



# Pausanias Tries to Visualize the Three 'Graces' of Orkhomenos in Boeotia

## Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2021.03.20. "Pausanias tries to visualize the three 'Graces' of Orkhomenos in Boeotia." Classical Inquiries. [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical\\_Inquiries](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries).

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# Pausanias tries to visualize the three ‘Graces’ of Orkhomenos in Boeotia

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MARCH 20, 2021 | By Gregory Nagy

2021.03.20 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. I focus here on a moment in history when the traveler Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE, visited the proud old city of Orkhomenos in the region of Boeotia. As we read in his report of that visit, he took a special interest in the traditional myths and rituals of the city’s inhabitants concerning goddesses worshipped there as the three *Kharites* or ‘Graces’. But how to visualize these goddesses? Pausanias experiences some difficulties here, as we will see. For one thing, the local population worships these goddesses in the form of three stones, quite bare and unadorned. As Pausanias reports (9.38.1), the natives of Orkhomenos say that these three stones had once upon a time fallen down to earth from the sky above. And so, as Pausanias observes (9.35.3), the question arises: why are there three such stones, three such ‘Graces’? And why was Pausanias, as he also observes (9.35.1), not told what names the local population might have in mind for each one of these three goddesses? To complicate matters further, Pausanias makes this additional observation about visualizing the ‘Graces’ of Orkhomenos in the form of three bare and unadorned stones: this aniconic visualization, he says (9.35.6–7), coexisted with alternative representations, both in sculptures and paintings, where these same goddesses are seen in the act of dancing naked with one another. At least, that was the case in the era of Pausanias, though our traveler adds (again, 9.35.6–7) that he knows of other sculptures and paintings attested in other places—and such works of art are sometimes older in

date—where the ‘Graces’ are shown not naked but adorned in resplendent drapery. What, then, are we to make of such alternative visualizations?



William Etty (1787–1849), *The Three Graces*. Glasgow Museums, inv. no. 443. **Image** via Glasgow Museums, used under the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.



Fresco from Pompeii, House of T. Dentatus Panthera: Three Graces with myrtle blossoms. Now in Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. no. 9236. **Image** via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. In a previous essay (Nagy 2021.03.06, linked [here](#)), I focused on a song composed by Pindar, who lived in the first half of the fifth century BCE, where the *Kharites* or ‘Graces’ of this same locale, Orkhomenos in Boeotia, are pictured as gracefully singing and dancing in a choral mode of song and dance known in Greek as the *khoros*. This song of Pindar, *Olympian*

14, was a choral performance celebrating the athletic victory of a young man from Boeotian Orkhomenos who had competed and won in the stadium-length footrace at the Olympics; the precise date of the Olympic year is in this case not known, but the general dating takes us back, in any case, to the early fifth century BCE—over six centuries before Pausanias. And I emphasize here a central assumption that is made quite clear in the wording of Pindar’s song—an assumption that is most relevant to the problems faced by Pausanias in his attempts at visualizing the ‘Graces’ of Boeotian Orkhomenos. As I showed in my previous essay (again, linked [here](#)), Pindar’s song pictures the ‘Graces’ as the divine regulators and ultimate models for the choral singing-and-dancing of the gods themselves, who are in turn the idealizing models for all choral performance, as we read in the wording of Pindar (lines 7–8): οὐδὲ γὰρ θεοὶ σεμνᾶν Χαρίτων ἄτερ | κοιρανέοντι χοροῦς ‘not even the gods can do without the sacred Graces [*Kharites*] in presiding-over ensembles of song-and-dance [*khoroï*]’.

§2. In my essay here, I return to such a graceful picturing of the ‘Graces’. And I will go further, by recalling other moments in the travels of Pausanias to other places where he too has encountered further variations on this theme of the ‘Graces’. One such moment stands out: it is when Pausanias, during his visit to Elis, site of the Olympics, fixes his gaze on a set of statues representing the three *Kharites* or ‘Graces’ (6.24.6–7) and engages in a reverie about the beauty and the pleasure radiating from these ‘Graces’, resplendent in their full bloom of youth. In this case, as I show in a previous essay (Nagy 2021.01.09, linked [here](#)), Pausanias goes out of his way to highlight the fact that two of these three goddess are actually holding flowers in bloom. As we will soon see, even the meaning of the noun *kharites* as ‘graces’ is relevant here, since this meaning can modulate into an actual visualization of flowers in bloom, occasionally plaited into garlands. There are many examples where the visual arts, both ancient and beyond, revel in the floral beauty of the ‘Graces’, and the colors red or white tend to predominate. These two colors, as we will also soon see, are relevant to the linking of the ‘Graces’ with flowers and with garlands made by way of plaiting flowers.



18th-century aquatint after Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini (1675-1741), *Les trois Graces* (*The Three Graces*). Two of the three Graces pictured here are holding blossoms, colored red on our left and white on our right. British Museum, inv. no. 1901,0417.71. **Image** © Trustees of the British Museum, used under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.



Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865), *Three Graces Garlanded with Roses*, 1856. Private collection. **Image** via Wikimedia Commons.

§3. Here I return to what Pausanias is saying about the ‘Graces’ of Boeotian Orkhomenos. I start with a detail: Pausanias reports that the custom of worshipping these goddesses known as



the *Kharites* or ‘Graces’ was begun at Orkhomenos in Boeotia, according to the local myths, and that the first worshipper was a hero named Eteokles, a prototypical king of the city. Although Pausanias seldom uses first-person forms for self-reference in his writings about his travels, he feels moved to say in this exceptional case: παρὰ δὲ Ἐτεοκλέους τοῦ Ὀρχομενίου μαθόντες τρισὶν ἤδη νομίζομεν Χάρισιν εὐχέσθαι ‘It was from Eteokles of Orkhomenos that we by now have-the-custom [*nomizein*] of praying [*eukhesthai*] to three Graces [*Kharites*]’ (9.35.3). So, ‘we’ Greek-speaking people in ‘our’ own historical time traditionally pray to specifically three *Kharites* when we pray to the ‘Graces’. In the context of this reportage, however, Pausanias mentions other cases linked with locales other than Boeotian Orkhomenos where these ‘Graces’ are visualized as specifically two in number, not three (9.35.1–2); and there are still other cases where only a single ‘Grace’ or *Kharis* makes her divine presence felt (9.35.4–5). Nevertheless, Pausanias emphasizes that the *Kharites* of Orkhomenos, according to the local population, were the first ‘Graces’ ever to be worshipped by humans, since the prototypical king Eteokles of Orkhomenos was the first human ever to sacrifice to them: τὸν δὲ Ἐτεοκλέα λέγουσιν οἱ Βοιωτοὶ Χάρισιν ἀνθρώπων θῦσαι πρῶτον ‘The Boeotians say that Eteokles was the first human to sacrifice [*thuein*] to the Graces [*Kharites*]’ (9.35.1). And the *hieron* or ‘sanctuary’ where the ‘Graces’ are worshipped, Pausanias adds, is the oldest of all the sanctuaries in the city: τὸ δὲ ἀρχαιότατον Χαρίτων ἐστὶν ἱερόν ‘the oldest sanctuary [*hieron*] in the city is that of the Graces [*Kharites*]’ (9.38.1). So, by inference, the prototypical situation of the *Kharites* in Boeotian Orkhomenos leads Pausanias to accept the primacy of these local goddesses as the definitive version, as it were, of the Panhellenic idea of the *Kharites* or ‘Graces’ to whom all Hellenes—that is, all of ‘us Greeks’ in the era of Pausanias—can and do pray.

§4. Pausanias, in highlighting some Panhellenic aspects of the three *Kharites*, especially in terms of their triadic presence in Boeotian Orkhomenos, did not mention—and possibly did not even notice—the relevant evidence to be found in the wording of Pindar’s *Olympian* 14, where the numbering of the three ‘Graces’ is presented as an essential feature of the local goddesses of Boeotian Orkhomenos as divine models for the choral singing and dancing that symbolizes the idea of social integration as celebrated by Pindar’s victory ode. I return here to a relevant argument I presented in my previous essay, already cited (Nagy 2021.03.06, linked [here](#)): the word *kharis*, personified in Pindar’s *Olympian* 14 by the three goddesses known as the *Kharites*, actually refers to the beauty and the pleasure that derive from social integration—as symbolized by the choral song that is being performed in praise of the local athlete whose victory at the Olympics is now being celebrated in his own city, Boeotian Orkhomenos. As I also argued in my previous essay, even the naming of the three ‘Graces’ in *Olympian* 14 as

*Aglaíā* (Ἀγλαΐα), *Euphrosúnā* (Εὐφροσύνα), and *Thalíā* (Θαλία) at lines 13, 14, and 15 of Pindar’s song, together with their epithets, is an additional way of referring to the beauty and the pleasure of the choral performance that symbolizes the social integration that is signaled by the word *kharis* and by the tripartite personification of this word in the divine personages of the three ‘Graces’. When Pausanias (9.35.5), by contrast, refers to the three ‘Graces’ or *Kharites* in the Hesiodic *Theogony*, line 907 (Χάριτας, in the accusative), he is interested simply in the fact that all three are given names at line 909 there: *Aglaíē*, *Euphrosúnē*, and *Thalíē* (Ἀγλαΐην / Εὐφροσύνη / Θαλίην, all in the accusative). But he does not consider the symbolism of such names in the context of local celebrations, as for example brought to life in Pindar’s *Olympian* 14, where we can see clearly that the meanings of these divine names, just like the meaning of the word *kharis* itself, are relevant to the actual worshipping of these goddesses as models of social integration. In the Hesiodic mention of the three ‘Graces’, by contrast, all we see on the surface is the beauty and the pleasure that is personified by the names of the three goddesses, without the “local color.”

§5. In other contexts, however, Pausanias does in fact clearly see the “local color” that is potentially linked to the worship of the *Kharites*—even where these goddesses are not named individually for the sake of further personifying the idea of *kharis* as the beauty and the pleasure that emanate from local celebrations in song and dance. A case in point is what Pausanias saw when he visited Olympia, where the statues of the three ‘Graces’ displayed in the public space of Elis caught his attention (6.24.6–7). At §2 above, I already mentioned this moment in the reportage of Pausanias, referring to a previous essay of mine (Nagy 2021.01.09, linked [here](#)), but now I elaborate further, repeating what I argued at §14 in the previous essay I just cited.

§6. As Pausanias says (6.24.6–7), the statues of the *Kharites* or ‘Graces’ that he sees in the agora of the people of Elis are linked with roses and myrtles, since one of the three ‘Graces’ is represented as holding a rose while another of the three is holding a spray of myrtle. In the case of the *mursínē* or ‘myrtle’, as Pausanias calls it, I find it significant that the word *kharis* itself, which applies generically in this context to each one of the three ‘Graces’, can apply in other contexts specifically to the flower of the myrtle-tree. I quote from Scholia D (via Scholia A) for *Iliad* 17.51: Μακεδόνες δὲ καὶ Κύπριοι χάριτας λέγουσι τὰς συνεστραμμένας καὶ οὐλας μυρσίνας, ἄς φαμὲν στεφανίτιδας ‘Macedonians and Cypriotes use the word *kharites* [= plural of *kharis*] with reference to myrtle blossoms that are compacted and curled [around a garland]. We call them garland-blossoms [*stephanitides*]’ (from my MoM 4§§144–146; further

comments in HPC II§424 pp. 295–296). Such a specific use of plural *kharites* in referring to myrtle blossoms is attested already in the Homeric *Iliad* (as I argued in HPC II§424 pp. 295–296). In *Iliad* 17.51–52, where the death of the hero Euphorbos is described, we see droplets of blood that grace the disheveled hair of the dead hero, lying in the dust, and these droplets are actually compared by way of simile to *kharites*, which in this context seem to be referring to red blossoms of myrtles: αἵματί οἱ δέουοντο κόμαι χαρίτεσσιν ὁμοῖαι | πλοχμοί θ'. Here is my translation: 'with blood bedewed were his locks of hair, looking like *kharites*, | with the curls and all'. I draw attention here (following my comment in HPC II§425 p. 296n80) to a modulation from red to white coloring in the complex simile of *Iliad* 17.51–59, where the graphic description extends from lines 51–52, focusing on the red color of myrtle blossoms, to lines 53–59, focusing on the white color of olive blossoms.

§7. The transition from red to white in the Homeric simile here corresponds, I now think, to the fact that the blossoms of different kinds of myrtle trees can have different colors—either red or white.

§8. I conclude for now by contemplating once again what is surely the biggest question of them all for Pausanias in his quest to visualize the three *Kharites* or 'Graces' of Orkhomenos in Boeotia—those three aniconic stones that once upon a time fell to earth from the heavens above. The question is, are these 'Graces' really to be pictured as beautifully naked when we see them dancing with each other in choral song? Or, instead, are they beautifully adorned in resplendent drapery? The answer may be primally simple—if we think of the 'Graces' as a heaven-sent expression of earthly Nature. These goddesses, as the essence of natural beauty in all its floral varieties, do not need to wear resplendent drapery for their adornment: what already adorns their song and dance are the blossoms that they embody—red or white or any other color they choose.

§9. In their naturalness, however, the 'Graces' can also choose to wear beautiful clothing, just as easily as they can choose to go *au naturel*. And whatever these goddesses, adored as they are, choose to wear—or not wear at all—will be fashionably erotic. Such is the theology of their theo-eroticism.



Émile Vernon (1872–1920), *The Three Graces*. Private collection, **image** via Wikimedia Commons.



Drawing by Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807), *Three Graces Dancing*. British Museum, inv. no. 1914,0216.150. **Image** © Trustees of the British Museum, used under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

### **Bibliographical Abbreviations**

BA = *Best of the Achaeans*, Nagy 1979/1999.

GMP = *Greek Mythology and Poetics*, Nagy 1990b.

H24H = *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, Nagy 2013

HC = *Homer the Classic*, Nagy 2009|2008

HPC = *Homer the Preclassic*, Nagy 2010|2009

HQ = *Homeric Questions*, Nagy 1996b

HR = *Homeric Responses*, Nagy 2003

LSJ = Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones. 1940. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Oxford.

MoM = *Masterpieces of Metonymy*, Nagy 2016|2015

PasP = *Poetry as Performance*, Nagy 1996a

PH = *Pindar's Homer*, Nagy 1990a

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Graces, *Olympian* 14, Pausanias, Pindar