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Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 137, No. 2 (Summer 2018), pp. 519-536

Published by: The Society of Biblical Literature

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15699/jbl.1372.2018.331667>

Accessed: 26-06-2018 18:34 UTC

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The Rider on the White Horse, the Thigh Inscription, and Apollo: Revelation 19:16

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This article proposes a solution to the puzzling thigh inscription of Rev 19:16, beginning with an examination of seven thigh inscriptions from antiquity, both statuary and literary. All but one of the inscriptions are dedicated to Apollo. I treat the thigh inscription of Rev 19:16 in light of possible images and allusions to Apollo in the Apocalypse. The saga of the celestial woman, the child, and Satan in Rev 12 emerges as a primary allusion to the Leto–Apollo–Python myth of antiquity. I consider secondary allusions to Apollo in relation to the defeat of Satan, the function of doxologies, oracle and revelation, and the imagery of the sun in the Apocalypse. I conclude that the inscription on the thigh of the rider on the white horse recapitulates the various terms and images reminiscent of the Apollo cult in the Apocalypse, which are perfected and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16).

Revelation 19:11–16 introduces a vision of a rider on a white horse in heaven. The rider is faithful and true, and he judges and wages war in righteousness. His eyes are flames of fire, and he is crowned with many crowns and clothed in a garment dipped in blood. He rides forth to execute the judgment of Almighty God, leading an army in heaven also riding white horses and clothed in white linen. A sharp sword issues from his mouth, which is interpreted in light of Ps 2:9, “he will shepherd them with an iron rod.” The rider bears a name known only to himself (19:12),¹ but he is called “the word of God” (19:13) and “upon his garment and upon his thigh is written the name, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’” (19:16).

I wish to thank Jonathan Moo, Roger Mohrlang, Will Kynes, Josh Leim, Margaret Schatkin, Christopher Synodinos, and two anonymous reviewers for their counsel in the preparation and publication of this article.

¹Biblical citations without a book name refer to Revelation. Unless otherwise noted, translations of inscriptions, original sources, and biblical material are my own.

The images of this descriptive collage were applied to Jesus earlier in the Apocalypse, including “Lord of lords and King of kings,” used with reference to him as the victorious Lamb of God (17:14). The rider is manifestly Jesus Christ. The one new image in this collage—an image that appears nowhere else in the New Testament—is the reference to the thigh inscribed with “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16). The thigh image is “an exegetical puzzle”² to interpreters of the Apocalypse, many of whom pass over it without comment. The lack of evidence with reference to the thigh has led to various speculations regarding its meaning. Patristic writers often interpret “thigh” allegorically as a reference to the posterity of Jesus, analogous to “all the souls that came with Jacob into Egypt, who came out of his thighs” (Gen 46:26).³ Modern scholars generally agree that the meaning is literal rather than allegorical but without consensus on the meaning of the image. Some suggest that the name is written at the place where the garment covers the thigh.⁴ Others take “thigh” as a metonym for “sword,” that is, the place where the sword is kept (Homer, *Il.* 1.190; *Od.* 11.231; Vergil, *Aen.* 10.788; Exod 32:27; Judg 3:16, 21; Ps 45:3; Cant 3:8).⁵ Somewhat similarly, David Aune suggests that thigh might refer to the haunch or hip of the horse rather than of its rider.⁶ These explanations largely dismiss thigh as a meaningful descriptive element in 19:16.

Interpreters who discuss thigh as a meaningful descriptive element differ widely. Ernst Lohmeyer thinks thigh is inspired by the Egyptian custom of inscribing the royal name on every limb.⁷ H. B. Swete speculates that the thigh inscription may imitate an “equestrian statue at Ephesus similarly inscribed.”⁸ G. K. Beale suggests that the name is hidden by the rider’s garment, invisible until the garment is “blown aside” as he rides past.⁹ Edmondo Lupieri acknowledges that a name on a

²So described by G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (London: Oliphants, 1974), 281.

³Arpingius of Beja, *Tract. Apoc.* (19:15–16), CCSL 107:74; Oecumenius, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, ed. Marc de Groote, TEG 8 (Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 244–45 on 19:15–16; Primasius, *Comm. Apoc.* (19:16), CCSL 92:268–69. See William C. Weinrich, *Revelation*, ACCS 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 313–14.

⁴E.g., Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1906; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 255; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 356.

⁵Among many others, G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 246–47.

⁶David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC 52C (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 1044. Julius Wellhausen (*Analyse der Offenbarung Johannis* [Berlin: Weidemann, 1907], 30) proposed a conjectural textual emendation of ἰμᾶτιον to ἵππον in 19:16 in support of such an interpretation.

⁷Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 2nd ed., HNT 16 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1953), 159–60. By way of analogy, Lohmeyer likens the thigh inscription to the indelible colored mark left by the impregnating serpent on the body of Atia, mother of Augustus (Suetonius, *Aug.* 94.4).

⁸So Swete, *Apocalypse of St John*, 255.

⁹G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 963.

thigh “evokes Hellenistic statuary” and tentatively posits that the inscription may be a *gemmadia*—mysterious letters that sometimes appear in paleo-Christian portraiture.¹⁰ Other commentators declare that ancient thigh inscriptions contain the name of the person represented.¹¹ In a recent article on Rev 19:16, Sheree Lear proposes that the thigh inscription recalls Gen 49:10.¹²

To date, no consensus has emerged regarding the meaning of thigh in 19:16.¹³ I propose a new solution to this puzzle. I begin by considering seven thigh inscriptions that have not previously been discussed in relation to 19:16. This evidence, both statuary and literary, reveals that thigh inscriptions, though rare, are dedicated to Apollo. Following examination of epigraphic evidence, I will consider Apollo

¹⁰Edmondo Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, trans. Maria Poggi Johnson and Adam Kamesar, Italian Texts and Studies on Religion and Society (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 306–7.

