

УДК 7.032

ББК 63.3(0)32; 85.103(3)

DOI 10.18688/aa2313-1-3

A. Corso

Swimming Nymphs: A New Interpretation of the B side of the Lerici-Marescotti Amphora

The Lerici-Marescotti amphora was made and decorated around 510 B.C. by the Attic Primitiv Painter. It was ultimately found in the territory of ancient Caere. It is currently kept in Rome, at the National Museum of Villa Giulia, no. 106463 [6; 10, pp. 97–118; 1, pp. 19–30]. The aim of this paper is to expand on my previous ideas regarding the iconography of the B side [3] and to place it in a broader cultural context.

On the A side of the vase (Ill. 4), Dionysus is depicted sitting under a canopy of fruit-bearing vines while Satyrs harvest grapes in the midst of luxuriant vegetation. The god is represented in profile, with a beard and wreathed head. He holds a cup in his left hand and is seated on a *diphros*. He is much larger than the Satyrs who gather grapes in two large *stamnoi* placed on the ground on both sides of Dionysus. Two thin and sinuous trees support the canopy.

On the B side (Ill. 5), there are seven young dark-skinned nude girls or Nymphs getting ready to swim in the open sea, leaving their garments and accessories on the boughs of two trees on the shore. A diving platform is situated in the middle, flanked by the two aforementioned trees. The sides of the panel suggest a rocky setting, depicting a distant grotto facing the sea. The waves of the sea are expressed with sinuous lines. The female figures are coated in two layers of color: the black is superimposed on the white. They look young and slender, with curly hair; two of them have their hair fashioned in chignons on their napes, while other two wear their hair in ponytails which fall on their shoulders.

The platform in the middle bears a large cubic or parallelepiped base painted in black, on which two girls stand. Above this base in the middle is a vertical projection, also parallelepipedal: its lower section is painted white, while its upper section is black. It is topped by a projecting crown, above which two other girls are positioned. Two more girls stand on the floor of the grotto, while the last girl is about to jump into the sea.

There are four garments on the trees: they look like thin *chitones* suitable for hot weather. Heavy *himatia* for cold weather are not represented. Three *hydriai* hang from the trees: of course, they carried fresh water, used either for showering or drinking. This second possibility would imply that the site depicted is imagined to be without potable water.

This picture conveys the notions of erotic appeal, enjoyment of the natural setting, and relaxation far away from the community [6].

With this contribution, I suggest that the two sides of the vase complement each other, since Dionysus was often imagined to be in Nysa, a place in a vague south-eastern region of the *oecumene*. The girls depicted may also be thought to bathe in that far away environment. This would also explain their dark skin.

In other words, the girls may be the Nymphs of Nysa, charged with the care of Dionysus [5, pp. 902–905].

The notion of Nysa and of its Nymphs harks back to Homer, *Iliad* 6. 130–135:

“Lycurgus (...) drove down over the sacred mount of Nysa the nursing Nymphs of drunk Dionysus, and they all let fall to the ground their thyrsi, smitten with an ox-goad by man-slaying Lycurgus. But Dionysus fled, and plunged beneath the wave of the sea”.

This passage provides two details on Nysa:

1. that it is on a sacred mountain, and
2. that it is located next to a sea.

Important specifications are found also 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 combs, 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)

This passage also places Nysa in a valley among mountains.

The notion that dark-skinned people 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 detail 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 harbours and boats correspond to the image on the B side of the amphora. The grotto is framed on both sides by high cliffs, and the sea below is without humans and suggests a sense of remoteness.

The Nymphs of Nysa have been depicted by Late Archaic — Early Severe style Attic painters. Specifically, they appear on a phiale by Macron dated around 490 B.C. [5, no. 4], a volute krater by the Altamura Painter dated around 470 B.C. [5, no. 5], and finally, on a stamnos by the Painter of Florentine Stamnoi dated around 470–460 B.C. [5, no. 6]. In these scenes, females figures appear draped and with light skin color.

In the Late Archaic period, the dream of distant places endowed with erotic seduction becomes topical: Pratinas wants to go “over the mountains with the Naiads” (frg. 708 Campbell, transl. Loeb).

