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## **Galateia in the Land of the Amazons: The silver plate of Yenikend (Azerbaijan) and cultural transfers between the Greco-Roman world and the Caucasus**

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*“His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono: / imperium sine fine dedi... //* For them, I set no limits in space or time: I give them empire without end...” This was Jupiter’s plan for the Romans, in Virgil’s first book of the *Aeneid* (1.278-279). Rome was undeniably the first and only western power that could claim dominion over the extent of the known world before the modern era with some justification. This was not only an echo of the Augustan propaganda consistently encountered in Latin texts before the nostalgic reconstructions of the past at the end of Antiquity. At least two types of sources indicate the influence exerted on the margins by the Roman Empire at its peak: firstly, literary and epigraphic texts mention relationships with barbarian kings loyal to the Empire, beyond its borders. Secondly, archaeological finds have revealed that networks established and used by people, objects and ideas extended beyond direct contact. In some cases, historians find matches between the two types of evidence and observe the barbarian temptation of “Romanisation” across the Empire’s limits and even over natural boundaries that one would imagine to be impenetrable. This “Romanisation” was not only a form of acculturation: it was the result of cultural transfers, that altered the meanings, perceptions and functions of objects on their journey from production to final acquisition. By comparing these types of sources, it is also possible to explain the construction of knowledge about the periphery and ‘the other’, at the center of the ‘civilized’ world. This historical study reminds us that texts and ancient objects do not in themselves reflect an absolute reality that can be used as proof in present-day historical and political debate: ancient literary and archaeological testimonies echo the fantasy, the *imaginaire* of the ancients that is different from ours. We must understand this foreign context by reconstructing the particular intellectual framework and interests of those ancients.

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This inquiry's starting point is one of the most important, if not the most famous, among the ancient archaeological discoveries in Azerbaijan: an object that is often referenced and illustrated in history books concerning the Caucasus, but whose implications in the study of cultural transfer have never been fully explained<sup>1</sup>. This is a Roman luxury item – highly valued for the technique of its making and in what it displays. In subsequent pages, I try to explain its presence in one of the remotest regions of ancient Eurasia via the political and military networks that included both Romans and Transcaucasian elites who were sensitive to the Roman lifestyle. The discovery of this item draws our attention to the Caucasus as a frontier zone, thus as a zone of continuous, although difficult, passage between the urbanized states of Europe and Asia to the south, and the nomads' steppes to the north.

In the first part of this article, I will describe the item. In the second part, I will make a critical presentation of all the possible identifications of the characters represented on the plate and comment on its original function, in the context of its making, within the Roman Empire. In the third and final part, I will present some hypotheses on its export from the shores of the Internal Sea and the north-eastern limits of the Roman Empire to the *Barbaricum*, north of the Taurus, on the slopes of the Caucasus. By taking into account all we know about contacts between the Romans and the people of what we call today (from a Russian, northern point of view) Transcaucasia, I will formulate some hypothetical scenarios on the political, military, economic and cultural relationships between Rome and the kingdoms of Caucasian Albania and Iberia. The conclusion will point to what such an object can tell us about the Caucasus as middle ground between nomads and sedentary populations and as contested ground between East and West<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the study of cultural transfer in the Classical Antiquity, see M. Espagne, "Transferts culturels, comparatisme et sciences de l'Antiquité", in A. Dan, F. Queyrel (ed.), "Les concepts en sciences de l'Antiquité: mode d'emploi. Chronique 2014 – Les transferts culturels", *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 40.1 (2014), p. 239-305 (p. 247-256).