¹¹So Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 369: “John is reflecting the custom mentioned in some ancient inscriptions of statues that have on the thigh of the person the name of the individual represented”; and David Andrew Thomas, *Revelation 19 in Historical and Mythological Context*, StBibLit 118 (New York: Lang, 2008), 140: “it was typical practice to write the names of heroes and gods on the thighs of statues that were cast in their image.”

¹²Sheree Lear, “Revelation 19.16’s Inscribed Thigh: An Allusion to Gen 49.10b,” *NTS* 60 (2014): 280–85. The thesis of Lear’s article is, as its title indicates, that Rev 19:16 is an allusion to a Hebrew version of Gen 49:10. In her words, “it would appear that John was reading a text similar to the MT. The translation ‘inscribed on his thigh’ is a legitimate translation of the consonants we find represented in the MT” (284). The chief appeal of the argument is the translation of רגל as *μηρός* in Gen 49:10. The term *μηρός* occurs in Rev 19:16, but this agreement with Gen 49:10 is insufficient to prove a correlation between the two texts. Although *μηρός* is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, it occurs some thirty-five times in the LXX. The remainder of Lear’s article falls short of proving the proposed thesis. With reference to Gen 49:10b (ומחקק מבין רגליו), which Lear translates “Nor the commander’s staff from between his feet”), she argues that John “chose to interpret the participle מחקק with the meaning ‘inscribe’” (283). This seems extremely doubtful. In v. 10, מחקק, a masculine *polet* participle, functions as a noun, not a verb. Its use as a *qal* verb for “inscribe” occurs only four times in the MT by my count (Isa 30:8, 49:16, Ezek 4:1, 23:14), whereas its nominative form (חקק), whose function the participial form of the word fulfills in Gen 49:10, occurs 130 times in the MT in the sense of “rule” or “law.” This argues against John’s choosing to translate מחקק by a rare verb form, “inscribe.” If “inscribe” were admitted, a straightforward translation of 49:10b (MT) would be: “inscribed between his feet/legs.” Whatever the precise meaning of that phrase may be, it differs substantially from the LXX of Gen 49:10b (και ηγούμενος εκ των μηρών αυτού, “and a ruler from his thighs”), which Lear admits “also offers a legitimate Greek equivalent of what we see in the MT” (284). The LXX version of Gen 49:10b thus refers to procreation, and its MT version to legitimacy of rule, but neither approximates a name written on a thigh, which is the clear meaning of Rev 19:16.

¹³The substitution of “forehead” (μέτωπον) in 19:16 for “garment” (ἱμάτιον) in minuscules 1006 (eleventh century) and 1841 (ninth/tenth century) attempts, ostensibly, to harmonize the verse with the frequent references (eight times only in Revelation) to names written on *foreheads*. The paucity and lateness of textual witnesses for “forehead” do not commend this variant for serious consideration.

imagery and allusions in the Apocalypse. Apollo was the most famous son of Zeus, the most Greek of the gods, and one of the only Olympians to retain the same name in both Greek and Latin. From a moral perspective he was the most exemplary member of the Greek pantheon. His epithets as “Helper,” “Sun God,” “Oracle Giver,” and “Beneficent Revealer,” and above all his victorious conquest over Python correspond in various ways to attributes of Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse.¹⁴ On the basis of epigraphic evidence from ancient thigh inscriptions and the Apollo imagery in the Apocalypse, I conclude that the thigh inscription of 19:16, although enigmatic to subsequent readers and interpreters of the Apocalypse, would have signaled to John’s readers that the virtues enshrined in the cult of Apollo are consummated in Jesus Christ as the victorious rider on the white horse.

I. EVIDENCE OF THIGH INSCRIPTIONS FROM ANTIQUITY

Miletus Statue

In the newly completed museum at Miletus a life-sized torso (chest to knees) of realistic style and proportion, identified as Apollo, bears an inscription on its left thigh (fig. 1). The orthography of the inscription, with Π formed approximating an English “P” (P), for example, dates the inscription to no later than the fifth century BCE.¹⁵ Only a limited number of words of the inscription can be read with any degree of certainty. This is due, first, to the fact that the left leg of the statue is broken off at mid-thigh, which results in the loss of the inscription between the break and the knee. The complete text of the inscription is thus lost. Several extant letters are also too faint or corrupted to be deciphered with certainty. The inscription is further complicated by the fact that it is written from right to left. The inscription begins at the knee and reads leftward up toward the hip, at which point it makes a U-turn and continues leftward down toward the knee. The preserved letters thus represent the middle part of the inscription, with loss of the beginning and end of the inscription at the break above the knee. In order for the backward-written script to appear in proper Greek orthography, the inscription must be read from its reflection in a mirror.

¹⁴ Apollo’s favorable comparison with the Greek pantheon did not render him faultless, however. He, too, was complicit, if to a lesser extent, in the wrongdoings of the pantheon. Homer’s *Iliad* records Apollo delivering a cowardly blow to Patroclus from behind, wounding him so he could be slain by Hector (*Il.* 16.915–960); Oedipus blames Apollo for bringing “these my woes to pass, these my sore, sore woes,” which resulted in the misfortune of Thebes (Sophocles, *Oed. tyr.* 1329–1330); and Euripides recounts Apollo’s rape of helpless Creusa and abandonment of both her and the child born of his violation (*Ion*, 384–90).

¹⁵ For the formation of Greek letters prior to the fifth century BCE, see Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. Gordon Messing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), §2.

FIGURE 1. A life-sized torso (chest to knees), marble, lifelike in motif, identified tentatively by the museum as Apollo, inscribed on left thigh in only partially legible Greek, written right to left. Fifth century BCE. Miletus Museum, Turkey. Photograph by James R. Edwards, January 2014.



