealing speculation.

Nevertheless, once it has been accepted that the grisaille men are Platonic double-male halves the painting cannot be regarded in isolation from the explosive subject of homosexuality.

To recapitulate once again, now focusing more sharply on this problematic and delicate aspect of my hypothesis: What the inventor of the picture intended – namely, to combine in one coherent work the subject common to the two myths, that is, love between men – is clear simply from the pure fact of his decision to append the grisailles reminiscent of two Platonic double-male halves alongside the scene of the calling of James and John. For to what other end could he have conceived the work in precisely this way? Given that, as shown above, the literary interpretations of Aristophanes' myth by Bembo, Equicola, and Leone Ebreo only speak of androgynous spherical beings and of the attraction between man and woman, without even alluding to the double-males or the taboo

subject of homosexuality, the inventor could perfectly well – had his aim been to give pictorial expression to his reading of Plato generally – have had the half-beings painted as a man and a woman. If he had wanted to evoke a connection – analogous to the present painting but heterosexual in its connotations – between the spherical-man myth and the gospel story, he could for example have centred his work on a scene featuring Jesus and Mary Magdalene, or the Annunciation with the Virgin Mary and the archangel Gabriel: both of these would have corresponded to Ficino's interpretation with its evocation of attraction between divine and human lights. But what he does – and this is without doubt no accident, but his deliberate purpose – is to show two grisaille men and the calling of Jesus' beloved disciple John in the company of a number of fellow males.

Up to this point he could have been thinking of his protagonists' relationship as being purely spiritual, warm-hearted, and chaste. But this changes when one considers the text from Plato that he took as his source of inspiration. The spherical-man myth only appears in the *Symposium*, the central theme of which is love; and in the present context that love clearly has a sexual component, as after punishing humanity Zeus in his mercy granted men and women copulation as the sole, albeit temporary, means of assuaging their agonizing desire for the separated partner. Given that the genitals were moved stomachwards to within reach of the hands, one might think of another possible option for mitigating urgent desires, but Plato naturally gives no consideration to this practical alternative. For what he puts into Aristophanes' mouth is a myth explaining how it is that humans, whether of different sexes or of the same sex, come to be attracted to each other and what was the cause of there being these sexually defined preferences in the first place. The space Plato grants to the respective variants demonstrates clearly which one interests him most. Attraction between men and women and between women is dismissed with one short sentence for each kind (the former with disparaging comments about adulterers of both sexes). Thereafter, however, he gives a detailed account and impressive description of the attraction between men resulting from the original double males, and praises it in ample terms. Now, given the background of the Accademia Romana's association with syncretism and the fact that the teaching activity of Marcantonio Sabellico was so firmly established in Venice, when a Venetian Renaissance humanist consciously incorporates Platonic double-male halves in a pictorial composition – whether he is painting them himself or having them painted for him – thus alluding to attraction between men, which Plato unmistakably makes a central topic in

83 Biblia 1511, fol. 462v: 'Qui habet mandata mea et seruat ea: ille est qui diligit me. Qui autem diligit me: diligitur a Patre meo. Et ego diligam eum: et manifestabo ei meipsum.'

Aristophanes' speech, that humanist can only be seeing these figures as homosexual men. Of course he will have to beware of propagating his point of view in the public sphere, because in his real-life situation – by contrast with Plato's – homosexuality is subject to severe punishment. And anyone who had read Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*, and thus recognized the double-male halves from the backward-looking head of the left-hand grisaille man in Basaiti's painting, would not have failed to understand the composition as a pictorially coded message denoting friendly acceptance of homosexual contacts on the part of the work's inventor.