<sup>2</sup> In its original meaning (R. White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, 1991), the 'middle ground' is a space where two cultural groups interact and exchange for economic, political or military profit. Each group borrows the other's social codes but cannot impose its dominion. I have coined the term 'contested ground' to remind of the rivalry between the hegemonic powers of Rome and Persia (under the Arsacids and then the Sasanians) in the Caucasus, especially south of the Great Caucasus, where ancient writers place the more or less independent states of Albania, Iberia and Armenia. These names have different meanings at different times, depending on interventions by the great powers, as far as we can tell by judging from the fragmentary, indirect and anachronistic sources preserved to our times. In this article, I use these terms following common historiographic practice inspired by Greek and Roman texts, and without consideration of modern debates – which, in my opinion, cannot be in any case based on ancient texts, if these are rightly understood (as I will suggest later).

## 1. An exceptional object in exceptional location

In 1893, near the village of Yenikend in the district of Göyçay (Geokchai, name given by the tributary of the Kur /ancient Kyros River, in the middle of Azerbaijan, south of Qabala district and south-west of Ismayilli district, (fig.1)), villagers found by chance a most beautiful silver plate of Greco-Roman antiquity. The plate was in

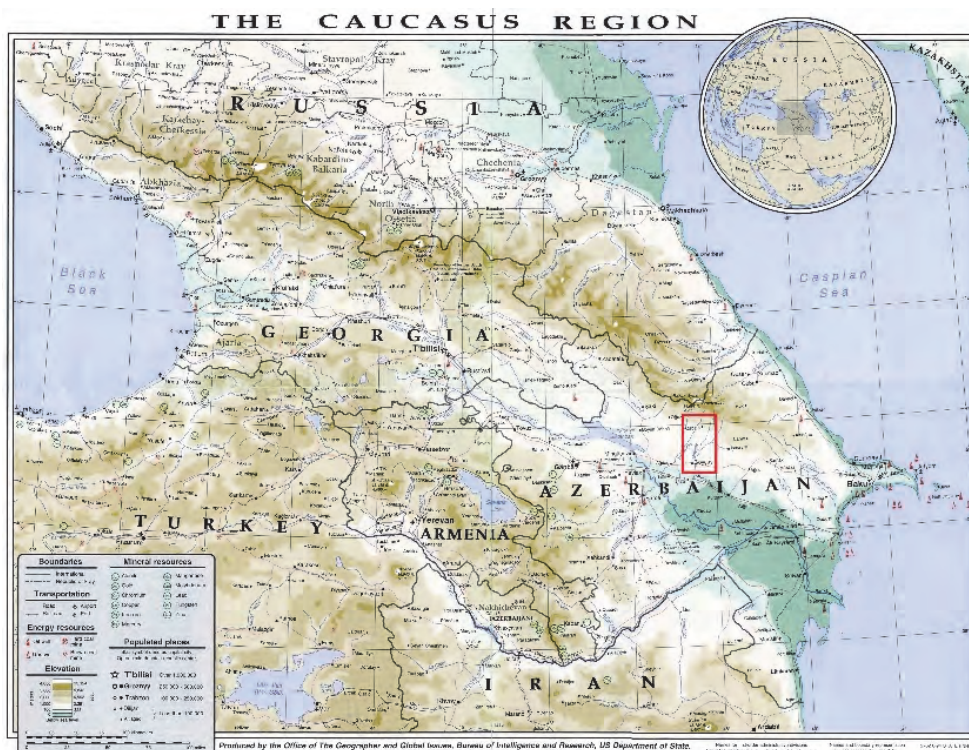


Fig. 1 Map of the Caucasus drawn by the American State Department (2004), showing the regions of Göyçay and Qabala in the red rectangle.

a tomb, together with some weaponry (a sword, a dagger, and part of some armor said to have been sent to the Museum of Tbilisi in 1896, but of which I could find no trace). A gold coin, which could have dated the tomb, but which was, unfortunately, never identified, has been declared lost since 1894<sup>3</sup>. This loss occurred when the plate and the coin were in the possession of Egor Romanovich

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the answer of the Baku governor to a request from the Imperial Archaeological Commission (№ 230/1894, preserved at the Institute for Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint-Petersburg), discussed by P. В. Кинжалов, “Грустная Нерейда”, *Кунсткамера. Этнографические тетради* 12 (1998), p. 293-307 (online [http://woman.upelsinka.com/history/antic\\_4.htm](http://woman.upelsinka.com/history/antic_4.htm)).