The inscription is transcribed and translated as follows:

... ΗΞΑΠΗΡΞΕΑΤΟ????
ΔΕΚΑΤΗΝΤΩΙΑΠ[ΟΛΛΩΝΙ]

... ηξάπήρξ(ε)ατο????
δεκάτηντῷ Ἀπ[όλλωνι]

... made an offering of ... a tithe to Ap[ollo].

The name of the putative donor of the offering and statue likely appeared in the lost letters. The votive nature of the inscription is evident from ἀπήρξ(ε)ατο and δεκάτην, and its dedication to Apollo, though not certain, is probable.

Claros Statue

A second thigh inscription appears on a statue at Claros (fig. 2), less than fifty miles north of Miletus. Like Didyma, to which Miletus was tethered by a ten-mile

Sacred Way, Claros was a celebrated oracle center of Apollo (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.54). The statue under consideration is one of two at Claros, both dated to the sixth century BCE. The statue with the inscribed thigh is also only a torso (navel to knees). The Claros statue is elongated, stylized, and less lifelike than its counterpart in Miletus. Two complete lines of text, and a remnant third, run from just below the waist down the left thigh to the knee. The orthography of the text is conventional—each line is written left to right, and each begins anew at the top of the inscription.

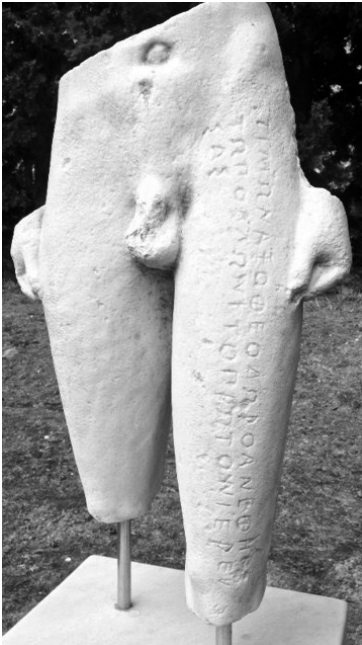


FIGURE 2. The Claros statue is a marble torso (navel to knees), elongated and stylized rather than lifelike, with clearly legible Greek lettering written conventionally from left to right. Sixth century BCE. Claros, Turkey. Photograph by Aydin Aygun, July 2015.

The inscription is transcribed and translated as follows:

ΤΙΜΩΝΑΞ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΟΝ ΑΝΕΘΗΚΕ
 ΤΩ ΠΟΛΛΩΝΙ ΤΟ ΠΡΩΤΟΝ ΙΕΡΕΥ
 ΣΑΣ

Τιμῶναξ ὁ Θεοδώρο ἀνέθηκε
 τῷ (Ἄ)πόλλωνι τὸ πρῶτον ἱερεύ
 σας.

Timonax, son of Theodorus, offered to Apollo the first sacrifice.¹⁶

¹⁶According to Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §1301, the “genitive of belonging” appropriately translates the first two names in the sense of ὁ [υἱὸς τοῦ] Θεοδώρου [υ] (“the son of Theodorus”). It is unclear whether τὸ πρῶτον intends *the* first sacrifice, or *his* (Timonax’s) first sacrifice. See again

Unlike its Miletian counterpart, the thigh inscription of Claros is complete and undamaged. Its donor is identified as Timonax, the name of Apollo (though contracted with its article) is assured, and *ἱερεῦσας* signifies a votive or priestly offering at the cult of Claros.

Mantiklos Statue

A third thigh inscription exists in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 3, p. 524). The statue on which it is inscribed was discovered in Thebes (Greece) in the 1890s, and is dated to 700–675 BCE.¹⁷ Unlike the previously mentioned statues, the MFA figure is not a life-sized marble torso remnant but a nearly complete bronze statuette of a standing nude male, twenty centimeters (eight inches) in height. W. Froehner knows no sculpture as old that equals the excellence of its artistry.¹⁸ The right arm of the statuette is missing, but the left arm is raised as if to hold a bow. The inscription, written in archaic Boeotian characters, appears on the front of both legs. The inscription begins at the right knee and reads up the thigh toward the waist, where it makes a broad U-turn down the left thigh to the knee. At the left knee, the inscription makes a sharp U-turn back up the left leg where another broad U-turn at the waist returns the inscription down to the right knee, where it ends. The inscription is thus a boustrophedon, that is, it “snakes”¹⁹ into an outer and inner horseshoe: the outer one written conventionally left to right, but the inner horseshoe, like the inscription on the Miletus statue, written in Greek letters facing and reading from right to left.

The inscription preserves the chief elements present in the Claros inscription—the name of the donor and a votive offering to Apollo, here signified by “Archer of the Silver Bow” (Homer, *Il.* 2.766) and his ancient epithet Φοῖβος, “Bright One.”²⁰

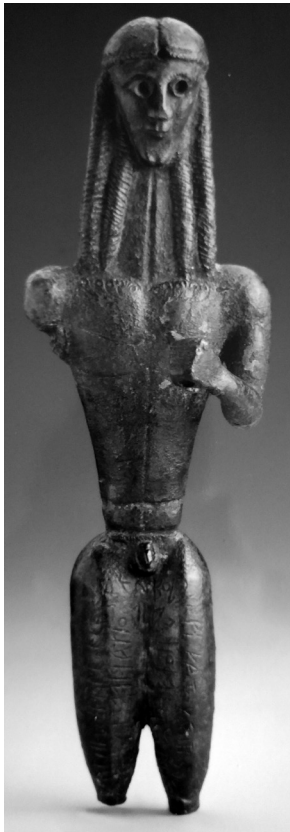
Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §1611. I am indebted to Dr. Christopher Synodinos for both of these references, as well as for references to secondary literature on the following Mantiklos inscription.

¹⁷W. Froehner, *Monuments et mémoires*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1894–1895), 2:137–43; Paul Friedländer, *Epigrammata: Greek Inscriptions in Verse from the Beginnings to the Persian Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), 38–39.

