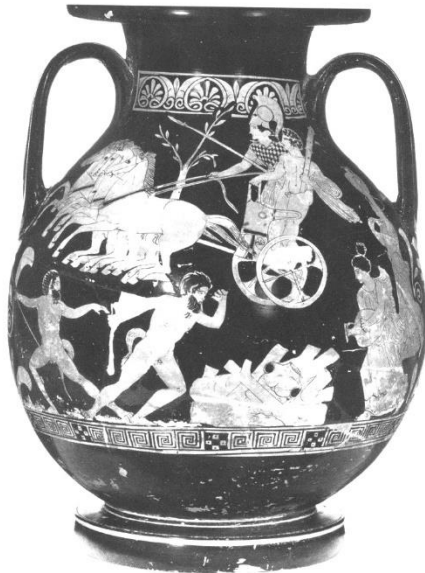


An ascension to heaven: the case of Sabina Poppaea, wife of Nero

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Herakles taken to heaven
by Athena on her chariot
Attic vase, ca. 410 BC



Prophet Elijah's
ascension to heaven
(cut from original painting)
Serbian painter, 18th century

Tetradrachm from Alexandria
Nero & Sabina Poppaea
AD 64/65
Roman Provincial Coinage I 5280



Short bibliography

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N.B.: a Masters' thesis was written in 2016 by an Italian student, Alberto Saccoccio, *Il papiro di Ossirinco 5105 e l'apoteosi di Poppaea Sabina: studio papirologico e filologico* (204 pages). It remains presently unpublished.

‘ . . .
 . . . of a fawn, and deep . . .
 . . . when they are upon (? . . .)
 . . . one of the . . . lynxes . . .
 5 . . . Arimaspean . . .
 . . . griffins followed . . .
 . . . shining gold dust . . .
 (. . . with the . . .) of the curb-chain she restrained the white . . .
 . . . lighted by the full-moon . . . cheeks . . .
 10 . . . when night blazes in response to far-seeing day.
 (She stood) in the porch . . .
 . . . Cyprus-born (Aphrodite) alone . . . the (fourfold) Seasons
 . . . and no one else ever set foot on the chariot
 Eros pushed back (the bolt), but she alone went through towards the . . . court;
 15 she found the lady . . . over the swelling of her belly;
 . . . month, she accomplished for Nero
 the . . . with respect; she instilled oblivion of wailing
 and said: “My child, stop crying and hurry up: with all their heart,
 Zeus’ stars welcome you and establish you on the moon
 20 whence . . . ruler. Fate has made
 you more . . . than marriage, you blessed one; your children for Nero
 you will guard for eternity . . .”
 Having thus spoken, (Aphrodite) led her by the hand; she was downcast and did not
 rejoice in the offered (favour). For she was leaving her husband, (a man) equal
 25 to the gods, and she moaned loudly from her longing. Standing on the rooftop, she spoke
 her last words, and brought pleasure about the house:
 “I did not burden the . . . throne, my husband, if I protected you
 . . .
 . . . sovereignty . . .
 30 . . . bedroom . . . I pressed . . . door . . .
 . . . wife . . . heaven . . .
 . . . utter . . . you did . . . jet (?) . . .
 . . . shining . . . opens . . .
 34 unpleasant (?) . . . child . . .
 . . .
 37 . . . you . . . staying.”
 . . . she spoke, and she opened the doors . . .
 . . . for the sake (?) of the lady . . .
 40 . . . , and the air . . . chariot
 . . . , and she . . . Nero
 . . . noble Auson