Mirzabekyants, a tobacco seller who was forced by the Imperial Archaeological Commission to surrender them for preservation and study. This is why the plate has been preserved, since 1898, in the Hermitage Museum in Saint-Petersburg (Inv. no. K3 5308). Unfortunately, I have not been able to see the object, but I attempt to give here some elements of a description, based on previous bibliography and on photographs kindly provided by the Hermitage Museum (fig. 2).

The plate is round, 24 cm in diameter, and registered as weighing 1030 g. It has a circular base, 8.2 cm in diameter, one-third of the principal diameter, as is often the case for this kind of Greco-Roman dish. If these numbers are precise and if the plate had not lost anything of its original dimensions, its diameter would be 10 Roman *unciae* and its weight c. 3 *librae*. Assuming that the concentration of silver is as high as in similar dishes, one could estimate the original weight of silver at between 300 denarii (for an imperial denarius of 3.4 g, during the reigns of the Julio Claudian emperors) and 500 denarii (for a denarius containing 2.6 g of silver, between the Antonine and Severan dynasties). Since we lack precise analyses of the



Fig. 2 The Yenikend plate, Hermitage Museum.

silver composition and because our statistics for percentages of silver in Roman imperial coinage are not yet very precise, it is difficult to suggest a valid date for the plate on the base of such quantitative criteria. We can only speculate that, if the silver was of sufficient purity, silver equivalent to 500 denarii is a fair figure for the material in this plate (not including the costs of production), between the reigns of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD) and Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) – especially during the reign of Commodus (180-192 AD)<sup>4</sup>. This was the equivalent of the annual (or one-and-a-half-year) stipendium of a legionary soldier, before deducting living expenses in the camp<sup>5</sup>.

The plate is said to have been made from two sheets of silver fixed together by the circular lip, one on top of the other, as was usual for Roman plates before Late Antiquity. First, the artist drew the model on the back of the upper sheet, which was then completely covered by the second sheet of silver, smooth and visible on the back and under the base of the plate. Following the drawing, the silversmith created a relief by hammering from the underside (*repoussé*) and from above, by chasing (engraving or inlaying). Some details were probably made by incision and others with gold plate – either by applying a fine sheet of gold leaf (for example to represent the sea) or by gilding, with a liquid mix of gold and mercury (probably for the finest details). The gilt is pretty well preserved: this indicates the decorative, prestigious function of this show plate, which was probably never used as a functional dish, for bearing food at a dinner. For its beauty and value, it may have been displayed on particular occasions and finally placed in the tomb as a mark of its owner's social position (cf. below).

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the so-called 'Aulis' silver plate, 1.977 g, which could correspond to 500 denarii by the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC: A. Dan, F. Grenet, Nicholas Sims-Williams, "Homeric Scenes in Bactria and India. Two Silver Plates with Bactrian and Middle Persian Inscriptions", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 2014 [2018], p. 195-294. For the weight in silver of the imperial denarii and the successive devalorisations between the Antonine and the Severan emperors, see M. Corbier, "Dévaluations et fiscalité (161- 235)", in *Les "dévaluations" à Rome. Époque républicaine et impériale I. Actes du Colloque de Rome (13-15 novembre 1975)*, Rome, 1978, p. 273-309; M. Corbier, "Coinage and Taxation: the State's point of view, A.D. 193-337", in A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey, A. Cameron (ed.), *The Cambridge Ancient History* XII. *The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193-337*, Cambridge, 2005<sup>2</sup>, p. 327-392; A. Wassink, "Inflation and Financial Policy under the Roman Empire to the Price Edict of 301 A.D.", *Historia* 40.4 (1991), p. 465-493; J. Hiernard, "Une source de l'histoire romaine: la monnaie impériale de Septime Sévère à Constantin", *Pallas. L'Empire romain de 192 à 325* (1997), p. 79-125; cf. J. France, "De Marc Aurèle à Constance II, le système financier de la paix romaine à l'épreuve de la guerre", in J. Baechler, G.-H. Soutou (ed.), *Guerre, économie et fiscalité: l'homme et la guerre*, Paris, 2016, p. 71-84.