How are we to imagine the genesis of this unique work? One thing is certain: our hypothetical humanist did not waltz into Basaiti's studio and slap a finished sketch down on Basaiti's table with a few simple instructions – 'Paint that for me, Marco, would you, all in colour except for the two figures on the columns', or the like. This would not accord with the step-by-step procedure followed in the execution and the numerous changes made during the painting as revealed through the infrared reflectograms and scientific analysis (see above in the section 'Composition'). As the left-hand grisaille man was painted over the finished column, it can be assumed that the double-male halves that are so important for the painting's overall message made a late entry into the pictorial space and were perhaps painted last of all. It is also possible that Basaiti himself was the inventor: if he was Greek in origin and had received an excellent humanist education, one could well imagine him developing the painting step by step on his own initiative.⁸⁴ However, we have too little source information about his career and development to know whether this was the case. If the painting was a commissioned work, the late appearance of the double-male halves calls for an explanation, which may be that it resulted from a strategy of self-protection. By initially commissioning the painter to execute an edifying gospel scene with a conventional architectural frame, and then waiting until it was almost finished to have the grisaille men added before whisking it away to the safety of his private quarters, the inventor would have been diminishing the risk of a visitor to the studio demanding explanations for backward-looking heads and paradoxical ears. But this is all of course mere speculation. At present we know nothing about the historical genesis of the *Calling* and nothing about its provenance prior to its being inventoried in the collection



Fig. 20: Marco Basaiti, *The Calling of the Sons of Zebedee*, detail: underdrawing of the hand

of Bartolomeo della Nave in 1636;⁸⁵ we do not even know whether Basaiti was party to the work's deeper meaning. Nor, however, given the present state of Basaiti research, can any such possibilities be positively ruled out, which is why I use the expression 'inventor of the picture' ('Bildfinder', see above), as it can be used to apply either to the patron who commissioned a work or to the painter who invented the image as well as executing it.

Another possibility that cannot be ruled out is that this extraordinary composition had a jocular dimension to it. Given that the extant comedies of Aristophanes are famous for their biting puns on sexual and particularly homosexual matters, the inventor may well have considered it questionable to hazard any serious interpretation of what was a most bizarre myth without any parallel in the classical Greek tradition and, what is more, was put into the mouth of – of all writers – Aristophanes. For anyone who knows and loves the dramas of Aristophanes, the very fact of a painting being associated with his name is enough to give rise to thoughts of all manner of fantastical nonsense.

And indeed, a peculiar detail that has been revealed by the ageing and increased transparency of the paint layers over the past five hundred years indicates that the preparatory phase in the genesis of the grisaille men involved some very risqué trains of thought. The detail casts doubt on the purity of the painter's and/or inventor's intention, as visible with the naked eye on the right-hand column is an underdrawing showing the outline of a second, much more roughly sketched hand (fig. 20),⁸⁶ indicating that the right-hand grisaille man originally

⁸⁴ This is not inconceivable. The painter and engraver Giulio Campagnola (c.1482–1516/18), for example, came from a family of humanists and even as a child learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, see Antonio Carradore, 'Giulio Campagnola, un artista umanista', *Venezia Cinquecento*, XX, 40/2 (2010), 55–134.

⁸⁵ See Ferino-Pagden and Odlozil 2009 (n. 2), 219.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

clasped his column a hand's breadth further down and, what is more, with his middle finger extended. (In fact, it cannot be clearly seen whether there are two or three further fingers lying on the column below the extended finger, but above it lies another finger that is not extended, which can only be the index finger.) This obscene gesture, still in use today as an insult betokening anal penetration, is well documented and was commonly understood in antiquity and the Renaissance.⁸⁷

While the offending hand was carefully painted over and replaced with another that would raise no suspicions, the backward-looking head and strange ear of the left-hand grisaille man, in spite of their offending the eye anatomically, remained unchanged, which proves that they are essential to the painting and its deeper meaning.

