

## A FIRE SAP WILLOW ON THE PERSONALITY AND FAMILY OF THE PRE-HELLENIC ZEUS

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It is well known that the pre-Hellenic, Minoan civilization was characterized by matriarchy, an obvious trait in the religious field as well, represented by a pantheon governed by a Magna Mater. The male deities were not missing, but they were usually inferior to the female ones, playing rather the part of a drone in a hive, by the almighty queen. One of these male deities, perhaps the most prominent one, was the one that the Greeks would name Zeus the Cretan (Velchanos, by his autochthonous name), whose worship has left important traces in Crete, the cradle of the Minoan civilization. Far from being the thunderous Zeus of the Greeks, Velchanos was represented as a fragile adolescent, seated between the branches of a willow and holding a cock in his hand, image a long while maintained on the coins. The intention of our paper is to highlight the characteristics of this deity, the symbolisms of the objects which define him and the domain he was patronizing, as well as the way Velchanos becomes Vulcan, the patron of fire and thus of handicrafts, once he penetrates the Roman pantheon.

**Keywords:** Velchanos-Vulcanus, fire, birth, child, fertility.

### I. PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

Over the last few years, our interest and research has been focusing on the pre-hellenic mythology and religion (deities, rites, places of worship, customs, etc.), insofar as they can be guessed from a few literary testimonies that have come to our hands or from certain objects which are the result of excavations. This is a paper in which comparative mythology needs to rely on graphic representations: mural or ceramic paintings, figurines or other tridimensional objects, which come from or bring evidence of the Minoan Age, as late relics of this era, which preceded and significantly influenced classical Greek mythology and religion. We have paid additional attention to masculine gods, more interesting and not so well outlined within a matriarchal civilization. We have already dealt with Hephaistos, with Dionysos, with Hermes, whose names are written on the Linear B tablets<sup>1</sup>. We

<sup>1</sup> F. Bechet, « Sur les traces du boiteux (I) », *Studia Indo-Europea, Revue de Mythologie et de Linguistique Comparée*, t. IV, Bucarest, 2010, p. 47–63; « Les dames de la balançoire : lieux, noms, mythes », *Studii Clasice XLVI*, (2010), 2011, București, Editura Academiei Române, pp. 195–203; « De e-ma-a<sub>2</sub> à Hermès Trismégiste », *Conference proceedings of the international conference 'The reception of Greco-Roman Antiquity in European cultures – the Vth edition: Under the Sign of Hermes'*, Craiova, 11–12 May 2012, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2013, p. 62–72.

already know about their contamination with the Greek gods and the change their personality went through under the influence of the patriarchal religion of the invaders.

But was Zeus, πάτηρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε, the Great God of the Indo-Europeans, entirely Greek, or had he got an equivalent in Minoan mythology which might have contributed to his synthetic personality in the classical period? This is the question that this paper raises.

## II. THE CRETAN ZEUS – A PRE-HELLENIC ZEUS?

Since Antiquity, myths have been telling about a Zeus Cretagenes, a Zeus from Crete (considered Zeus' infant version, due to the legend about this god's birth). Was this Cretagenes an epiclesis like all the others – countless, as a matter of fact – or an old Cretan god of the Minoan Age which, like almost all the other deities of the matriarchal age, underwent an astonishing syncretism with the conquerers' supreme god? We know the names of several gods which come from the pre-hellenic layer, both female – more numerous –, and male<sup>2</sup>. Among the male gods we can distinguish one which seems more important than the rest. Its name is mentioned several times and it is still stamped on the coins that can be dated between 322 and approximately 300 BC, many centuries after the Minoan Age. It is the Cretan god Velchanos, whose name and image are very neatly stamped on the silver staters minted at Phaistos. This god was also worshiped at least at Agia Triada, where there was a little sanctuary dedicated to him ; at Gortyna, where his name is written on a list which must date from the VIIth or from the VIth century and which mentions the victims that must be offered to the gods of the city throughout the year (*IC*, 4, 2, r. 1) ; at Cnossos, where there was a month dedicated to the same god in 118/117 BC, like in the cities of Lato and Olonte ; at Lyttos, where an inscription dating from the II<sup>nd</sup> or the III<sup>rd</sup> century AD (*IC*, 1, 16, 4) informs us about the existence, in such a late period, of a feast called Βελγάνια<sup>3</sup> (*IC*, 18, 11, r. 1–14). All these testimonies can be dated back at a time far away from the Minoan Age, but in Gérard Capdeville's opinion<sup>4</sup> « comme nulle part ailleurs dans le monde grec n'est attesté un dieu du même nom, il faut bien considérer qu'il est certainement préhellénique; on sait que les envahisseurs achéens et doriens ont subi fortement l'influence des populations locales sur le plan