¹⁸Froehner, *Monuments et mémoires*, 140: “De tous les ouvrages archaïques qui nous sont connus, aucun, il faut l’avouer, ne répond exactement au type que je viens de décrire.”

¹⁹The German word for “boustrophedon” is *Schlangenschrift*, “serpentine script.”

²⁰See LSJ, s.v. “φοῖβος.”



The inscription is transcribed and translated as follows:²¹

ΜΑΝΤΙΚΛΟΣ ΜΑΝΕΘΕΚΕΦΕ
ΚΑΒΟΛΟΙΑΡΓΥΡΟΤΟΧΣΟΙΤ
ΑΣΔΕΚΑΤΑΣΤΥΔΕΦΟΙΒΕΔΙ
ΔΟΙΧΑΡΙΦΕΤΤΑΝΑΜΟΙ

Μάντικλός μ' ἀνέθηκε φεκαβόλοι ἀργυροτόχοι
τᾶς δεκάτας, τὸ δὲ φοῖβε δίδοι χαρίφετταν
ἀμοι[φάν].²²

Mantiklos donated me as an offering to the Archer of the Silver Bow; now you, Phoebus, grant a reward in return.

FIGURE 3. Mantiklos “Apollo.” Greek. Late Geometric or Early Orientalizing Period, about 700–675 B.C. Place of Manufacture: Boiotia, Thebes, Greece. Bronze. Greek, Etruscan, & Roman Bronzes (MFA), no. 015; Sculpture in Stone and Bronze (MFA), p. 118 (additional published references); Highlights: Classical Art (MFA), p. 047. Height: 20.3 cm (8 in.) Francis Bartlett Donation of 1900. 03.997. Photograph © 2018, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

²¹ Following the transcriptions of Froehner, *Monuments et mémoires*, 138; and Friedländer, *Epigrammata*, 39. The MFA web site (www.mfa.org/collections/object/mantiklos-apollo-152660) mistakenly doubles the *mu* in the final word.

²² Τύ is the Doric second-person singular nominative pronoun for σύ (Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §132 D). The first digamma (Ϝ) is a reduplication of augmented *εκαβόλοι* (*ibid.*, §122.b). Froehner seems right in rendering τᾶς δεκάτας as an indefinite offering, from spoils in war, for example (*Monuments et mémoires*, 139). Δίδοι (*ibid.*) is an imperative form employed by Pindar. The last two words pose the chief problem of the inscription. Χαρίφετταν is without analogy in ancient Greek. Since half the words in the inscription are known from Homer, Froehner (138–39) emends the reading to χαρίφισσαν, and the final word to ἀμοι[φάν], in conformity with *Od.* 3.58, δίδου χαρίεσσαν ἀμοιβήν ἀμοιβήν, “grant a reward.” Froehner’s emendation has been adopted by most classical scholars.

Statue Mentioned by Cicero

In his second speech prepared for the prosecution of Verres, a first-century BCE proconsul of Sicily, Cicero accuses his opponent of sacrilege and of crimes of theft, corruption, and extortion against the Roman people (*Verr. 2*). Verres had succeeded in remaining in office by evading similar charges on earlier occasions, but he was unable to withstand the speed and forensic skill of Cicero's case against him, which resulted in his conviction and banishment.²³ Among Cicero's charges against Verres was the "impious and abominable theft ... from the much-venerated temple of Aesculapius at Agrigentum, ... of a beautiful statue of Apollo, on whose thigh was inscribed the name of Myron in small silver letters" (*scelus illud furtumque nefarium ... Agrigento, ... signum Apollinis pulcherrimum, cuius in femore litteris minutis argenteis nomen Myronis erat inscriptum, ex Aesculapii religiosissimo fano sustulisti; Verr. 2.4.93*).²⁴ Like the three statues considered above, the figure referenced by Cicero was a statue of Apollo with an inscribed thigh, although which thigh is not specified. Cicero describes the statue as "a memorial of Scipio," which implies its votive nature. Cicero does not specify whether the inscription contained more than the name "Myron."²⁵

Statue Mentioned by Pausanias

A second literary reference to a thigh inscription comes from the second century CE. In approximately 175, the Greek traveler and geographer Pausanias, a native of Lydia, wrote what we today would call a travel guide on the history, topography, religions, mythologies, and monuments of important cities in Greece, as well as of some cities in Palestine, Egypt, and Italy (especially Rome). Pausanias's descriptions show a preference for the religious significance and associations of a site. In book 5 of his *Graeciae descriptio*, Pausanias discusses Elis, the main sanctuary of Zeus in Greece, in the northwest region of the Peloponnese that was dominated by Mount Olympia. The discussion of Elis contains a reference to "Apollo of Delphi" (5.27.1), who is subsequently called "the god of Delphi" (5.27.10). The ascription to Apollo is followed by mention of a statue of a fallen warrior "with an elegiac couplet written on its thigh: 'To Zeus, king of gods: the Mendean, who overpowered Sipte by the might of their hands, placed me here as a first-fruit'" (ἔλεγεῖον δὲ ἐπ' αὐτὸ γεγραμμένον ἔστιν ἐπὶ τοῦ μηροῦ· Ζηνὶ θεῶν βασιλεῖ μ')

²³ For a description of Cicero's spectacular defeat of the lawyers and orators marshaled by Verres, see Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 253–54.

²⁴ Text and translation from L. H. G. Greenwood, *Cicero: The Verrine Orations*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 396–97.

²⁵ The suggestions of Reddish and Thomas (see n. 11 above) that thigh inscriptions contained only names of individuals may derive from a generalization based on Cicero's report. My survey demonstrates that thigh inscriptions (including perhaps the one referenced by Cicero) typically contained text as well as names.