<sup>5</sup> R. Alston, "Roman Military Pay from Caesar to Diocletian", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994), p. 113-123; M. A. Speidel, "Roman Army Pay Scales Revisited: Responses and answers", in M. Reddé (ed.), *De l'or pour les braves! Soldes, armées et circulation monétaire dans le monde romain. Actes de la table ronde organisée par l'UMR 8210 à l'INHA (12-13 septembre 2013)*, Bordeaux, 2014, p. 53-62.

Several publications describe the plate and suggest iconographic parallels known in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no scientific analyses of the silver and no studies of the methods, date and craft conditions.

The plate shows a young, naked woman in three-quarter view in the middle of the plate, riding one of the most common monsters in Greco-Roman bestiaries: a hippocamp. This fictional seahorse has a body in two parts: the anterior half is that of a galloping horse - to the right of the viewer; the posterior half, beyond the rider, ends in a long fishtail<sup>7</sup>. The young woman, riding like an Amazon, with both legs on the right side of the seahorse, is in a graceful pose: her body forming an S-shape, corresponding to the opposite borders of the plate. Her head leans delicately forward, towards her left shoulder, as if reacting to the thrust of the animal's leap. Yet, this lean of the head could be a sign of modesty and innocence, befitting a virgin who has just risen from the waves. At some point, the gesture has even been interpreted as an expression of melancholy, or even of a virgin's pre-marital sadness, since the candor of the character and the surrounding decor clearly shows a connection with eroticism (cf. below)<sup>8</sup>.

The woman's face is carefully drawn: she has almond-shaped eyes. The incised irises and pupils look forward, beneath well-arched eyebrows. The nose is long and straight. The tight lips are quite fleshy, a sign of youth and sensuality; although the

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<sup>6</sup> *Отчет императорской археологической комиссии за 1896 год* (1898), p. 113-114, ill. 410; L.A. Matzulewitsch, *Byzantinische Antike: Studien auf Grund der Silbergefäße der Ermitage*, Berlin-Leipzig, 1929, p. 35-36, 43 pl. 5; К. В. Тревер, *Очерки по истории и культуре Кавказской Албании: IV в. до н.э. - VII в. н.э.*, Москва-Ленинград, 1959, p. 24-25, 176-177 pl. 3; D. E. Strong, *Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate*, London, 1966, p. 198; К. В. Тревер, "Блюдо серебряное с изображением nereиды: Римская работа II-III вв.", in *Сокровища Эрмитажа*, Ленинград, 1969, nr. 25; О. Я. Неверов, *Художественное ремесло эпохи Римской империи (I в. до н.э. - IV в.): каталог выставки*, Государственный Эрмитаж, Ленинград, 1980, p. 46-47, nr. 127; J. M. C. Toynbee, K.S. Painter, "Silver Picture Plates from Late Antiquity: AD 300 to 700", *Archaeologia* 108 (1986), p. 15-65 (p. 19, 36-37, nr. 37, pl. XVIc); N. Icard-Gianolio, A.-V. Szabados, "Nereides", in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 6 (1992), p. 785-824, nr. 208; P. В. Кинжалов, "Грустная Нереида..."; F. Althaus, M. Sutcliffe, *The Road to Byzantium: Luxury Arts of Antiquity*, British Museum, London, 2006, p. 140 nr. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. Pausanias 2.1.9; Philostratus the Elder, *Images* 1.8; Servius, *Commentary on Georgica* 4.387. See B. Sauer, "Hippokamp", in *Roschers Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* P<sup>2</sup> (1890), p. 2673-2677; H. Lamer, "Hippokampos", in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 16 (1913), col. 1748-1772; A. Rumpf, *Die Meerwesen auf den antiken Sarkophagreliefs*, Berlin, 1939 (reimpr. Roma, 1969; *Die antiken Sakralrelief* 5.1), p. 114-117; S. Lattimore, *The Marine Thiasos in Greek Sculpture*, Los Angeles, 1976; Ch. Hünemörder, "Hippokampos", in *Der Neue Pauly*, en ligne 2006 ([http://dx.doi.org/janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1574-9347\\_dnp\\_e514510](http://dx.doi.org/janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1574-9347_dnp_e514510)); C. Février, "De Γ'ιππόκαμπος à l'*equus marinus*. Le cheval de mer, ou les vicissitudes d'une figure double", *Schedae* 3.1 (2009), p. 33-46.