<sup>2</sup> Besides their form, which can indicate the flexion and the gender, the most important source of these names – the Linear B tablets – doubtlessly shows the gender of these gods, because, as Joan Gulizio proves (« *Hermes and e-ma-a<sub>2</sub>. The continuity of his cult from the bronze age to the historical period* », *ŽA*, 50, 2000, p. 105–116), after having studied several tablets, a female god is assigned a woman, while a male god is assigned a man.

<sup>3</sup> By reason of the very old date of all the inscriptions that have come to our hands, the first letter is either the expected digamma in its most usual form (F), or B, Γ.

<sup>4</sup> *Volcanus. Recherches comparatistes sur les origines du culte de Vulcain*, Roma, École Française de Rome, 1995, p. 165.

religieux, et que la Grèce continentale elle-même en a reçu des échos puissants. Au reste, les calendriers sont des structures très conservatrices, et le seul fait qu'ils soient différents d'une cité à l'autre exclut l'action uniformisante d'une vague de conquérants homogènes ».

We do not know anything about the attributes of this god. Then why can we assimilate it to Zeus? First of all, we have a direct testimony. A lemma of Hesychios (G, 315 Latte) formulated in a doubtful manner, but not in its essential parts, and corrected nowadays, has: Γελχάνος· ὁ Ζεύς παρὰ Κρησίν. As far as his attributes are concerned, all we can do is exploit the images offered by the Phaistos coins. They show on the tail a bull and the name of the city, and on the face the god's image. We find it more suggestive to transcribe the description made by M. Guarducci<sup>5</sup>, quoted by the same Capdeville: « Una piccola serie di monete di Phaistos ... ci presentano la leggiadra imagine di un giovanetto seduto nell'ampio cavo di un tronco d'albero, che forma cespuglio intorno a lui circondandolo con una corona di rami. Il corpo delicato, modellato dall'artista con molta sapienza, si abbandona quasi mollemente sul sedile arboreo, e mentre il braccio sinistro riposta inerte, quello destro si avvolge, con gesto carezzevole, intorno ad un gallo, il quale sta, pieno di baldanza, sulla gamba destra del giovane ». The important hints are the animals and the tree, considered to be a willow.

The masculine element is represented, in zoomorphism, by the **bull**<sup>6</sup>, which appears as companion of The Great Goddess. And this is undoubtedly where legends like Pasiphae's and Europe's come from, in which the heroine, entirely human, mates with an animal. In another era, more recently, the god, too, has got a human appearance, perhaps after a mixed period to which there could be related figures like the one of the Minotaur, half-man and half-bull. **The cock** (ἀλεκτρούων) can only be a relatively recent attribute, from the Greek age. In the Greek world he appears just in a later period. The first literary testimony dates back only to the VIth century. For a long time (e.g. at Aristophanes), he is usually called ὄρνις Περσικός, which seems to confirm that his arrival to Greece is still recent. The cock is a solar symbol<sup>7</sup>, but also an attribute of the chthonian gods; but these gods preside over death and over rebirth as well. Ch. Picard<sup>8</sup> thinks it is a symbol of male fecundity.

