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The Sacred Landscape of Callimachus' Acontius and Cydippe

ABSTRACT

The story of the love of Acontius and Cydippe in the third book of the *Aetia* was one of Callimachus' most renowned elegies. Roman poets like Propertius and Vergil pay homage to this work in highly programmatic passages of their oeuvre. Modern scholars, in turn, have often focused on the programmatic features of this poem, highlighting, among other things, the sophistication of its narrative voice and its use of a local historian, Xenomedes of Ceos. My paper, by contrast, focuses on a different aspect that makes this poem unique, namely its pervasive adoption of rituals as key features of the narrative. The two youths meet at Apollo's festival in Delos (fr. 67.5-6 Pf.); Cydippe's beauty shines at the festival of Ariadne in Naxos (fr. 67.11-14 Pf.); before the wedding the girl sleeps with a παῖς ἀμφιθαλής, an extremely obscure rite also celebrated in Naxos and associated by the narrator with the "rites of the fearful goddess" (fr. 75.1-11 Pf.); Apollo himself tells of the Cean ritual with which the etesian winds are called upon (fr. 75.32-7 Pf.). Scholars of literature are for the most part content with the fact that a particular passage or poem can be traced back to a ritual, as though "ritual" per se could be considered as the final phase of the interpretive process of a text. From this point of view, Callimachus' elegy on Acontius and Cydippe represents a fascinating challenge. The poem does not just evoke the ritual dimension as the subject of antiquarian interest. It problematizes the nature of ritual practice as an area of human experience that is in itself open to interpretation. From this point of view, religious practices are a crucial component of Callimachus' narrative strategy, a strategy that, firstly, contrasts traditional religious views (the "sacred disease" of fr. 75.13-15 Pf.) with Callimachus' own voice, and, secondly, highlights the enigmatic nature of love itself as it affects, in different ways, Acontius, Cydippe and those surrounding them.

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