ἀκροθίνιον ἐνθάδ' ἔθηκαν Μενδαῖοι, Σίπτην χερσὶ βιασσάμενοι) (*Descr.* 5.27.12).²⁶ This is the only known thigh inscription that appears on a statue other than of Apollo, although, as noted, it occurs in the context of Apollo's oracular activity at Delphi. Like the other statues in its genre, the figure at Elis is a votive statue (referred to as ἀκροθίνιον rather than δεκάτας).

References to Thigh Inscriptions in Secondary Literature

Two further thigh inscriptions are referenced in Froehner's discussion of the Mantiklos statuette.²⁷ Similar to the Mantiklos inscription, the two are inscribed on both thighs of bronze statuettes. The first was located by Froehner in the "Museum of Berlin" (Pergamon?) and inscribed, [Δ]ειναγός[ρ]ης μ' ἀνέθηκεν ἐκὼς βόλωι Ἀπόλλωνι ("Deinagores donated me to the Archer Apollo"). The second, provenanced from the Temple of Ptoos in Egypt, bears the inscription [ἀργ]υρόχοιο ("To the Silver Bow [Bearer]") on the right thigh, and the names of its donors on the left, Πυθίας ὠκραιφ[τεύς] καὶ Ἀσχρίων (ἀν[ε]θ[έ]ταν) ("Donated by Pythia, the defender(?), and Aschrius"). The epithets "Archer" and "Silver Bow," as in the Mantiklos statuette, designate Apollo. "Pythia" in the second inscription likely designates the Pythian priestess of Apollo at Delphi.

Summary of Inscriptional Evidence

The foregoing summarizes all known thigh inscriptions from antiquity. The testimony of Cicero (*Verr.* 2.4.93) is frequently the lone evidence from Greco-Roman antiquity cited with reference to Rev 19:16. The conclusion typically drawn—that "names were inscribed in the thighs of statues of antiquity"²⁸—is, as the foregoing survey demonstrates, inaccurate. Thigh inscriptions are relatively rare in antiquity,²⁹ and they contain text in addition to names. A characteristic template

²⁶ See the text of W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod, *Pausanias II, Description of Greece*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 548–51.

²⁷ Froehner, *Monuments et mémoires*, 139–42.

²⁸ *EDNT* 2:425, s.v. "μηρός"; similarly, Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 159–60; Reddish, *Revelation*, 369; Thomas, *Revelation 19*, 140.

²⁹ The source most commonly referenced by commentators in support of the frequency of thigh inscriptions in antiquity is J. J. Wettstein, *H KAINH DIAΘΗKH: Novum Testamentum Graecum*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Ex Officina Dommeriana, 1752), 2:834. An examination of Wettstein with reference to 19:16 does not affirm the frequency of thigh inscriptions in antiquity, nor his intention to demonstrate such. Of Wettstein's seven references, one (Plutarch, *Per.* 21.2) refers not to a thigh inscription but rather to the Lacedaemonians who engrave on the forehead (μέτωπον) of a wolf their privilege of consulting the oracle of Delphi. Another (Musonius Rufus [first century CE], *T. I. Tab. XIV.1* [as cited by Wettstein]), also not a thigh inscription, refers to lettering on the cloak of a Roman officer that runs from the area covering the thigh down to that covering the shin. Of sources that refer to the leg, two (Anacreontea [first?/sixth century CE], mistaken by

of thigh inscriptions contains (1) the name of a donor, (2) who offers a “tithe” or “first sacrifice,” (3) in fulfillment of a vow to Apollo.

II. APOLLO IMAGERY IN REVELATION

If the thigh inscription of 19:16 were the only allusion to Apollo in the Apocalypse, it would be of doubtful significance for John’s readers. In order to be meaningful, the thigh inscription, like images of a similar nature such as “Jezebel” (2:20), “root” (5:5, 22:16), or various combinations of “twelve” (21:12, 4:4, 21:17, 7:4), would need either to be independently recognizable or to recapitulate prior elements in the narrative. In this section I wish to demonstrate that the thigh inscription of 19:16, which, as I have demonstrated above, typically referenced Apollo in Greco-Roman antiquity, recapitulates earlier allusions to Apollo in the Apocalypse.

Revelation 12

The most significant Apollo prototype in Revelation is the depiction in chapter 12 of the heavenly woman, who gives birth to a child and who is subsequently pursued to earth by a dragon. Chapter 12 is distinguished in the Apocalypse by its independent and “patently mythological narrative” structure.³⁰ It also repeats signature elements of the Hellenistic myth of Leto–Apollo–Python, which belonged to the common cultural stock of John’s readers in Roman Asia.

The celestial woman arrayed with the sun, whose footstool is the moon and whose head is crowned with stars, is in birth pangs. A powerful red dragon, its seven heads bedecked with diadems and its violent tail capable of sweeping a third of the stars from the sky, crouches before the woman to devour the child at birth. The woman gives birth to a son, whose destiny is to shepherd the nations with a rod of iron (Ps 2:9). Before the dragon can kill the boy, however, he is seized by God to his throne, and the woman flees to earth, where God has prepared a place for her in the desert. Michael and his angels defeat the dragon in battle and banish it from heaven, whereupon it flees to earth in pursuit of the woman, who is aided and

Wettstein for Anacreon [fourth century BCE], *Carmina Anacreontea* 50.1 and the scholia on Lucian [second century CE], *Ind.* 5) refer to the branding of horses on their haunches or hips. (These two references may account for the favoring of this interpretation by Wellhausen and Aune; see n. 6 above.) A single reference in Aristophanes (*Nub.* 122) refers to a crescent (σῆγμα) around the thigh (not an inscription on the thigh) of the Sapphorai. Wettstein also cites the report of Marcus Junianus Justinus (third century CE) 15.4.5, 9, of a figure of an anchor that appeared on the thighs of certain Seleucids from birth through childhood. This is not technically a thigh inscription, however, for it concerns a figure rather than letters. Only one of Wettstein’s sources refers to a thigh inscription, the citation from Pausanias discussed above.