<sup>5</sup> In his study « Velchanos – Vulcanus », in *Scritti in onore di Bartolomeo Nogara*, Cité du Vatican, 1937, 183–203, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> In the pre-hellenic age, in the Oriental area of the Mediterranean Basin, the bull was the symbol of vigour, of vital energy and fertility. Consequently, it is naturally associated with the cult of Artemis of Ephesos, an Asian goddess related to the rites of fecundity and earth, a trait pointed out by the epicleris Tauropolos, « the bull tamer ». See also the bull associated with the Oriental myth of Mithra, a solar god, in which the bull is seen as the source of life. (cf. Anna Ferrari, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, traducere de Dragoș Cojocaru, Emanuela Stoleriu, Dana Zămoșteanu, Iași, Polirom, 2003, s. u. *Taur*). On the contrary, in the Indo-European world, which has a different ideology, the bull is associated with rivers, not with the sky, like in the Minoan world.

<sup>7</sup> As Pausanias tells us (5, 25, 5), he had been chosen by Idomeneus as a badge that appears on his shield. And Idomeneus is Helios' grandson, through his mother, Pasiphae, daughter of Helios, the sun.

<sup>8</sup> *Les religions préhelléniques (Crète et Mycène)* (= Mana, 2, 1), Paris, 1948, p. 82–83; 94, *apud* Capdeville, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

If the cock is a recent attribute, in our opinion he replaced another bird with the same symbolism, but an older one. Let us look at the birds consecrated to well known gods, especially at those that come from the Minoan Age. Nowadays we know that in that era of Magna Mater or of The Mother-Earth (The Fertile and Nourishing Mother), first rank gods were female gods. They had the most important prerogatives, they were the most worshiped ones in magnificent temples, in great celebrations. With these female gods minor male gods are associated, with inferior prerogatives, which share the same temple with the more powerful goddesses to whom they match. In Athens, for example, Hermes' statue was hosted in Athena Polias' temple, while in Arcadia and in Crete (at Kato Symo) it was placed in Aphrodite's or Hecate's temple, or in that of the Muses, and in Samos – in Hera's, Demeter's and Despoina's temple<sup>9</sup>. The male god is usually the goddess's son and lover/husband at the same time. Their couple somehow resembles the one in a hive, made up of the mother bee (queen) and the drone. All these goddesses come from the Minoan Age and were worshiped in Crete. They all had as an attribute one or more birds (owl, female pigeon, sparrow, partridge, cuckoo, peacock). Therefore, it seems to us very natural that the goddesses share this ornithic attribute with their partner. In the case of Velchanos, depicted with a cock, if we search the birds of the same family (gallinaceae phasianidae alectoris), we shall find the partridge (*Alectoris graeca* «cliff partridge»). This bird was consecrated to Minoan gods, such as Aphrodite, Lato and Zeus (we are obviously speaking about Zeus Cretegenes or Chthonios)<sup>10</sup>. R. Graves, too, supposes – we do not know his arguments – that the hellenic cock replaced the Minoan partridge.

**The partridge** is well represented in the old Cretan mythology. It is depicted on a lot of frescoes. There is also a legend telling about Hephaistos as Hera and Talos' son. Talos is the nephew of Daedalus, the builder of the labyrinth, whose sister was called Perdix. Jealous of his nephew's talent, Daedalus throws him off the cliff of Acropolis; Talos' soul flies away turning into a partridge or, in another version of the same legend, Athena rescues the gifted young man transforming him into a partridge.

A partridge can be seen on the tomb of Icarus, son of Daedalus, fallen from the celestial vault. Is there anything in common between Hephaistos and his family, on the one hand, and the partridge, on the other? Hephaistos was lame in one leg, the name Talos is the same as Tantalos, which means «gimpy»<sup>11</sup>, and the nuptial dance of the partridge is a kind of lameness. By means of its sacred dance, the partridge is the lame himself.

Is there anything in common between the Cretan Velchanos, Hephaistos and the partridge? Hephaistos was lame. The partridge limps in its sacred dance. Robert Graves translates the god Velchanos' name as «the king who drags his foot». Hence, he belongs to the family of the lame.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Gulizio, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Anna Ferrari, *op. cit.*, s. u. *potirniche*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf: <http://rebeccalochlann.wordpress.com/category/velchanos>.