Moreover, the Late Archaic period is the age of important explorations of areas of the world which previously were poorly known. This phenomenon, during the Late Archaic period, led to the flourishing of the written genre of the description of land and sea routes [13].

A noteworthy personality who in the Late Archaic era promoted this literary tradition was Scylax of Caryanda [4, pp. 639–640]: the “Circumnavigation of the inhabited parts of Europe, Asia, and Libya” has been attributed to him. Probably the core of the description derives from

a work by this writer, but it was integrated several times until the third quarter of the 4th century B.C. [11].

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 attractive dark-skinned Nymphs in the remote south of the world aligns well with the idealization of southern regions typical of the time.

Thus, this picture would express the desire to evade the narrow world of the polis and a longing for distant places, which are at the same time sacred and full of Eros and seduction.

This feeling is evidenced in Late Archaic societies also by other testimonia [2, pp. 13–25].

For example, Ibycus describes a landscape featuring a temple of Aphrodite, lovely buds of roses, the goddess Charis, fragrant garlands, and tender beauty (frg. 282 Campbell). This attractive landscape contrasts with the angst suffered by the poet.

A similar contrast is expressed in frg. 286 (Campbell), i. e. the description of spring, when Cydonian quince trees watered from flowing rivers flourish near the garden of the Maidens, with vine-blossoms growing under shady vine-branches conveying the idea of a magical place. The suffering of the poet for the pains of love is in striking opposition to such perfect beauty. In frg. 315 (Campbell), myrtles, violets, golden flowers, apple-blossoms, roses, and soft bay leaves also conjure up an ideal landscape, ruled by love and beauty. The mention of specific birds (dapple-necked widgeon, hidden-purple birds and long-winged Kingfishers, frg. 317 Campbell) also alludes to an earthly paradise.

The ‘perfect’ sites described by Ibycus are far-removed, if not physically, then at least psychologically, from the painful experience of the poet.

Anacreon, the poet of Teos, conveys the image of “the fields of hyacinth, where Cyprian Aphrodite tied her lovely horses freed from the yoke” (frg. 346 Campbell) — i. e., a form of earthly paradise, a kingdom of love, beauty, and freedom for animals.

We also have the same poet’s image of Dionysus “with whom Love the subduer and the blue-eyed Nymphs and radiant Aphrodite play, as you haunt the lofty mountain peaks” (frg. 357 Campbell): here we have a scenic landscape, remote from the world of cities, ranging over mountain peaks, where Dionysus, Eros, Aphrodite, and the Nymphs spend their days in play. Love and beauty rule forever on these enchanted mountains.

Simonides (frg. 579 Campbell), asserts that Arete dwells among unclimbable rocks in a holy place, unseen by most mortals. In this fragment, the poet of Ceos conceives a utopian world, denied to mortals, ruled by “Excellence”. It is worth highlighting that this wonderland is located on high mountains.

Utopian or idealised landscapes also appear in Pindar. In the Second Olympic Ode (71–74), the island of the blessed is described as follows: breezes blow from the Ocean, golden flowers blossom from trees on the shore, while others are nourished by water, and with these flowers the blessed create arm-laces and wreaths.

He also describes (frg. 129 Race) the land of the blessed: “In meadows of red roses their country above is laden with ... shady frankincense trees and trees with golden fruit, and some

take delight in horses and exercises . . . , others in lyres; and among them complete happiness blooms and flourishes. A fragrance spreads throughout the lovely land as they continually mingle offerings of all kinds”.

Thus, the Priam Painter visualizes a deeply felt need for escapism to remote destinations which are idealized and take on the tone of fairy tales.

Around three decades after the creation of our amphora, the Tomb of the Diver in Paestum also depicts a diving platform, two trees, the wavy open sea, and a man leaping from the platform [6]. Both the masterpiece of the Priam Painter and the panel at Paestum convey a message of liberation.

The similarity of the two scenes and especially of the forms of the two platforms — both parallelepiped and topped by projecting crowns — suggests either that the Paestum one depends on an Attic model, or that both are inspired by the same pictorial tradition. The latter may perhaps have been that of Cimon of Cleonae. The information about him provided by Pliny 35. 56, who epitomizes the Hellenistic art criticism (see below), encourages this suggestion.