In these two features, a humanist with an unconventional manner of thinking had an artist paint on to a precious painting (or himself painted) a result of his erudition in the form of an eye-catching allusion that does not force itself upon the viewer: a sign of the inner link between Ficino's transcendental interpretation of a burlesque myth nobilitated by Plato's authorship and the gospel scene of the calling of the disciples James and John. For him personally and for his erudite friends, this puzzle situated in the 'viewer's space' surrounding the

realistic aedicule with utopian blackness becomes a philosophical-theological manifesto – perhaps imbued with Aristophanean humour, perhaps with bitter irony – and a document of his rootedness in antique culture. If he were to have gone into the allusion and inner link in verbal form, whether orally or in writing, the inherent connection with homosexuality would certainly have caused him problems. By using a non-verbal picture, by contrast, he allowed himself several possibilities for obscuring the deeper meaning. If someone he did not trust were to ask about the sense of the backward-looking head, he could refer him to Dante's soothsayers or, more generally, to the Netherlandish tradition of architectural frames peopled with figures; he could quote precedents in the form of grotesques, creatures of fable, or the multifarious *parerga* so much in fashion at the time;⁸⁸ or, if absolutely necessary, he could resort to claiming it resulted from lack of skill on the part of the painter.

A further aspect arises in the context of the work as an instrument of personal devotion. Ficino's interpretation of Aristophanes' myth focuses on the ascent of the soul to the divine realm and on its release from the earthly sphere. If one is so inclined, one can also recognize this motif in the painted framework. The right-hand grisaille man – with a new physical form that enables him to enjoy episodes of successful love and sexual pleasure – is just taking leave of his column and preparing himself to take off from the pedestal (perhaps in post-coital thankfulness of a quite un-animal, quite un-sad kind), which may even suggest associations with the Redemption.

The left-hand grisaille man is behaving in a totally different way, warmly embracing his column and clinging to it with tensed muscles – he seems to be reluctant to separate himself from earthly matter. By contrast with his fellow on the right, he has not yet undergone Apollo's operation to make him into a 'modern' man; he is filled with a desperate desire for his 'other half', to whom he calls out with an open mouth and expression of extreme pain.

The fact of his being 'unfinished' also explains the mystery of his ear, which as mentioned at the beginning of the essay is in a disconcerting position. The explanation I propose is that the rear part of his head is not optically covered by the column, as it seems at first sight, but simply non-existent, as until just recently that

87 As a representative of the many Renaissance commentators and lexicographers, I quote Erasmus of Rotterdam, who in his *Adages* (2, 372) collected a number of instances from ancient literature. See *Erasmii Roterodami Adagiorum Chiliades tres, ac centuriae fere totidem* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1508), fol. 148v: 'Medium ostendere digitum. Medio item digito porrecto supremum contemptum significabant. Martialis. Atque illi digitum porrigeret medium. Nam hunc digitum Martialis impudicum uocat. Ostendit digitum, sed impudicum. Persius. Infamem, Infami digito & lustralibus ante saluius. Huc arbitror pertinere, quod apud Laertium Diogenes ut alibi diximus hospitibus quibusdam Demosthenem uidere cupientibus, non indice digito, sed medio porrecto demonstrauit, parum uirum innuens & effoeminatum. Ac paulo post eodem in loco satis indicat porrectione digiti medii quippiam obscenum significari, cum ait insanos haberi, qui medium porrigant digitum, qui indicem, non item. Itaque eodem in carmine duobus adagiis extremum contemptum indicauit Satyricus. Mandaret laqueum & medium ostenderet unguem. Elegantius fiet utrunque si longius detorqueatur. Vt philosophicis praeceptis laqueum mandes, tu tuo uiuito more. Et Theologorum decretis, medium unguem ostendunt, id est plane contemnunt ridentque.' (To show the middle finger. To hold up the middle finger was another way they had of showing supreme contempt. Martial [*Epigrams*, 2, 28, 2]: 'And hold up your middle finger.' Martial [6, 70, 5] calls this finger 'shameless': 'He shows a finger – but his shameless one.' Persius [2, 2, 33] calls it 'infamous': 'With infamous finger and purifying spittle.' Here, I think, must belong a story in Laertius [*Lives of the Philosophers*, 'Life of Diogenes', 6, 34] of which I have spoken elsewhere: how, when some visitors wanted to set eyes on Demosthenes, Diogenes pointed him out by holding up not his forefinger but his middle one, thus suggesting that he was no man and effeminate. A little later in the same passage he makes it quite clear that the outstretched middle finger conveys some obscene symbolism, when he says that those who stretch out the middle finger are thought to be of unsound mind, but this is not so of the forefinger. So it was two adages in the same line that the satirist [Juvenal, 10, 53] used to express extreme contempt, when he wrote [that Democritus] 'bade her [Fortuna] go hang, showed her his middle fingernail'. Both will be more stylish if bent some way from their proper use, for instance, 'Tell the precepts of the philosophers to go hang, live your own life,' and 'Merchants hold up the middle nail at the rulings of divines,' that is, they simply despise and laugh at them.) *The Adages of Erasmus*, selected by William Barker (Toronto, 2001), 182.