³⁰David Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 674–75.

defended by the forces of nature. The cosmic drama ends with the dragon, frustrated in its schemes, plotting revenge against both woman and child. Revelation 12 is, of course, an allegory that is understandable and successful without reference to a mythic prototype. The woman is God's people in the churches of Asia Minor, the dragon is Satan, and the child is the Messiah.

Nevertheless, the warp and woof of Rev 12—the mortal struggle between the divine woman and evil dragon—preserve the same two mythic elements that are widespread in ancient mythology, especially in the Near East: two primordial beings and their allies—a protagonist representing order, virtue, and fertility and an antagonist representing chaos, destruction, and sterility—are locked in combat from the moment of creation. Creation myths throughout the ancient Near East preserve similar cosmic struggles: between Marduk and Tiamat or Gilgamesh and Humbaba in Babylonian mythology; between Baal and Yam (the sea) or Baal and Mot (Death), or YHWH and Rahab/Leviathan in Canaanite mythology; between Osiris and Set, or the sun god Re, to whom Pharaoh was assimilated in Egyptian mythology; and between Ouranos and Kronos, or between Zeus and Kronos, the Titans, and Giants in Greek mythology. Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest surviving religions of the ancient Near East, is defined by such cosmic dualism—good and wise Ahura Mazda in combat with a lying and evil archrival, the Druj.

The primordial dualism of light and darkness, good and evil, order and chaos was adopted, adapted, and adorned throughout ancient Near Eastern mythology. The dramatic *theomachies*—battles of the gods—depicted on the friezes of the Temple of Zeus at Pergamon or at the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias, for example, are visual tapestries of this same genre. A similar motif is present also in the Old Testament in the figure of YHWH as the divine warrior who executes just vengeance.³¹ A version of the “combat myth” that depicts many of the essentials of Rev 12 was preserved by the second-century Latin mythographer Hyginus in the myth of Leto–Apollo–Python.³² Although Hyginus postdated the Apocalypse by approximately

³¹ Among many texts, see Exod 15, Deut 33, Judg 5, Isa 24–27, Hab 3, Ps 68. On YHWH as divine warrior, see Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. and ed. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996; German original, 1965); Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult*, JSOTSup 41 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); and, most recently, Andrew R. Angel, *Chaos and the Son of Man: The Hebrew Chaaskampf Tradition in the Period 515 BCE to 200 CE*, LSTS 60 (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

³² Nothing is known of Hyginus's personal life (not even his full name). His *Fabulae*, written in approximately 200 CE, is an anthology of Greek and Roman myths in a low-quality Latin translation or paraphrase. The critical edition of Mauricius Schmidt, *Hygini Fabulae* (Jena: Libraria Maukiana, 1872) is based on a single manuscript copied and edited in Basel in 1535, which itself derived from a single manuscript of the same work dated to the ninth or tenth century. The Latin edition of Schmidt is translated and edited by Mary A. Grant, *The Myths of Hyginus*, University of Kansas Publications: Humanistic Studies 34 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, 1960). For assessments of Hyginus and his *Fabulae*, see Grant, *Myths of Hyginus*, 1–24; and H. J. Rose, “An Unrecognized Fragment of Hyginus' *Fabulae*,” *CIQ* 23 (1929): 96–99.

a century, he preserved in writing a version of the myth that contained earlier elements with which John would have been familiar.³³

Python, offspring of Terra, was a huge dragon who, before the time of Apollo, used to give oracular responses on Mount Parnassus. Death was fated to come to him from the offspring of Latona (Leto). At that time Jove (Zeus) lay with Latona, daughter of Polus (Coeus). When Juno (Hera) found this out, she decreed (?) that Latona should give birth at a place where the sun did not shine. When Python knew that Latona was pregnant by Jove, he followed her to kill her. But by order of Jove the wind Aquilo (Boreas) carried Latona away, and bore her to Neptune (Poseidon). He protected her, but in order not to make void Juno's decree, he took her to the island Ortygia, and covered the island with waves. When Python did not find her, he returned to Parnassus. But Neptune brought the island of Ortygia up to a higher position; it was later called the island of Delos. There Latona, clinging to an olive tree, bore Apollo and Diana (Artemis), to whom Vulcan (Hephaestus) gave arrows as gifts. Four days after they were born, Apollo exacted vengeance on his mother. For he went to Parnassus and slew Python with his arrows. (Because of this deed he is called Pythian.) He put Python's bones in a caldron, deposited them in his temple, and instituted the funeral games for him which are called Pythian.³⁴

The skeletal structure of Rev 12 is preserved in this myth. A virtuous woman at the point of giving birth is attacked by a powerful dragon intent on killing her and/or her son. A superior power enlists the forces of nature to aid the woman in escaping the machinations of the dragon. The abortive schemes of the dragon are thwarted, and the endangered child survives birth to fulfill his divine fate to slay the dragon.³⁵

³³See Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 139: "The conflict between the mother and dragon in Rev 12 most likely depends upon the Greek myth of Leto and Python.... However, as a whole the conflict between the dragon and divine figures in Revelation is an articulation of the ancient West Asian conflict topos, and these traditions were obviously compatible."

³⁴Hyginus 140 "Python," in Grant, *Myths of Hyginus*, 115–16. Joseph Eddy Fontenrose documents eight versions of the Python myth prior to Hyginus (Homeric Hymns, Simonides, Pseudo-Julian, Ovid, Euripides, Servius, Lactantius Placidus, and Lucan) (*Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959]).