Regarding the willow, it can be one of the sacred trees related to the Great Goddess or to the Goddess-Earth in the oldest Cretan religion, a tree that was an object of religious devotion<sup>12</sup>. Although its Greek name, ἑλίκη « spiral », fits in very well with this role of sacred tree, tree of the sky, tree of the world, we cannot draw such conclusions using a Greek etymology. But the willow is one of the representations of the world tree in Egyptian mythology, which had had a great influence on the Cretan one. The willow was associated with the Mother-Earth and with the topic of fertility due to its fruits which ripen very fast and fall on the earth, and the earth receives its offspring in its bosom.

Thereby, the willow also symbolizes death (Homer beds it at the gates of Hades' kingdom<sup>13</sup>). We are also thinking of a trait specific to this tree: when one seeds a branch cut from a willow, the branch produces roots very soon and gives birth to a new tree. The willow is consecrated to many gods, like Hera, who was born in a willow boscage, or like Demeter and Persephone, whose feast – a fertility feast – used to include huts made of willow branches, in which the women spent the night<sup>14</sup>, but also like Zeus, whose cradle was hung between willow branches on the mountain of Ida in Crete. In other legends, the willow is replaced by the plane tree. In Egyptian mythology, the plane tree is one of the symbolic figures of the tree of the world.

Capdeville<sup>15</sup> comes up with the idea that « l'arbre n'appartient pas à la définition du dieu, il est le lieu de son union avec la déesse. Or cette déesse – says he – nous est connue par des monnaies de Gortyne, qui nous offrent comme la réplique de celles de Phaistos: dans la fourche d'un arbre est assise une jeune femme à l'air pensif, la tête appuyée sur la main gauche; un oiseau, qui paraît être un coucou, la regarde; sur d'autres monnaies de la même cité, l'oiseau est un aigle, en position « hiérogamique », et une tête de taureau est suspendue à l'arbre ». On the tail there appears a bull heading to the right and, in the previous emissions, carrying a girl on its back. All the commentators recognize, in the girl with the bull, Europe abducted by the metamorphosed Zeus, and most of them have the same opinion regarding the tree. Indeed, the mythographers place the union of Zeus with Europe in Crete, at Gortyna<sup>16</sup>, and the tree believed to have hosted them was a plane tree of a rare kind, with everlasting leaves. It was long believed that this tree was the produce of popular fantasy, but the existence of this strange tree (*Platanus Orientalis Semperuirens*) on the mountains of Crete is real. Its extraordinary conformation led, already from Antiquity, to a change of the tradition itself.

<sup>12</sup> The cult of the tree can be found in relationship with many goddesses of the Minoan Age, such as Artemis (the cedar, the nut tree, the same tree as Zeus' – the nuts were deemed the god's testicles and they symbolized fertility and abundance, just like chestnuts, *Iouis glandes*), Hera, Hellen (the plane tree, like Zeus), Persephone (the fig, Hermes and Dionysos' sacred tree), Ariadne, Phaedra, Erigone etc., whose fructiferous strength is expressed by the tree.

<sup>13</sup> Cf: Anna Ferrari, *op. cit.*, s. u. *salcie*.

<sup>14</sup> Like the barracks in which the women used to spend the night on the occasion of the Nonae Caprotinae feast, at Rome.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Let us not forget that Europe's old name was Gortyna.

Therefore, given this description and all these interpretations, we may wonder: which are the attributes of this Velchanos, of this old god specific to the Cretan area? This young god, seated on a tree, whose feast takes place at Lyttos at the Kalends of May<sup>17</sup> and gives its name to a month of the spring at Gortyna and Knossos, appears nowadays to most commentators as a god of vegetation, of the cycle of nature, a « young male year Spirit » – according to Rodney Castleden's definition<sup>18</sup> – celebrated especially at the time of the prevernal rejuvenation. His name remained one of the attributes of the Cretan Zeus, known in Crete also as *Kouros*, « the boy »<sup>19</sup>. Like Adonis or Dionysos, but also like the Egyptian Osiris, this prototype of the Minoan Zeus dies and revives every year, as a subordinate of the Goddess of Resurrection, the Mother-Earth.