From an artistic point of view, the scene on the B side of the amphora offers, to my knowledge, 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 line had been already introduced in the art of Late Archaic Athens, and that the absence of other examples from this period is due to the total loss of the easel painting of the time.

It is possible that the line of the horizon was first indicated in painting by the late 6th century BC painter Cimon of Cleonae: according to Pliny 35. 56, “it was Cimon who first invented ‘catagrapha’, that is, images in ‘three-quarter’, and who varied the aspect of the features, representing them as looking backward, upward, or downward” [8, nos. 436–437; 9, pp. 125, 132, 180; 16, pp. 61–84]. In fact, the technical word in art criticism ‘catagrapha’ may refer to the representation of what lies behind the figures in the foreground [7, pp. 67–68]. Thus, our amphora may perhaps suggest the existence of landscapes in the easel painting of the late archaic period.

The close correspondence between the description of the Grotto of Nysa in the above quoted first Homeric Hymn and its representation on the B side of the Lerici-Marescotti amphora suggests that this visual depiction depends on the corresponding Homeric poem, since some Homeric hymns were regarded paradigmatic already in Late Archaic times¹.

It is also necessary to stress that probably in 534 B.C. the cult of Dionysus Eleuthereus was established in Athens, on the southern slopes of the Acropolis. The favor bestowed on the son of Semele by Pisistratus and Hippias determined the frequent visual evocation of his story and of the figures of his retinue [12, pp. 84–100]. The two scenes of our amphora should be understood in the context of the great success experienced by the Dionysiac imagery in Athens during these decades. Very soon, the story of the childhood of Dionysus became popular in the Greek theatre, as Aeschylus’ plays *Semele* and *Trophi* attest.

The association of the cult of the Nymph of Nysa with that of Dionysus in Athens, although it is evidenced only for later periods [5, p. 902], may have characterized the worship of Dionysus as early as Late Archaic time: the fortune of these mythical figures, both in the tragedy of Aeschylus and in the vase painting of the same period, may have been related to this cult.

¹ The first poet who seems to refer to a Homeric Hymn is Alcaeus: [15, pp. 6–20, particularly 14].

Finally, it should be noted that the pattern of the diver who jumps off a rocky hill into the sea was painted in southern Etruria around 510 B.C. [14, pl. 3.11]. The fact that these are the years of the reception of our amphora in Southern Etruria may not be just a coincidence: it is possible that the adoption of this scene in the Southern Etruscan mural painting was based on Greek continental models, which became locally known through the widespread reception of Greek and in particular Attic painted vases.

References

1. Boardman J. Iconographic Signals in the Work of the Priam Painter. *Cronache di Archeologia*, 1990, vol. 29, pp. 19–30.
2. Corso A. *The Birth and Development of the Idealized Concept of Arcadia in the Ancient World*. Oxford, Archaeopress Publ., 2022. 188 p.
3. Corso A. The Nymphs of Nysa. *Mare Ponticum*, 2022, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 32–34.
4. Gaertner H. A. Skylax. *Der Neue Pauly*, vol. 11. Stuttgart, Metzler Publ., 2001, pp. 639–640 (in German).
5. Gottschall U. Nysa, Nysai. *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 8. Zürich, Artemis Publ., 1997, pp. 902–905 (in German).
6. Hölscher T. *Der Taucher von Paestum: Jugend, Eros und das Meer im antiken Griechenland*. Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta Publ., 2021. 152 p. (in German).
7. Hurwit J. M. The Lost Art. Early Greek Wall and Panel Painting. *The Cambridge History of Painting in the Classical World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press Publ., 2014, pp. 66–93.
8. Kansteiner S. (ed.). *Der neue Overbeck*. Berlin, De Gruyter Publ., 2014. 5 vols. (in German).
9. Koch N. *Technik und Erfindung in der klassischen Malerei*. München, Biering & Brinkmann Publ., 2000. 255 p. (in German).
10. Moon W. G. The Priam Painter. *Ancient Greek Art and Archaeology*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Publ., 1983, pp. 97–118.
11. Peretti A. *Il periplo di Scilace*. Pisa, Biblioteca di Studi Antichi Publ., 1979. 558 p. (in Italian).
12. Shapiro A. *Art and Cult under the Tyrants in Athens*. Mainz, Von Zabern Publ., 1989. 194 p.
13. Shipley G. *Periplous*. Exeter, Bristol Phoenix Press Publ., 2011. 244 p.
14. Steingraber S. Etruscan and Greek Tomb Painting in Italy. *The Cambridge History of Painting in the Classical World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press Publ., 2014, pp. 94–142.
15. West M. L. *Homeric Hymns*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press Publ., 2003. 467 p.
16. Zanardi B. Hic catagrapha invenit, hoc est obliquas imagines. *Vitruvio e il disegno di architettura*. Venice, Marsilio Publ., 2012, pp. 61–84 (in Italian).