back

]ων ἴτις [
]οι· καὶ τέρμονες ὄμβ[ρ
 45]· χειμῶνα καλεῦ[
] καὶ φᾶν· [
]ι χάους [·]ν ἄλωες[
] ἡέρος ενθαμ· . ντ[
 κυμφερ· . [·]αις ψαφαραίς· ασα· [
 50 ἴστανται δοκί[δες τε μινυ]νθάδιός τε διάι[σων
 ἦιχι πίθιοι τε . . [· . . .]· φρέαρ ἦιχι τε λα[μπάδες
 . . ι . . . ι[·]ιπων[·]ολ[·]τεκμαρ[·]· τελλομ[εν-
 .] ὑπερ· . [· γ]λαυκώπιδος ἀντί ς[ελληνης
 Ἡελίου τ' ἀψίδα κ[αὶ ἀστέρα Κ]υ[λ]ληναίου
 55 Κύπρις ἐόν τ' ἠλαυνε παρ' Ἑσπερον· ἀλλ' ὄτ' [Ἄρηα
 ζώνην τ' Αἰγιοόχοιο Φέης τ' ἐπέρησεν ἀκοίτη[ν,
 ς]ύμβαλεν ἀπλανέεσσι, Θέμις δ' ἠπλωσεν· [
 .] ας· αἱ δ' ἀπέ[β]ησαν· ὄληι δ' ἠειδοῖν ἀπ[αντες
 ἀρμο]νίη· Μο[ύσαι] τε συνήντεον, οὐδ' ἐς [
 60 .]· η· α μέγαν β[λάστ]ησεν ἐπεὶ ζαθέοιο νέφ[ους ἕξ
 ο]υράναια εἶθ[· π]αρηΐσιν, ἀμφὶ δὲ μίτρη[ν
 χεῖτο . . ρη[·]· ον ἐπὶ θρόνον ἴζε μυδ[
 δεξιτερῆ[ι πάντες] δὲ γεγηθότες ἴζανον ἀ[μφίς
 δαίμονες· οὐδέ τι τερπνὸν ἐλείπετ[ο]· νε· [
 65 πατρὸς ἔδη· φοιβοὶ μὲν ἀποθρώσκοντε[ς
 ἀστῆρες, ἐς δύσιας δ' ἀέκων ὠλίθθανεν Ἄρ[ης·
 ἠ δὲ χορὸν μακάρων καθαρῆς ὑπένερθε[
 .]· [·]μένη θηεῖτο, δόκευε δὲ μή τις ἀκοίτη
 . . .] δεμο· . [· . .]· ν εὔχετο μέσφα κ· [
 70 .]· [· . .]· [· . .]π[·]γα . . ο . . . νθεον ἀλλ' ἐνέκυ[ρσ-
 .]· κ· ι [·]τι Νέρωνος ἐπει [
 ἔστε μὲν ηκ· ι· [· . .] . . . ηλυθ· ν ἔνθα· [
 ἐν]δέδεται Βορέηι πέρασ ἀξονος ἐνθεγ· [
 παπ]ταίνουσα σύν[ε]υνον ὑπὸ κνέφας· [
 75 . . .]· . . ον γλυκὺ φ[·]· ιαπλοον . . . ο· [
 . . .]· ροται . . . [· . . .]· εου σελα[
 . [· . .] ἄστροις αρ· [· . . .]· αι πρωτ[
 μαζόν, ὄσην . . . [·]· πλα[
 ἦ]ιθέων Βορέα[-
 80 τυτθὰ δὲ καλλιστ· [
 κείνωι Cιδόνιος κ[
 γν]ώσεται ἀφ· . . . [
 . .]· αγον αἰτήσουσι τ[
 . .]· ξεις δ' α . . α . . [

- . . . the rim of the . . .
 . . . and the boundaries . . . storm . . .
 45 . . . call winter . . .
 . . .
 . . . expanse . . . haloes . . .
 . . . air . . .
 . . . powdery . . .
 50 . . . meteors stand with the short-lived shooting-star
 where (there are?) jar-shaped comets, a . . . well and where meteors
 . . . boundless (?) . . .
 . . . in place of the green-gazed moon
 the Sun's orbit and the Cyllenaean star (= Mercury)
 55 Cypris (went beyond?), and drove past her Evening star (= Venus); but when she passed Mars,
 and the belt of the Aegis-bearer (= Jupiter) and Rhea's bedfellow (= Saturn),
 she met the fixed stars and Themis spread out . . .
 . . . they stepped down, and all sang in complete
 harmony, and the Muses joined them, nor . . .
 60 . . . he put forth a large . . . when, out of a divine cloud,
 . . . with heavenly cheeks, and around her girdle
 poured . . . sat her on a throne . . .
 on the right, and (all) the gods rejoicing sat (round about);
 nor was anything delightful left behind: . . .
 65 the father's abodes: the bright stars springing away . . .
 and (Mars) slipped under compulsion to the west.
 Under a clear (moon), the dance of the blessed (gods)
 she viewed . . . , but watched in case some . . . her husband
 . . . prayed until . . .
 70 . . . but . . .
 . . . Nero . . .
 until . . . came . . . where . . .
 the pole is fixed for Boreas, from where (the lady)
 looking around for her husband under the darkness . . .
 75 . . . sweet . . .
 . . .
 . . . stars . . . first . . .
 breast, . . .
 young . . . Boreas (? . . .)
 80 small . . . most beautiful . . .
 that . . . Sidonian . . .
 . . . will know . . .
 . . . will ask . . .
 . . . and you will . . . ?