### III. THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE GODS OF VEGETATION

**1. The phallus.** A symbol of good luck and fertility, the image of the male sexual organ was considered an attribute of several gods. Hermes, be it as a big and cone-shaped block of stones or as a quadrangular pyramid or trunk fitted with an always tumid penis, is himself a phallus, a mark of fertility and of animal fecundity. Similarly, Artemis is depicted as a pillar with a pyramidal apex. Dionysos as well was symbolized by a phallus of different sizes and materials, used on the occasion of some feasts, especially the Thesmophoria and Phallophoria (when the phallus was made of fig wood). The phallus was carried in procession by the young girls on the occasion of certain religious rites of Artemis or it took the shape of loaves of bread, biscuits or cakes in other rites, especially those of Demeter. Hephaistos is not depicted as tumid (e.g. the famous François vase), like Hermes, but is often accompanied by phallic satyrs, especially in the vase paintings, and even the donkey that carries him at his famous return to Olympus is depicted as tumid. Later on, when he becomes the great smith, his hammer is a phallic symbol. Some of his traditional companions, the Dactyls, to be found both in Lemnos and in the Italic city of Praeneste, were known particularly as good ironmen, but as the natural parents of Caeculus, the founder of Praeneste and Vulcan's son, they were rather a band of shepherds, having a mainly pastoral appearance<sup>20</sup>. As far as Zeus or Velchanos is concerned, since the male element is represented by the sky, the male organ is the lightning. His fecundating power is concentrated in this very lightning, which announces the rain, the hierogamy being fulfilled in the brutal encounter of the lightning with the earth, like the encounter of the ax (the symbolic representation of the lightning) with the tree.

<sup>17</sup> See also the May Tree rite, still extant today at many peoples.

<sup>18</sup> In *Minoans: Life in Bronze Age Crete*. London, Routledge, 1993, *apud* <http://rebeccalochlan.n.wordpress.com/category/velchanos>

<sup>19</sup> Two little ivory figurines, discovered in the Labyrinth and described by Evans as « Divine Boy », depict him.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. G. Capdeville, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

**2. The ram.** The ram was considered a symbol of fecundity and strength. He has got these characteristics in Egyptian mythology, but also as attributes of some Greek gods, all of which turn out to be gods of vegetation and fertility. We can enumerate here Hermes Criophoros, an epiphany that protects the herds; Dionysos who, being thirsty during his wanderings in Libya, is helped by a ram that shows him a spring; Apollo Carneios, considered by the Dorians a god of the herds; but also Zeus, in his hypostasis of Zeus Ammon, depicted with ram horns<sup>21</sup>.

This protection of the herds is extended over the vegetable world.

**3. The fire.** In our study on Hephaistos<sup>22</sup> we have also explained the relationship between fire and vegetation, fertility. In our opinion, Hephaistos was a chthonic god of fertility, too, an aspect which has not been emphasized enough by those who have analysed the personality of this god. The explanation, which is one of common sense, is given by Alexander Murray: « From being god of the warmth within the earth – of volcanic fire, Hephæstus came also, when the fertility of a volcanic soil became known by experience, to be looked on as one who aided the spread of vegetation, this function of his being recognized most in the spread of the vine, which thrives and bears its best fruit on volcanic soil. It is from knowledge of this fact, no doubt, that the idea arose of the close friendship between him and the wine god Dionysus [Bacchus], which we find exemplified partly in the joint worship of these two deities, and partly in the story [...], of how Dionysus led Hephæstus back to Olympus, and smoothed his differences with the other gods »<sup>23</sup>. We have also presented the different hypostases of fire (celestial, solar, underground, volcanic, etc.). The main difficulty is to know which fire one must start from: the lightning fire, the volcanic fire, the fire lit by the sun – but, to put it plainly, as Capdeville concludes, this problem always stays a minor one since, whatever the starting point is, at the end this god is assigned the patronage of all fires. But Hermes is considered the inventor of fire, identified by Gordon<sup>24</sup> with the sacred fire, because it is used in sacrifices. In the case of Dionysos – accompanied at the Anthesteria by his kinsman, as far as attributes are concerned, Hermes – the fire is to be found in the burning which becomes the cause of his unusual birth, a fire that resurges in the Bacchants' torches and, obviously, in the subtle fire of the wine. And, since in Rome the hearth is protected by a goddess, Vesta, a well-conceived match was needed, to represent masculine strength, and this match was the restless Vulcan, the metamorphosis of the Cretan Velchanos, which has passed through the Etruscan *Velchans*<sup>25</sup> or *Mulciber*, and *Vulcanus Iouialis*. The contamination between Vulcan and Iuppiter took place, therefore, at the Etruscans, because in Martianus Capella's pantheon, for instance, and in the sixteen celestial regions presented by

