

*Embodying the divine: herms in Greek vase-painting*¹

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Historians and archaeologists have long been interested in the Greek hermaic pillar. However, several aspects of this topic can still be refined. The usual questions about these monuments bear on their origin, their signification and their function. Many works have already addressed the question of the origin of the hermaic form, which is rather clear today². But some uncertainties remain about the role, the signification and, in particular, about the function of herms: were they divine images, cult images of the god Hermes, or only boundary markers?

If we turn to ancient texts, some points can be noted: firstly, what we call “a herm” is a monument mainly characterized by its rectangular form (τετράγωνος). Secondly, it is not only a statue, but also an offering, as proved by the terms used to label it, ἄγαλμα and ἀνάθημα. Thirdly, this statue is most of the time simply designated by the word ἑρμῆς, especially by the traveler Pausanias, who is perfectly consistent, in this case, with his usual manner to evoke divine images by the name of the god they represent. The link between herms and Hermes seems clear. But are we sure that every herm must be considered as an image of Hermes? Is he the only god to be represented in this shape? Moreover, what was the status of these monuments, in relation with other divine images and in particular with other Hermes’ images?

Hermaic pillars are frequently represented on Greek vases: more than 200 occurrences are attested. Such a profusion cannot be a coincidence and it invites us to incorporate iconographical evidence in our investigation. Representations can be divided into two main categories: images from the first group show a “sacrificial” scene, with several figures around a herm; images of the second group present a face-to-face encounter between a human and a herm, and evoke rather a “prayer” ritual.

Classifying and analyzing this important corpus from a new perspective should help clarify some points about the meaning of herms. Vase-painting leads us to think that a hermaic pillar, precisely because it is closely linked to the god Hermes, can be conceived as an efficient tool for communicating with the divine. In this perspective, herms assume a double status: as a monument, this is a “space marker”; like the altar, to which it is often associated, the herm organizes and characterizes the area in which it presents itself. As a divine image, it makes the divine present and transforms the space where it appears as a favorable place for establishing contact with the gods. Accordingly, this paper will show that, even if it was originally a milestone, the herm was quickly perceived and used as a ritual instrument, fostering communication between the human and the divine spheres.

¹ This study is part of my PhD thesis entitled « Montrer l'invisible. Recherches sur la mise en image de la présence divine dans la céramique grecque », pursued under the direction of Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge (Université de Liège) and François Lissarrague (EHESS-Paris).

² See e.g. R. OSBORNE, The Erection and Mutilation of the Hermai, *PCPhS* 211 (1985) 47-73; G. SIEBERT, Hermes, *LIMC* V (1990) 375-377.