Tacitus, *Annals* 16.6.1 (transl. C. Gillespie)¹

post finem ludicri Poppaea mortem obiit, fortuita mariti iracundia, a quo grauida ictu clacis adflicta est neque enim uenenum crediderim, quamuis quidam scriptores tradant, odio magis quam ex fide: quippe liberorum cupiens et amori uxoris obnoxius erat.

After the end of the games Poppaea met her death by the chance fury of her husband, by whom with a blow of the foot she was struck while pregnant, for I am not inclined to believe poison, although some authors (out of hatred more than faithfully) hand down that account: for indeed he was desirous of children and submissive to his love of his wife.

Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Astrologers* 7.111 (= Parmenides, fr. 28 B 1 Diels / Kranz = D4 Laks / Most [transl. L. / M.]

ἵπποι ταί με φέρουσιν, ὅσον τ' ἐπὶ θυμὸς ἰκάνοι, πέμπον, ἐπεὶ μ' ἐς ὁδὸν βήσαν πολύφημον ἀγούσαι δαίμονες, (...).

ἄξων δ' ἐν χνοίησιν ἴει σύριγγος αὐτὴν αἰθόμενος (...)

(...) ὅτε **σπερχοῖατο πέμπειν**

Ἡλιάδες κοῦραι, προλιποῦσαι δώματα Νυκτός, εἰς φάος, ὠσάμεναι κράτων ἄπο χειρῶν καλύπτρας.

καί με θεὰ πρόφρων ὑπεδέξατο, χεῖρα δὲ χειρὶ δεξιτερῆν ἔλεν, ὠδε δ' ἔπος φάτο καί με προσηύδα· ὦ κοῦρ' ἀθανάτοισι συνάορος ἠνιόχοισιν, ἵπποις ταί σε φέρουσιν ἰκάνων ἡμέτερον δῶ, χαῖρ', ἐπεὶ οὔτι σε μοῖρα κακὴ προὔπεμπε νέεσθαι τήνδ' ὁδὸν (ἧ γὰρ ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων ἐκτὸς πάτου ἐστίν), ἀλλὰ θέμις τε δίκη τε. χρεὼ δέ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι ἡμὲν Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἀτρεμέσ ἤτορ ἧδὲ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἐνὶ πίστις ἀληθῆς. (...)

The mares that carry me as far as ardor might go were bringing me onward, after having led me and set me down on the divinity's many-worded road (...).

The axle in the naves emitted a whistle of a flute as it was heated (...), while **the maidens of the Sun hastened to bring me**, after they had left behind the palace of Night towards the light and had pushed back the veils from their heads with their hands. (...)

And **the goddess welcomed me graciously**, took my right hand in her own hand, and spoke these words, addressing me: 'Young man, **companion of deathless charioteers**, you who have come to our home by the mares that carry you, I greet you: for it is no evil fate that has sent you to travel this road (for indeed it is remote from the paths of men), but Right and Justice. It is necessary that you learn everything, both the unshakeable heart of well-convincing truth and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true belief.' (...)

2 Kings 2.11 (transl. *New Revised Standard Version*)

As they continued walking and talking, **a chariot of fire and horses of fire** separated the two of them, and **Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven**.

Douris, FGrH 76 F 71.26 (= Plutarch, *Life of Lysander* 18.3)

πρώτῳ μὲν γάρ, ὡς ἱστορεῖ Δοῦρις, Ἑλλήνων ἐκείνῳ βωμοὺς αἱ πόλεις ἀνέστησαν ὡς θεῷ καὶ θυσίας ἔθυσαν, εἰς πρότον δὲ παιᾶνε ἤσθησαν (...)

(Lysander) was the first among the Greeks – as reported by Douris – for whom the cities built altars **as if for a god**, and performed sacrifices. He was the first to whom they sang paeans (...).