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Anna Ferrari, *op. cit.*, s. u. *Berbec*.

<sup>22</sup> F. Bechet, « Sur les traces du boiteux (I) », *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Alexander S. Murray, *Manual of Mythology*, Revised Edition, Philadelphia, David MacKay Publisher, 1895, p. 102.

<sup>24</sup> P. Gordon, *Le Mythe d'Hermès*, Paris, Arma Artis, 1984.

<sup>25</sup> In Etruria, Velchans is a god that throws bolts.

him, Vulcan, labeled with the current epithet Mulciber, appears twice in the regions that are presented as Iuppiter's main domain. He might have been designated *Vulcanus Iouialis*, symmetrically to Ζεὺς φελχάνος, while one of the deities associated to him, a kind of « mistress of the animals », bears a surname equivalent to Ἰδαῖος (*Lynsa siluestris*)<sup>26</sup>. There is also another connection between the Cretan Zeus and fire. Antonius Liberalis (*Met.* 19, 1–2) tells that every year, during a particular period of time, one can see coming out of the cave on Mount Ida, the cave where Zeus spent his childhood, an extremely bright fire. And according to the myth, this happens when Zeus' blood, spread at the moment of his birth, boils up. As a matter of fact, the stone that Rhea had chosen to be swallowed instead of Zeus is considered a betyl, that is a meteorite, widespread in the Oriental Mediterranean Basin and object of devotion in the cave of Zeus' birth (Hésych., *s. u.*, B, 992). Hence, the Cretan Zeus is certainly a son of the lightning, as it is confirmed by the stone he was replaced with, and the fire coming out of the cave highlights the double valence of the fire element, celestial and chthonian at the same time.

**4. The vehicle.** In the same study about Hephaistos I have shown that the gods which cover the entire route of the sun, which go up on the celestial vault and then down beneath the horizon, which quench or die away and resurge in the morning or in the spring – a route equivalent to the descent in the underworld – need help for transportation (chariot, sledge, riding animal, winged shoes). Hephaistos has got winged sandals, identical to the ones of Hermes. He has also got a chariot comparable to that of Dionysos or, since he is lame in one leg, he moves around by riding a donkey *en amazone*. The vehicle is the attribute of the lame, which are gods of vegetation. Dionysos, too, is considered lame, having inherited lameness from his father Zeus, since the latter had carried him in his thigh. For that matter, Nonnos of Panopolis (*Dionysiaka*, 9, 22) comes up with an interesting etymology of this god's name, explaining that in Syracusan Greek the word *nysos* means *cholos*, « lame »<sup>27</sup>. As far as Zeus is concerned, we mustn't forget an episode from the oldest layers of his history. Ge, insulted by the Olympians, had bestirred her son, monster Typhon, against them. He attacked Zeus, who lost the battle. Typhon cut his tendons, rendering him immovable, he took him to a cave in Cilicia and hid his tendons in the same place. Hermes and Pan, who had not taken refuge in Egypt together with the other gods, interfered and succeeded in chasing away Delphyne, the dragon that was guarding the cave where Zeus was imprisoned. Zeus takes back his tendons and follows Typhon in his

<sup>26</sup> Herodot uses several times ἴδη – an ionian form – as a common noun to designate a forest (1, 110 ; 4, 109 ; 4, 175 ; 5, 23 ; 7, 111), a meaning confirmed by lexicographers, such as Hésychios (*s. u.* ἴδη, I, 184 L), *Souda* (*s. u.* ἴδη, I, 101 A), *Etymologicum Magnum* (*s. u.* ἴδη, 465,52). – In his capacity as a god of fecundity and fertility, match of a mother-goddess, he had been deprived of his actual power by Tinia, in a coup attempt less violent than that of the Greek mythology, in which the Indo-European Zeus unthrones the Minoan Velchanos.