³⁵Fontenrose offers a tenfold summary of his exhaustive study of ancient combat myths: The enemy (1) was of divine origin, (2) had a distinctive habitation, (3) had extraordinary appearance and properties, (4) was vicious and greedy, and (5) conspired against heaven; (6) a divine champion appeared to face and (7) fight the enemy; (8) the champion nearly lost the battle but (9) finally destroyed and (10) disposed of the enemy and celebrated his victory (*Python*, 9–11). Adela Yarbro Collins (*The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* [HDR 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976], 57–83), following the lead of Fontenrose, correlates the chief features of the Leto-child–Python myth with Rev 12 as follows: (1) dragon (v. 3), (2) chaos and disorder (v. 4a), (3) attack (v. 4b), (4) champion (v. 5a), (5) champion's "death" (v. 5b), (6) recovery of the champion (v. 7a), (7) battle renewed and victory (vv. 7b–9), (8) restoration and confirmation of order (vv. 10–12a), (9) dragon's reign (vv. 12b–17). Collins concludes, "The striking similarities between

The cult of Apollo flourished in the region to which John addressed the Apocalypse. On the southern circumference of the circuit of churches to which John wrote in Asia lay Didyma, home to the most important oracular cult of Apollo outside Delphi. A sacred area of Apollo had existed at Didyma from at least the eighth century BCE, prior to the first Ionian settlement there (Pausanias, *Descr.* 7.2.6). But in the third century BCE the Apollo cult in Asia grew to unprecedented proportions with construction of an immense Hellenistic temple at Didyma. Comprised of 120 columns sixty-five feet high and six-and-a-half feet in diameter, the temple (though never fully completed) was the third largest religious edifice in the Hellenistic world.³⁶ The Temple of Didyma attracted military and political luminaries of the Greco-Roman world, including Lysimachus, Augustus Caesar, and Trajan. Its spectacular construction nourished the memory of the Apollo cult throughout the Roman period, particularly in Asia. As noted earlier, a ten-mile Sacred Way linked the Temple of Apollo at Didyma to another Apollo cult site, the sanctuary of Apollo Delphinos in Miletus, which lay even closer to John's circuit of churches.

John's seven churches in Asia were in the immediate vicinity of the powerful purveyors of the Apollo cult at Didyma and Miletus. The inscribed thigh on a victorious rider of a white horse recapitulated in a single image the fuller narrative of the birth of the Messiah in Rev 12. The explicit citation in Rev 12 and 19 of Ps 2:9, "he will shepherd his people with a rod of iron," a text cited elsewhere in the Apocalypse only in 2:27, appears clearly to identify the messianic king born of the celestial woman in 12:5 with the rider on the white horse in 19:15.

Vanquisher of the Serpent Foe

Although chapter 12 is the fullest allusion to the Apollo myth in the Apocalypse, several further descriptions or images associated with Jesus Christ appear to recall particular characteristics of Apollo and his cult. The feat for which Apollo was most renowned was the slaying of Python, the dragon guardian of the sacred oracle at Delphi. The dragon was frightful and the contest grueling, but Apollo's unerring arrows won the victory. Importantly, *δράκων*, "dragon," which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, appears thirteen times in the Apocalypse with

Revelation 12 and the Python-Leto myth led to the conclusion that Revelation 12 is an adaptation of that myth" (83). Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 660-93) rightly finds some of Yarbro Collins's correlations forced but also rightly, in my judgment, affirms that "the version of the combat myth found in Rev 12 is closest to the Greek Leto-Apollo-Python myth" (712).

³⁶The Temple of Didyma was only slightly smaller than the Artemision in Ephesus and the Heraion on the island of Samos west of Ephesus. For a complete description of the history, plan, and archaeology of the Temple of Didyma, see Ekrem Akurgal, *Ancient Civilizations and Ruins of Turkey: From Prehistoric Times until the End of the Roman Empire*, trans. John Whybrow and Molly Emre, 10th ed. (Istanbul: Net Turistik Yayınlar San. Tic. A.Ş., 2007), 222-31.

reference to Satan. Seven of the occurrences are clustered in chap. 12. Christ as the rider on the white horse seizes the beast and false prophet who lead the world astray and hurls them into the lake of fire and burning sulfur (19:19–21), after which “the old serpent, who is the devil and Satan” (20:2) is “cast into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and false prophet are, and they shall be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10). The reference to “the old serpent, the devil, and Satan” (20:2) repeats the description of the dragon in 12:9 and is thus a distinctive link between the defeat of Satan in chapter 12 and the rider on the white horse in chapters 19–20. The Apollo–Python myth appears as a pilot analogy native to John’s Asian readers of the greater cosmic victory over Satan by Jesus Christ, “the King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16).

Doxologies

A principal characteristic of the Apollo cult was music and adoration. Apollo was the great musician of the Greek pantheon, entertaining the gods with his lyre or harp (κithάρα). He was frequently depicted in art with a laurel crown on his head and either stringed instrument or strung bow in hand. The crown and lyre are likewise associated with Jesus in Revelation. The Son of Man seated on a heavenly cloud wears a golden crown (στέφανος) on his head (14:14), and, as the rider on the white horse in chapter 19, there are “many crowns [διαδήματα] on his head” (19:12). Others also, such as the twenty-four elders, wear crowns, though not of gold. But they cast their crowns before the throne of God and the Lamb, singing, “You are holy, our Lord and God” (4:10–11). As the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, Jesus is extolled in thunderous praise, approximating “the sound of many waters and great thunder, and the sound I heard was the sound of harpists playing their harps” (14:2; further, 15:2–4). The triple repetition of κithάρα in 14:2 accentuates the adoration rendered the Lamb.

Processions to the temple or holy site of a Greek deity were typical of Greek festivals. Among the most prominent destinations of processions were oracular shrines of Apollo, the most esteemed oracular god of the Greek pantheon. The great festal processions “before the throne and the Lamb” (7:9) repeat on a grander scale the scenes of pagan choirs that processed annually to Apollo sanctuaries.³⁷ The processions of choirs before the Messiah are no longer localized at Didyma or Miletus or Claros, however, but now include “every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (4:7–11, 7:9–17, 13:7). They swell with “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” (μυριάδες μυριάδων και χιλιάδες χιλιάδων) who sing a *new* song to the Lamb, the Christ of God (5:8–13, 15:3–4). The hymn and ritual associated with

³⁷ See, e.g., the description in Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 180–82.

the cult of Apollo are in the Apocalypse devoted to Jesus Christ in fuller chorus and in universal scope.

Oracle and Revelation

Several offices of Apollo are likewise applied on a grander scale to Christ in the Apocalypse. Apollo's most important divine endowment was his oracular power, shunted through his cult sites and priestesses at Delphi, Didyma, Claros, and Miletus. As the son of Zeus, Apollo was the *magna vox* of the Greek pantheon—and as such second only to Zeus. Apollo's prophecies were communicated chiefly via oracles and music. John likewise assures readers that Jesus Christ is the unique and all-sufficient revealer of God. Jesus's prophecies, however, are communicated primarily in writing, as indicated by the sealed book in the right hand of the One who sits on the heavenly throne. This book cannot be opened by any mortal in heaven or on earth or under the earth. Only the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, is able to open the book and its seven seals (5:1–5). Two references immediately prior to the thigh inscription in 19:16 are relevant in this regard. The description of the witness of Jesus Christ as “the Spirit of Prophecy” (19:10, τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς προφητείας) is particularly reminiscent of Apollo's office as oracular revealer of the Greek pantheon. But, unlike Apollo, Jesus is not simply the revealer of God. He is the “Word of God” itself (19:13, ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ).

Light of the Sun

From the earliest days of the cult, Apollo was correlated with the sun, which was deemed an appropriate symbol for his purity and moral earnestness. This correlation frequently appears in numismatic images of Apollo. Sunlight, likewise, symbolizes the purity and holiness of Jesus Christ. In an opening description in the Apocalypse, the face of the celestial Christ “shines as the sun in its brilliance” (1:16). The concluding description of the new heaven and earth in the Apocalypse reports no need of the sun, for “the Lamb is its light” (21:23, 22:5), “the bright morning star” (22:16). Both of these descriptions are particularly reminiscent of “bright Apollo ... great god of glorious light” (Ovid, *Metam.* 1.450–453). Similarly, Φοῖβος, “Bright One,” was a common epithet of Apollo. Further correlations of Christ with the sun/brightness occur in 10:1, 12:1, 14:14, and 21:23, and most importantly in 19:17, immediately following the thigh inscription in the preceding verse.

Summary of Apollo Imagery in Revelation

The thigh inscription in 19:16 can be seen as a capstone image for a variety of Apollo allusions in the Apocalypse. Even if Apollo imagery is secondary to the load-bearing symbolism that draws on the history of Israel, it is not insignificant.

The primary locus of Apollo imagery is the saga of the celestial woman, messianic child, and dragon in chapter 12. Secondary allusions occur in the defeat of the dragon, doxologies, festal processions, prophecy and oracular powers, and references to the sun and light. All these images were associated with the Apollo cult. These same images are repeatedly transferred to Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse. Three of the images—prophecy, thigh inscription, and sun—are linked consecutively in 19:15–17. Further, the quotation of Ps 2:9 in 19:15 and 12:5 links Christ as the rider on the white horse with the vanquisher of Satan in chapter 12. Finally, the emphatic epithet—“the great dragon, the age-old serpent, who is called Devil and Satan and who leads the world astray” (12:9)—is repeated with similar emphasis in the context of the rider on the white horse in 20:2.

III. CONCLUSION

The thigh inscription of 19:16 is not an isolated and disconnected image in Revelation, but an apparent symbol recalling the Apollo cult prevalent in first-century Asia. The inscription on the thigh of the triumphant Christ, “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16), is the divine rejoinder to the inscription on the forehead of the great harlot and antichrist, “Babylon the great, the mother of the earth’s whores and abominations” (17:5). Although a forehead inscription is more prominent than a thigh inscription, it is not more significant, for the thigh is where a warrior’s sword was hung.³⁸ In her hubris, the great harlot attacks the Lamb, but the Lamb triumphs because he is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14). This is the name the rider on the white horse bears on his thigh (19:16). “King of kings and Lord of lords” is the ultimate epithet of the Messiah, for only where the Messiah is acknowledged as ruler of all kings, and of all lords and gods, is the Messiah properly glorified.³⁹

The Apocalypse is a graphic narrative drama in which the power of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, the Lamb and Messiah of God, overcomes sin, evil, and death in order to restore fallen and captive creation to a new heaven and earth. The new creation is symbolized by the descent of the new Jerusalem, into which are ushered the people, wealth, and glory of all history and nations (21:22–27). The new Jerusalem, which signifies the particular fulfillment of Israel’s salvation history, remarkably is empty of the temple, for the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are

³⁸Homer, *Il.* 1.190; *Od.* 11.231; Song 3:8. On “sword” and “rod of iron” as symbols of masculine sexual domination, see Christopher Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 85–92, who rightly concludes that in 19:15 eroticism is “entirely absent” from the symbols.

³⁹See Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 209.

themselves the temple (21:22). Nor is there a sun in the new Jerusalem, for the Lamb is the source of light (21:23). The new Jerusalem equally signifies the universal scope of the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ, for John repeatedly includes “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” in the purview of the Apocalypse (5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 14:6). The gentiles are now guided by the same light of the Lamb that guides Israel, for “the nations will walk by the light [of the Lamb], and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into [the city]” (21:24). The inscription on the thigh of the rider on the white horse appears as a graphic illustration of the Lamb-turned-victorious-Warrior fulfilling his sovereignty over the nations.⁴⁰ The various terms and images reminiscent of the Apollo cult that are preserved in the Apocalypse are perfected and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16).

⁴⁰ Similarly, *ibid.*, 172.