Theocritus 15.106-108 (transl. N. Hopkinson)

Κύπρι Διωναία, τὴ μὲν ἀθανάταν ἀπὸ θνατᾶς, ἀνθρώπων ὡς μῦθος, ἐποίησας Βερενίκαν, ἀμβροσίαν ἐς στήθος ἀποστάξασα γυναικός.

Cyprian goddess, daughter of Dione, it is said that you changed Berenike **from mortal to immortal**, with **drops of ambrosia on her breast**.

Theocritus 17.34-50 (transl. N. Hopkinson)

Οἷα δ' ἐν πινυταῖσι περικλειτὰ Βερενίκα ἔπρεπε θηλυτέρης, ὄφελος μέγα γειναμένοισι. τᾶ μὲν Κύπρον ἔχοισα Διώνας πότνια κοῦρα κόλπον ἐς εὐώδη βράδινᾶς ἐσεμάξατο χεῖρας· τῷ οὔπω τινὰ φαντὶ ἀδεῖν τόσον ἀνδρὶ γυναικῶν ὅσον περ Πτολεμαῖος ἐὴν ἐφίλησεν ἄκοιτιν. ἧ μὰν ἀντεφιλείτο πολὺ πλέον. ὠδὲ κε παισὶ θαρσῆσας σφετέροισιν ἐπιτρέπει οἶκον ἅπαντα, ὅπποτε κεν φιλέων βάλνη λέχος ἐς φιλεούσης· ἀστόργου δὲ γυναικός ἐπ' ἄλλοτρίῳ νόος αἰεὶ, ῥήϊδιοι δὲ γοναί, τέκνα δ' οὐ ποτεοικότα πατρὶ.

As for renowned Berenike – how she stood out among women of good sense, a great asset to her parents! The revered daughter of Dione, **the Cyprian goddess**, pressed her slender hands upon Berenike's fragrant breast. For that reason, it is said, no woman has ever pleased her husband so much as Ptolemy loved his wife; and indeed she loved him far more deeply in return. When a loving husband sleeps with a loving wife in this way, he can with confidence hand on his whole estate to his children, but a woman without

¹ The same story is also told by Suetonius, *Nero* 35.5 and Dio 62.27.5.

κάλλει ἀριστεύουσα θεῶν πόντῳ Ἀφροδίτα,
σοὶ τήνα μεμέλητο· σέθεν δ' ἔνεκεν Βερενίκα
εὐειδῆς Ἀχέροντα πολύστονον οὐκ ἐπέρασεν,
ἀλλὰ μιν ἀρπάξασα, πάροισ' ἐπὶ νῆα κατελθεῖν
κυανέαν καὶ στυγρὸν αἶψα πορθμῆα καμόντων,
ἐς ναὸν κατέθηκας, ἑᾶς δ' ἀπεδάσασα τιμᾶς.

affection is constantly thinking of another man and gives birth easily to children who bear no resemblance to their father. **Aphrodite, queen of goddesses, first in beauty, you cared for this woman,** and it was due to you that the lovely Berenike did not cross over Acheron, the river of lamentation: **you snatched her up before she came to the black boat and its ever-grim ferryman, placed her in your temple, and granted her a share in your own honors.**

Acts of the Apostles 1.9-11 (transl. New Revised Standard Version)

καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν βλέπόντων αὐτῶν ἐπήρθη, καὶ
νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν.

When he had said this, as they were watching, **he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.**

καὶ ὡς ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν πορευομένου
αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο παρειστήκεισαν αὐτοῖς ἐν
ἑσθήσεσι λευκαῖς,

While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

οἱ καὶ εἶπαν, Ἄνδρες Γαλιλαῖοι, τί ἐστήκατε
βλέποντες εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ
ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ' ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οὕτως
ἐλεύσεται ὃν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς
τὸν οὐρανόν.'

They said: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

*Ascension of Jesus, Rabula Gospels
(VI AD, Syria; Florence,
Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana;
cut from original painting).
Note the winged chariot!*



Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus* 13 (transl. A.M. Harmon)

πεπεῖκασι γὰρ αὐτοὺς οἱ κακοδαίμονες τὸ
μὲν ὄλον ἀθάνατοι ἔσσεσθαι καὶ βιώσεσθαι τὸν αἰ
χρόνον, παρ' ὃ καὶ καταφρονοῦσιν τοῦ θανάτου καὶ
ἐκόντες αὐτοὺς ἐπιτιμᾶσθαι οἱ πολλοί. ἔπειτα δὲ ὁ
νομοθέτης ὁ πρῶτος ἔπεισεν αὐτοὺς ὡς ἀδελφοὶ
πάντες εἶεν ἀλλήλων, ἐπειδὴν ἅπαξ παραβάντες
θεοῦ μὲν τοὺς Ἑλληνικοὺς ἀπαρνήσωσιν, τὸν δὲ
ἀνεσκολοπισμένον ἐκείνον σοφιστὴν αὐτὸν
προσκυνῶσιν καὶ κατὰ τοὺς ἐκείνου νόμους βιώσιν.
καταφρονοῦσιν οὖν ἀπάντων ἐξ ἴσης καὶ κοινὰ
ἡγοῦνται, ἄνευ τινὸς ἀκριβοῦς πίστεως τὰ τοιαῦτα
παραδεξάμενοι. ἦν τοίνυν παρέλθη τις εἰς αὐτοὺς
γότης καὶ τεχνίτης ἄνθρωπος καὶ πράγμασιν χρῆσθαι
δυνάμενος, αὐτίκα μάλα πλοῦσιος ἐν βραχεὶ ἐγένετο
ιδιώταις ἀνθρώποις ἐγγχεῶν.

The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.

Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus* 39 (transl. A.M. Harmon)

Ἔνθα δὴ, ὦ ἑταῖρε, μυρία πράγματα εἶχον ἅπασι
διηγούμενος καὶ ἀνακρίνουσιν καὶ ἀκριβῶς
ἐκπυθνομένοις. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἴδοιμι τινα χαριεντα,
ψιλὰ ἂν ὡσπερ σοὶ τὰ πραχθέντα διηγούμενην, πρὸς δὲ
τοὺς βλάκας καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἀκρόασιν κερηνότας

In that business, I assure you, my friend, I had no end of trouble, telling the story to all while they asked questions and sought exact information. Whenever I noticed a man of taste, I would tell him the facts without embellishment, as I have to

ἐτραγώδουν τι παρ' ἑμαυτοῦ, ὡς ἐπειδὴ ἀνήφθη μὲν ἡ πυρά, ἐνέβαλεν δὲ φέρων ἑαυτὸν ὁ Πρωτεύς, σεισμοῦ πρότερον μεγάλου γενομένου σὺν μυκηθμῷ τῆς γῆς, γύψ ἀναπτάμενος ἐκ μέσης τῆς φλογὸς οἶχοντο ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνθρωπιστὶ μεγάλη τῇ φωνῇ λέγων

ἔλιπον γὰν, βαίνω δ' ἐς Ὀλυμπον.

ἐκεῖνοι μὲν οὖν ἐπεθήπεσαν καὶ προσεκύουον ὑποφρίττοντες καὶ ἀνέκρινόν με πότερον πρὸς ἔω ἢ πρὸς δυσμᾶς ἐνεχθείη ὁ γύψ· ἐγὼ δὲ τὸ ἐπελθὼν ἀπεκρινάμην αὐτοῖς.

you; but for the benefit of the dullards, agog to listen, I would thicken the plot a bit on my own account, saying that when the pyre was kindled and Proteus flung himself bodily in, a great earthquake first took place, accompanied by a bellowing of the ground, and **then a vulture, flying up out of the midst of the flames, went off to heaven, saying, in human speech, with a loud voice: 'I am through with the earth; to Olympus I fare.'** They were wonder-struck and blessed themselves with a shudder, and asked me whether the vulture sped eastwards or westwards; I made them whatever reply occurred to me.

Various accounts of domestic violence, with kicks in the belly and ensuing death

- Cambyses: Herodotus 3.32.4
- Periander: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers* 1.94
- Chaereas: Chariton of Aphrodisias, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 1.4.12 [near-death]
- Herodes Atticus: Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 555 (Olearius)

Sabina Poppaea and Nero, depicted both as a loving couple and in a scene of domestic violence.

Woodcut illustration, German translation by Heinrich Steinhöwel of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, printed by Johannes Zainer at Ulm ca. 1474.