<sup>27</sup> Nonnos' assertion is confirmed by *Etymologicum Magnum* : νῦσος ὅτι γλώσση Συρακοσσίδη χωλὸς ἀκούει.



chariot harnessed with winged horses. From his chariot he lightens Typhon, somewhere near Sicily, and buries him under Etna. This legend expresses in its specific terms, preserving the main elements, the coordinates of the gods of vegetation which are chained up, wounded, weak, incapable to move, in one part of the year, and they regain all their strength in the other.

**5. World of the dead.** Hermes is known as a psychopomp, who guides the souls of the dead in Hades' kingdom. This role fits in very well with his capacity as a chthonian god of fertility. He pendulates continuously between life and death. He goes down into the underworld and comes back among humans or gods. Therefrom, in his capacity as a *Liberator*, he brings back Persephone from Hades. In this infernal mission he meets other gods of fertility, which are nourishing gods: Artemis-Hekate and Dionysos, but also the Cretan Velchanos<sup>28</sup>. This is the reason why, at the feast of Anthesteria, a feast of Dionysos, in the day of the pipkins (*Chytroi*), Hermes Psychopompos, « carrier » of the souls, is, in Maria Daraki's opinion<sup>29</sup>, Dionysos's duplicate, whom he is associated with: in this day sacrifices are made for both of them in order to close the feast. On a lekytos (published by P. Schaow) there appears a big *pithos*, buried deep in the earth, whose lid is open (certainly an *anodos*). Tiny spirits creep out of it. Two of them are soaring, a third one is on the verge of getting out, while the forth is plunging back in the open pithos. Hermes the psychopomp is leading all these moves, which he seems to be conducting with the *rhabdos* he is holding in his right hand. Jane Harrison believes that these are images of the souls that escape from the pithos as from an open tomb, just to fall back later on at the orders of Hermes, who is fully qualified to lead this up and down motion. It is the collective exit of the dead at the Anthesteria. « Dionysos n'est pas le dieu qui « souffre » – wrote Maria Daraki – mais le dieu qui *circule*. Ses départs et ses retours s'inscrivent sur un parcours circulaire qui établit la jonction entre le monde des morts et le monde des vivants »<sup>30</sup>. This statement fits Hermes, too, very well. This path is the most important route, the complete route, the paradigm of routes. Hence, no wonder that Hermes protects everything that has to do with roads and with contacts, with crossovers (travelers, sailors, heralds, thieves etc.). No wonder, either, that Hermes is depicted carrying Dionysos in his arms, just as Dionysos is depicted bringing back Hephaistos to Olympus.

**6. The child.** Few Greek gods are depicted as children or even as babies. The scholars have been drawing attention to this hypostasis without making any comments. As far as we are concerned, by comparing several representations of the Greek gods, we have noticed that only the gods of vegetation appear as babies or children. Hermes is one of them. On a vase, the newly-born lays in his cradle

<sup>28</sup> All these gods have the epiclesis *Chtonios/Chtonia* and an attribute that refers to the black color (*melas*).