Title. Swimming Nymphs: A New Interpretation of the B side of the Leric-Marescotti Amphora

Author. Corso, Antonio — full doctor, research fellow. Etaireia Messeniakon Archaiologikon Spoudon, Psaromiligkou 33, 10553 Athens, Greece; antoniocorso@hotmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0002-8090-4274

Abstract. The paper focuses on the amphora of the Attic Priam Painter dated around 510 B.C., found in Etruria, now kept in Rome at Museo di Villa Giulia. On the A side, Dionysus sits under a canopy of fruit-bearing vines while Satyrs pluck grapes in the surroundings of very luxuriant vegetation. On the B side, seven young dark-skinned nude girls or nymphs are either swimming or about to swim in the open sea, 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. The author suggests that this is the Cave of Nysa and that these are the nymphs who take care of Dionysus. Semantically, this scene reveals the notion of the erotic allure of the southern seas. Artistically, this may be the first surviving example of the indication of the horizon line between sea and sky.

Keywords: Priam Painter, Caere, Dionysos, Nymphs, Nysa, Homeric Hymns, Athens, Periplus, horizon, cave

Название статьи. Купающиеся нимфы. Новая интерпретация стороны «Б» амфоры Мастера Приама

Сведения об авторе. Корсо, Антонио — доктор наук, научный сотрудник. Общество археологических исследований Мессени. Псаромилику 33, Афины, Греция, 10553; antoniocorso@hotmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0002-8090-4274

Аннотация. В работе рассматривается амфора Мастера Приама, аттического вазописца. Памятник был обнаружен в Этрурии, датируется ок. 510 г. до н. э. и сегодня находится в Национальном музее Вилла Джулия (Рим, Италия). На стороне «А» можно видеть Диониса в окружении пышной растительности, а также сатиров, собирающих виноград. На стороне «Б» присутствует изображение семи темнокожих обнаженных девушек, вероятно — нимф, которые купаются или собираются нырнуть в море. Детали по двум сторонам изображения указывают, что действие разворачивается в приморском гроте. Автор выдвигает гипотезу, что эти персонажи — нимфы Нисы, прислуживающие Дионису. В семантическом отношении сцена отмечает начало традиции о подчеркивании эротического аспекта южных морей. В художественном отношении данная ваза демонстрирует одно из самых ранних изображений линии горизонта между морем и небом.

Ключевые слова: Мастер Приама, Цере, Дионис, нимфы, Ниса, гомеровские гимны, Афины, Периплы, линия горизонта, грот



Илл. 3. Урартский фрагмент росписи с изображением нижней части мужской фигуры. VII в. до н. э., монументальная живопись. Большой зал дворца Аргишти I (т. н. «помещение № 15») в Эрбуну, Армения. Коллекция ГМИИ им. А. С. Пушкина (Инв. № У 407) © ГМИИ им. А. С. Пушкина



Илл. 4. Priam Painter. Leric-Marescotti Amphora. Around 510 B.C. The National Museum of Villa Giulia, Rome. A side. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain. File:Dionysos vineyard MNE Villa Giulia 106463.jpg



Илл. 5. Priam Painter. Leric-Marescotti Amphora. Around 510 B.C. The National Museum of Villa Giulia, Rome. B side. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain