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The Nymphs of Nysa

Abstract

The aim of this note is to focus the Lerici Marescotti amphora by the Attic Priam Painter, made and painted around 510 BC, found in the territory of ancient *Caere* and kept at Rome, in the National Museum of Villa Giulia, no. 106463¹.

Key words: Dionysus, Homeric hymn, Nysa

On the A side of the vase (fig. 1), Dionysus sits under a canopy of vines bearing fruit while Satyrs pluck grapes in the context of very luxuriant vegetation. On the B side (fig. 2), seven young black naked girls or Nymphs are either swimming in the open sea or about to do it, leaving their garments and accessories on boughs of two trees on the shore, near a diving platform. The sides of the panel suggest a rocky setting, thus a remote grotto.

This picture conveys the notions of erotic appeal, enjoyment of the natural setting and relaxation, far away from the community. With this contribution I suggest that the two sides of the vase integrate each other: since Dionysus was often imagined to be in Nysa, which in archaic times was located in a vague south-east of the *oecumene*, the girls may also be thought to bath in that far away environment: that would explain their black skin.

In other words, the girls may be the Nymphs of Nysa charged of the care of Dionysos². The notion of Nysa and of its Nymphs harks back to Homer, *Iliad* 6. 132-135. Important specifications are found in Homer's *Hymns* 26. 3-10: 'I begin to sing of ivy-crowned Dionysus, the loud-crying god, splendid son of Zeus and glorious Semele. The rich-haired Nymphs received him in their bosoms from the lord his father and fostered and nurtured him carefully in the dells of Nysa, where by the will of his father he grew up in a sweet-smelling cave, being reckoned among the immortals. But when the goddesses had brought him up, a god oft hymned, then began he to wander continually through the woody coombes, thickly wreathed with ivy and laurel. And the Nymphs followed in his train with him for their leader; and the boundless forest was filled with their outcry. (transl. Loeb)'

The notion that blacks lived in the south of the world was reported already by Hesiod, *Works* 527, who notices that during winter the sun 'comes and goes over the community and the city of dark-skinned men'. The setting of the grotto of Nysa is described in Homer's *Hymns* 1. 9-24: 'There is a place Nysa, a mountain most high, burgeoning with forest, in a distant part of Phoenicia, almost at the waters of Egypt. No one crosses there by ships, for it has no harbor where curvy-tipped ships can ride: a steep cliff encloses it all round to a great height. But it grows lovely and delicious things in abundance (...) lovely pastures'.

The steep cliff which encloses the grotto all round to a great height and the closeness of the grotto to a sea without harbors and boats correspond to the image on

¹About this amphora, see Moon 1983, 97-118; Boardman, 1990: 19-30.

²About these Nymphs, see Gottschall, 1997: 902-905.

the B side of the amphora. The grotto is framed on both sides by high cliffs and the sea in front of the grotto is without humans and suggests a sense of remoteness. Nymphs of Nysa are not unknown in the repertoire of late archaic / severe style Attic painters: they appear on a phiale by Macron dated around 490 BC,³ again on a volute krater by the Altamura Painter around 470 BC⁴ and finally on a stamnos by the Painter of Florentine Stamnoi around 470-460 BC⁵.

In late archaic times, the dream of distant places endowed with erotic seduction becomes topical: Pratinas would like to go ‘over the mountains with the Naiads’ (*frg.* 708 Campbell, transl. Loeb). Moreover, the archaic period is an age of important explorations of areas of the world which until then were poorly known. This phenomenon determined throughout the late archaic decades the flourishing of the written genre of the description of the earth as well as of sea routes⁶.

A noteworthy personality who in late archaic age promoted this literary tradition is Scylax of Caryanda⁷: a ‘Circumnavigation of the inhabited parts of Europe, Asia and Libya’ is attributed to him. Probably the core of the description harks back to a work by this writer but it was integrated several times until the third quarter of the 4th century BC⁸.

In this work the author describes far-away places as *loci amoeni*: the forest of *Hesperides* in Libya (section 108) is singled out for its great wealth of trees and of many and very useful fruits. Another beautiful land, full of cattle, is found near the gulf of Sirtis (section 109). Then he describes the land of the *Lotophagi*, which was characterized by a great fecundity and productions of trees and fruits. He also specifies that the Libyans are very beautiful, their land is excellent and fecund, with a great wealth of cattle (section 110). Finally, beyond the columns of Heracles, the tall and very beautiful Aethiops are placed (section 112).

The representation of these appealing black Nymphs in the remote south of the world fits this contemporary idealization of southern regions quite well. From an artistic point of view, the depicted scene on the B side of the amphora offers, as far as I know, the first representation of the line of the horizon, between sea and sky, in Greek painting. This fact suggests that the indication of the horizon was introduced in pictures already in late archaic Athens and that the absence of other examples for this period is due to the total ruin of the contemporary easel painting.

Finally, the close correspondence between the description of the grotto of Nysa in the above quoted first Homeric hymn and its representation in the B side of the Lerici Marescotti amphora suggests that this visual depiction depends from the corresponding Homeric poem, because some Homeric hymns were regarded paradigmatic already in archaic times⁹.

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³ See Gottschall, 1997: no. 4.

⁴ See Gottschall, 1997: no. 5.

⁵ See Gottschall, 1997: no. 6.

⁶ See Shipley, 2011.

⁷ See Gaertner, 2001: 639-640.

⁸ See Peretti, 1979.

⁹ The first poet who seems to refer to a Homeric hymn is Alcaeus: see *e. g.* West, 2003: 6-20, particularly 14.

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Fig. 1

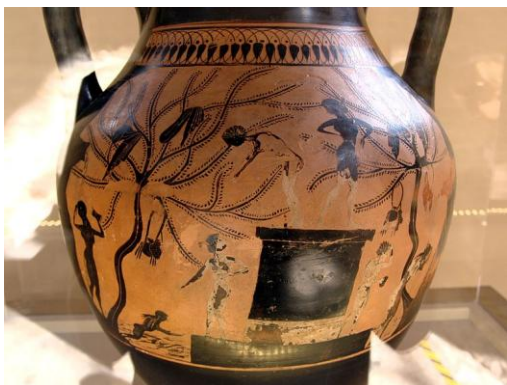


Fig. 2