<sup>29</sup> Maria Daraki, *Dionysos et la déesse Terre*, Paris, Flammarion, 1994, p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

where, clouted up to his chin, he pretends to be asleep, after he had stolen Apollo's oxen. On another one, the child Hermes is carried by Iris in her arms; she is bearing here the sign of the herald, the caduceus. The most portrayals of a divine child (paintings and sculptures) depict the child Dionysos, many times in Hermes' or Seilenos' arms, in those of a nymph or of Zeus himself. The Greeks used to place near the hearth portrayals of Hephaistos as a dwarf, which seem to be the oldest ones.<sup>31</sup> Examining the graphic representations and the literary descriptions of this god in Greece, Aterman<sup>32</sup>, on the footsteps of Marie Delcourt<sup>33</sup> and of C. Kerény<sup>34</sup>, finds out that his representations had made huge progress in time, passing from a lame child – because his twisted feet and heels make it impossible for him to walk – to a young lad with twisted feet and then to a mature and bearded man, physically normal, who travels either in a chariot, shoed with winged sandals, as the only sign of his abnormality, or even a stout and vigorous man, with no remarkable morphologic anomaly. M. Delcourt notices that on the archaic vases – the oldest representations – he is painted at his return to Olympus. He is accompanied by Dionysos and by other phallic characters and is, most often, «nain, impotent, contrefait. Jamais il n'apparaît vigoureux. Il ne porte primitivement aucun outil»<sup>35</sup>. Consequently, it seems to us that the actual Hephaistos, the Lydian, was a dwarf or a child, a symbol associated to the resurging sun, going up on the sky every morning, always young, like a «resurrected god». We believe that the creative imagination of man has completed the cycle, by subsequently creating the stout youngster and the bearded and decrepit old man. This is what happened with Hermes and with Dionysos. Another child which we find depicted on the antique monuments is Zeus: most images present the baby Zeus surrounded by Kouretes, which dance and hit their shields, or suckling the milk of the goat Amalthea. Let us not forget that this supreme god of the Greeks represents the sum of more gods and that, although Zeus is an essentially Indo-European god, he had englobed a local, chthonian Zeus, Zeus Meilichios (an epithet used for Dionysos, too) or Chthonios (an epithet of Hermes), a kind of Ploutos, also known as Kouros. He is a carrier of the Horn of Plenty. Before having become anthropomorphic, he had taken the shape of a bolt, of a bull, of a half-bull. In all these hypostases, he is depicted as a child. An example is the Minotaur-baby in Pasiphae's arms:

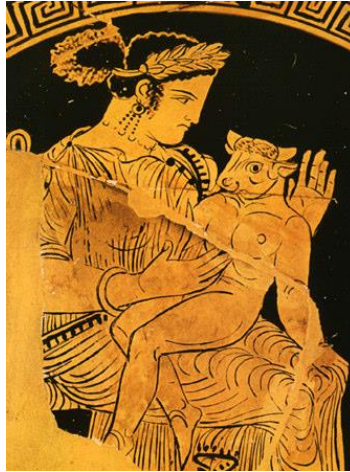
<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hdt., 3, 37; Aristoph., *Av.* 436; Callim. *Hymn. in Dian.* 60.

<sup>32</sup> K. Aterman, « Why did Hephaestus limp? », *Am. J. Med. Gen.*, 1999, 83, p. 53–63, *apud* Ph. Charlier, *Les Monstres humains dans l'Antiquité. Analyse paléopathologique*, Fayard, 2008, p. 162.

<sup>33</sup> M. Delcourt, *Héphaïstos ou la légende du magicien*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1957, p. 144.

<sup>34</sup> C. Kerény, *The Gods of the Greeks*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1951, p. 150–151 (« He is, however, shown as a child in the portrayals of him by the Etruscans, who must have got the prototypes for these from our ancient artists »).

<sup>35</sup> M. Delcourt, *op. cit.*, *ibid.*



Vase with red figurines, around 340 BC.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

We have therefore demonstrated that the pre-hellenic deities are gods that ensure the fertility, the cycle of vegetation (in close relationship with the cult of the dead and the underworld). I have noticed that, contrary to the other male gods, they are also depicted as **children**. On the other hand, they are, at the same time, either young beardless ephebes in full blossom, or bearded old men. In our opinion, these three hypostases are in perfect harmony with the cycle of the seasons, in which we can see nature in full strength, then withering and dying, just to resurge in spring, to grow in the form of buds, like little vegetal babies. This is also the case of the Minoan god Velchanos, who had left Crete as a supple willow and had gone to Italy, accompanied by his entire family, in the form of the vigorous Vulcan.