88 On the subject of delectable additions and elements of supposedly marginal importance in Renaissance art, see Degler 2015 ('Parerga', n. 21). So long as Basaiti's grisaille men remained unexplained, considered as mere 'outlandish stone beings' ('befremdliche steinerne Wesen', Ferino and Odlozil 2009 [n. 2], 215), they would have fitted well into Degler's collection, but she did not include them. However, their present identification as Platonic double-male halves makes of them not *parerga* but, rather, *erga* in their own right.

position was occupied by a second front half of a head with the face of his lost partner (a good impression of his ‘original’ anatomy is offered by Passeri’s medal, see figs. 17, 18). The column, as if it were administering a kind of first aid, provisionally closes off the open wound of the halved head and bisected torso and also acts as a temporary surrogate for the ‘other half’ the man so desires to have back. By means of the ear with its effect of spatial ‘impossibility’, the inventor subtly and ingeniously evokes the non-appearance in the picture of the back of the head, thus calling to mind two essential elements of the myth: on the one hand the Janus-like head of the double-males and on the other the cruel cut, the separation, the ‘halvedness’ – all the misfortune wrought on mankind by irate Zeus, which Apollo could only superficially put to rights with his surgical intervention. This explanation, an iconographical argument *ex nihilo*, is the only plausible one for this extraordinarily painted head, for if an anatomically normal figure had simply had its neck turned round, like Dante’s prophets in the *Inferno*, then any competent painter would have been able to make the ear disappear behind the column.

And as Plato’s myth tells us about the order in which the reshaping of the human body took place, we also know where the left-hand grisaille man’s genitals are located without being able to see them: not where the orientation of the arms and legs would suggest they might be but, like his face, in their original position to the rear of the buttocks, where they are turned toward the darkness but illuminated by the light of Apollo, god of the Sun and of healing, who is already hastening on his way to perform the operation.

Philological postscript

In conclusion, I wish to discuss certain matters of semantics that to my mind provide additional support for my hypothesis. The words in question appear in Plato’s presentation of a putative sequel to the myth (*Symposium*, 193a), to be found shortly after the longer passage quoted in full above: ‘So, there is a fear that if we are not well behaved towards the gods we may be sliced in two once more and go about like figures in profile on gravestones, sculpted in relief, sawn through along the line of our noses, mere half dice.’⁸⁹ Ficino translates this sentence as follows: ‘Verendum est preterea ne si minus

modesti quam deceat in deos simus iterum diuidamur talesque efficiamur / quales / qui in columnis figurantur / nares secti euadamus similes tenuissimorum quorundam animalium que lispe uocantur.’⁹⁰

In the original, the reliefs on tombstones are ‘οἱ ἐν ταῖς στήλαις καταγραφὴν ἐκτετυπωμένοι’, literally, ‘the ones carved out as images on the gravestones’, by which is meant profile portraits in relief. However, Ficino does not translate στήλαι (stelai) expressly as ‘gravestones’ (though one might expect a Latin equivalent such as *monumenta, sepulchra, cippi*, or simply *lapides*), but as ‘columnae’;⁹¹ his translation literally means, ‘like the ones cut in two down their noses who are shown on columns’. Now, our picture clearly features columns and figures depicted upon them. What is more, the left-hand grisaille man is shown in profile, though of course the plane of the cut does not run down the nose but parallel to his face, because he does not yet have a normal ‘modern’ head (as is assumed of the humans referred to at 193a), but, being freshly bisected, one half of a double-faced head. Only with the dreaded repetition of the halving process (making a quartering in all) would he then be deprived of the half of the face that is not visible in the picture, not to mention the entire half of his body on that side, following which he would not be able to cling to the column but would simply hop around on one leg.

In Leone Ebreo, too, we find ‘columns’ rather than ‘gravestones’ in the translation of this passage and, what is more, a participle of the Italian word ‘dipingere’, which always implies ‘paint’ or ‘draw’ and would never be associated with reliefs hewn in stone (ed. 1535, fol. 81v): ‘come gl’huomini dipinti ne le colonne à mezzo viso’, literally, ‘like the people who are painted on to columns with half a face’.⁹² Could it be that these translations

⁹⁰ Ficino 1491, fol. 153r.

⁹¹ This translation is of course also provided by the Greek-Latin lexicon of Giovanni Crastone (c.1420–1498), with which Ficino was certainly familiar, *Dictionarium graecum cum interpretatione latina* (Milan: Bonus Accursius Pisanus, n.d. [before 1478]) (Hain 5812): ‘στήλη. ης. ἢ. columna. statua. gades. columna quae fiebat sepulchris. cippus. titulus.’ (column, statue, Gades [Cádiz], the reference is to the ‘Pillars of Hercules’, i.e., the promontories that flank the Straits of Gibraltar), the column raised on gravestones, gravestone, funerary inscription).

⁹² A connection with paintings (‘dipinture’) is also found in the *Asolani*, not specifically in the translation of the passage on gravestone reliefs but in the framework of the explanation presented directly after the paraphrase of spherical-man myth. Bembo 1515, fol. 59r: ‘Se io così ti fauellassi; che mi risponderesti tu o Perottino? Perauentura quello istesso; che io pur hora d’intorno a tuoi miracoli ragionando ti rispondea: cio è, che questi sono giuochi de gli huomini, dipinture & faule & loro semplici ritrouamenti piu tosto & pensamenti, che altro. Non sono queste dipinture de gli huomini, ne semplici ritrouamenti o Perottino: La natura istessa parla & ragiona questo cotanto, che io t’ho detto, non uerun huomo.’ (If I were to tell you a story like that, what would you give me for an answer, O Perottino? – Perhaps just the argument I have given you in response to your miracles: That these things are nothing other than human games, paintings and stories, and simply their inventions and thoughts rather than anything else. – Those are by no means paintings made by humans, nor are they mere inventions, O Perottino: Nature itself, and not a human being, speaks and argues all that I have said to you.)

⁸⁹ Plato, *The Symposium*, transl. David Horan, see n. 31. The Greek original of *Symposium*, 193a, runs as follows, quoted from the Musurus edition (1513, 249–50): ‘φόβος οὖν ἐνεστιν, ἐὰν μὴ κόσμοι ὄμειν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς, ὅπως μὴ καὶ αὐθις διασχισθῶμεθα. καὶ περίμεν ἔχοντες ὥσπερ οἱ ἐν ταῖς στήλαις καταγραφὴν ἐκτετυπωμένοι διαπερισσμένοι κατὰ τὰς ρίνας γεγονότες ὥσπερ λίσαι.’

promoted the idea of painting the two grisaille men on to columns of an architectural frame that as an aedicule was in a form frequently found in antique sepulchral monuments?

As noted above, the form of the architecture in the painted framework is strongly reminiscent of the aedicules in the interior of the Pantheon in Rome (see figs. 3, 4), which since the medieval translation of martyrs' remains to the church (leading to the name 'Sancta Maria ad Martyres' in addition to 'Sancta Maria Rotunda') was considered a prime Roman burial place – only a few years after the making of our painting, the artist Raphael was laid to rest there. Might the association with the round form of this celebrated space been a sophisticated reference to the rotund spherical beings of Plato's imagination? Another building that was known as Sancta Maria Rotunda was the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli, also round, which perhaps provided the inspiration for the frieze of ox skulls (bucrania) under the tympanum which, initially drawn but ultimately not painted, is visible in the infrared reflectogram (see the section 'Composition' with figs. 7, 9). In any case, Ficino uses the adjective *rotundus* to describe the spherical beings, both in his translation and in his commentary.⁹³

93 Ficino 1491, fol. 137r (commentary, *De amore*): 'Preterea integra erat cuiusque hominis species / atque rotunda ...' (Moreover, the appearance of each person was whole and round ...), Ficino 1491 (1944) (see n. 65), 154; fol. 152v (translation): 'Preterea tota cuiusque hominis species erat rotunda ...' (Moreover, the appearance of each person was round ...) In Plato's original (*Symposium*, 189e, quoted from the Musurus edition of 1513, 248), the passage runs as follows: 'ἔπειτα ὄλον ἦν ἐκάστου τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ εἶδος στρογγύλον.' On the possible interpretation of the adjective as 'cylindrical', which would fit in well with the temples, see the discussion in Manuwald 2012 (n. 30), 92, n. 11, with further literature. If one looks the term up in the *Suda*, the work that Ficino used for the 'Lispai', see below, then one finds only the metaphorical meaning of 'fitting words', but not the actual geometrical meaning, though significantly enough with a quotation from a genuine comedy by Aristophanes, see *Suida* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1514), s.v.: 'Στρογγύλοις ῥήμασι. πιθανοίς, ἢ πανούργοις. ἀριστοφάνης: ἐς τάχος παίει: ζυνάπτων στρογγύλοις τοῖς ῥήμασι.' (With round words: convincing or crafty. Aristophanes [*The Acharnians*, 686]: He swiftly launches an attack and continues with round words.) Another not especially helpful source for spherical beings is the *Dictionarium* of Crastonus (n. 91), where the relevant lemma runs as follows: 'στρογγύλος. οὐ. ὀ. rotundus. tendens in acutum. sicut pinna restrictus.' (that is round, with a pointed end, tapering like a feather/fin/battlement). Here there seems to be the idea of a dome tapering to a point, certainly a part of a building, because the lemma 'Pinna' in the *Dictionarium* of Ambrosius Calepinus (c.1440–1509) – an indispensable source for the Renaissance use of Latin vocabulary (I use the Venice edition printed by Petrus Liechtenstein in 1509) – offers the following in addition to the meaning 'feather': 'Pinna etiam acutum significat. vnde & pinnae murorum id est summitates'. (Pinna means something pointed/high, whence also the Pinnae of walls, that is to say, their highest edges), while the lemma 'Pinnaculum' strangely enough seems to copy Crastonus' translation of στρογγύλος, with the formulation 'in acumen tendens': 'fastigium & summitas aedificij in acumen tendentis siue quod veteres pinnam acutum dicebant. Vnde bipennis securis quae vtrinque aciem habet siue quod pinnaculis addi pinna consuevit. quae facili motu ventorum indicet flatum. quod genus nunc penniculum dicitur.' (The gable and highest point of a building tapering to a point. Or because the ancients called something sharp 'pinna'. Thus the double axe, which has a blade on both sides. Or because it was the custom to place a weather vane on a gable, which can easily be set in motion and is used to indicate the blowing of the wind. This kind is now called 'penniculum'.)

May we then also understand the circles of dark red suggesting marble inlays on the pedestals of the columns and in the tympanum as additional clues? Was the painting deliberately invested with round elements in order to guide us to the spherical beings?

Are these really merely fortuitous, chance elements that just happen to prompt the present author to indulge her delight in interpretation with a synoptic display of gleeful anamnesis? Or are they perhaps, to use the words of Bembo's Perottino,⁹⁴ 'nothing other than human games, paintings and stories, simply their inventions and thoughts rather than anything else', but now, however, carefully and thoughtfully applied, positively and artistically oriented, semantic tentacles reaching forward to a more liberal future in which the painting is to be understood?

Another interesting matter is Ficino's translation of the rare word *lispai* in the short passage under consideration (*Symposium*, 193a), which is understood to mean 'broken identification tokens' or 'counterparts': on arriving, a guest not personally known to the host but recommended would confirm his identity by presenting the matching second part of a token. Ficino, however, appears not to have been familiar with the term and the understanding of it apparent shortly before in Aristophanes' speech,⁹⁵ and he comes up with a remarkable translation, 'similes tenuissimorum quorundam animalium que lispe uocantur', literally, 'similar to certain very thin/delicate living beings called *lispai*'. Clearly, he had derived his knowledge from the highly important tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia known as the *Suda*,⁹⁶ in which *λίσπη*, in addition to being accorded comments on its accentuation, is defined as follows:⁹⁷ 'ἡ τετριμμένη καὶ λεία, οἱ δὲ, θηρίδιον λεπτὸν σφόδρα', literally, 'something worn down and smooth; as some

The standard lexica in which the inventor of Basaiti's painting could have looked up Plato's word στρογγύλος thus do not suggest a sphere, and its Latin translation 'rotundus' is associated with some kind of dome, which speaks in favour of the cylindrical form. *Non liquet*. The above-mentioned medal of Marco Antonio Passeri (figs. 17, 18) is evidence of how 'spherical men' were imagined in the Renaissance, that is to say (in this case at least) by no means as spherical nor strictly cylindrical either but, rather, human-shaped. In any case, the Pantheon in Rome ('Sancta Maria Rotunda') is the domed building of antiquity par excellence, and interestingly enough there is a lexical chain of association that leads from the Greek adjective Plato used to describe 'spherical man' to its Latin translation in Crastonus and the explanation given by Calepinus referring to the classical dome form.

94 'che questi sono giuochi de gli huomini, dipinture & fauole & loro semplici ritrouamenti piu tosto & pensamenti, che altro', see full quotation in n. 92.

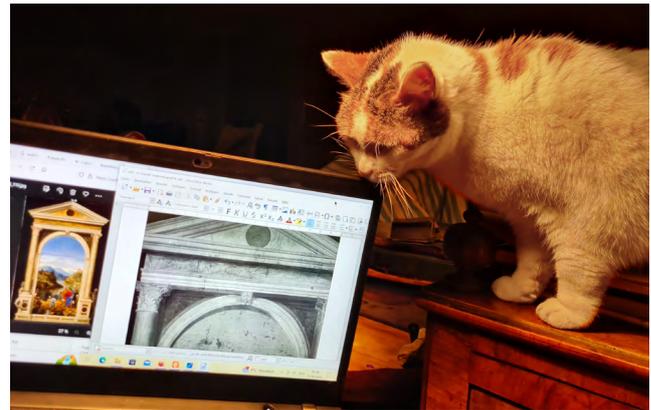
95 At this point (*Symposium*, 191d) Plato uses the words 'ἀνθρώπου σύμβολον' (Musurus edition of 1513, 249: 'ἀνθρώπου ζύμβολον'), which Ficino (ed. 1491, 153r) freely translates as 'dimidium hominis'.

96 Detailed interpretations of the *Suda* entries, with source references, English translation, and additional comments are provided by the SOL-Project, *Suda On Line*: <http://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol.html/> (last accessed 14.4.2024). The entries of interest here can be found under the numbers lambda 603 and lambda 604.

97 *Suda* 1514, s.v.

[consider], an extremely thin/delicate little animal/being⁹⁸ – which indeed corresponds very well to our delicate, nebulous figures painted white-in-grey on the columns. Maybe this extraordinary translation on Ficino's part and Ficino and Leone Ebreo's rendering of 'grave-stones' as 'columns' were also instrumental in providing inspiration for painting the *lispai* as grisailles on an aedicule strikingly reminiscent of the Pantheon, as mysterious beings on ancient pictures, as luminous spirits of Platonic antiquity who for good – or, rather, bad – reasons were, in a world of threatening homophobes, only intended to be recognized for what they really are by those who sought them out with open eyes and open minds.

98 The only meaning that is correct for the passage from Plato's *Symposium*, and recognizable as such from the context, is of course a different one: *λίσπαι* are, as we have seen, identification or recognition tokens, which in the 1514 edition of Suda that I have before me (by contrast with the modern Suda text, though in fact Ficino will have used a manuscript, as the *editio princeps* of Demetrios Chalkokondyles was only published 1499, in Milan) do not appear until the next lemma, which begins 'Αίσπαι, καὶ οἱ τὰ ἰσχία λεπτοί' (*Lispai* also [means] those people, who are slim in the hip), and in the next but one (i.e., the second lemma for *λίσπαι*), where they are defined as *astragaloi* (bones) that have been sawn through in the middle and perforated. Here, however, one also finds further terms, *λίσπόπυγοι*, for example, which is explained as 'οἱ λεῖοι τὴν πυγὴν' (those who are delicate/smooth in the backside), and a further explanation for *lispai* according to which the word was an epithet for the Athenians, who as seafarers had to spend a great deal of time rowing and were thus *ἀπόγλουτοι*, which roughly translates as 'small-bottomed' or 'smooth-bottomed'. The lexicographer also records another opinion according to which the Athenians were called *ἀπόγλουτοι* because of Theseus, who after descending to the underworld with Peirithous was, with his friend, fixed immovably to a rock by Persephone. When Hercules descended to fetch Cerberus, he, with permission from Persephone, tore Theseus away from the rock, but in the process Theseus left part of his buttocks behind. This myth was well known in antiquity and the Renaissance. The adjective *ὑπόλισπος* ('a little smooth') is used to crudely amusing effect by Aristophanes in *The Knights* (line 1368) in association with seafarers' worn-down buttocks; on the obscene joke see Hans Licht, *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*, London 1936, 232–3. In the scholion to this line (and we may assume that in Basaiti's day the Aristophanes scholia were well known, as Musurus had had them printed by Aldus in Venice in 1498), the explanation provided likewise refers to the myth of Hercules and Theseus. Giovanni Crastone's *Dictionarium* (see n. 91) also has a very evocative translation of the term *lispai*, s.v.: 'λίσπαι. οἱ λίσπαι. dicuntur qui habent nates graciles.' (*Lispai*, or *lispoi*, is used of those who have delicate buttocks.) The translation is found verbatim in the *Lexicon graeco-latinum, multis et praeclaris additionibus locupletatum* (Paris, 1512) of Girolamo Aleandro (1480–1542), s.v. Apart from this explanation related to the human body, which derives not so much from *λίσπαι* as from the *λίσπόπυγοι* of the *Suda*, the two dictionaries offer no other translation for *λίσπαι*, and most especially not the sole meaning applicable in Plato's *Symposium*, that is to say, divisible identification or recognition tokens. However, it would now be a vain endeavour to undertake any serious investigation into whether Ficino or the humanists of Basaiti's day who consulted these indispensable lexica saw any connection between delicate buttocks and interests of a homoerotic kind.



AD MORVM & STVDIORVM COLLEGAM
CHLORIDIS EPIGRAMMA

NOCTVRNO PERI MIRAM FELICITER ARTEM
QVAE LVSTRAS MECVM TEMPORE CARA FAVE
ABSTVLIT IPSE BOVES PICTOR NOSTRA INQVE CATILLA
ALMAE ALIQVID NVMQVAM QVOD CADAT ARTIS ERIT

To my colleague in studies and lifestyle
An epigram by Chloris

Peri my dear, content to spend the small hours
researching wondrous art with me: quiet now!
The artist himself removed the oxen, and never will
any morsel of nourishing art fall into our bowls.

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