<sup>8</sup> P. В. Кинжалов, "Грустная Нереида...".

mouth remains closed and outlines no smile, the face exudes youthful serenity. The slightly sloping chin and prominent cheekbones complete this feminine, somewhat stereotypical face.

She has long hair, separated into lateral locks, turned around a diadem. The viewer sees only the elevated triangular ridge, with some traces of gilding. The circle of the crown remains hidden under the curls, which are brought together behind the nape of the neck, from which they fall onto both shoulders. The chiseled locks become finer and finer lower down, until simple incisions mark wet fringes contiguous to the skin – the young woman is shown immediately following her emergence from the waves. On her right profile, heart-shaped hooks are incised near a delicate ear lobe – signs of the character's femininity, but also of the high quality of the plate's craftsmanship. Three strands of hair raised on the lateral side of the head pass behind the diadem, highlighting the young woman's freshness, perhaps even the sacred nature of the moment in which she is depicted.

The breasts, seen from the front, are perfectly spherical, in line with the Greco-Roman ideal of a virgin's beauty. The musculature of the arms, torso and legs is carved and incised with great care, in order to evoke feminine grace, health and vibrant youth. The rider's legs are slightly crossed, her left foot behind the right one, whose toes are turned towards the viewer. The toes are longer than proportion would dictate: this is normal for some statues of the time but can also be explained by the artist's desire to express the grace of the legs touching the waves. The right arm, gently stretched, seems to rest with open palm on the rump of the hippocamp. The left arm is bent to the right of the viewer, shadowing the curve of the body. The artist wanted to make the left hand's fingers perfectly visible. The gesture is unnatural for someone really holding a horse's reins: the index and little fingers are stretched to the right, while the middle and the ring finger are bent, holding the reins with the thumb. Rather than functional, the gesture is esthetic and highly symbolic: its apotropaic intent, well attested in various ancient cultures from the Mediterranean to Iran and India, persists today. The sign is meant to ward off evil, discord or infidelity<sup>9</sup>. Since the central character makes the gesture while heading to the right, the whole plate was probably thought to be a good sign for a viewer familiar with such a widespread superstition.

The attitude of the hippocamp is strongly dramatized, as is often seen in Hellenistic and Roman decorative scenes, when the artist wants to demonstrate the twists of the different parts of this hybrid body. The hippocamp is galloping, its two forelimbs in the air. The mane, tail and fish fins (on the throat, the webbing and the baleen above the hooves) are clearly visible above the water. By bringing the tail in front of the visible side of the animal, like the tail of a squirrel, also as often seen in this kind of

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<sup>9</sup> C.A. Bromberg, "An Iranian Gesture at Miran", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 5 (1991), p. 45-58; see also the gesture of the *nymphetria* on the Indo-Bactrian vase of Alexandrian inspiration that we published in A. Dan, F. Grenet, N. Sims-Williams, "Homeric Scenes...".



Greco-Roman representation, the artist (identical or not with the craftsman) shows off the extent of his drawing skills. He probably also wanted to express the animal's excitement, supposing that he knew the body language of horses.

The animal raises its head forwards; the beautiful lower jaw pulled down by the bit reveals perfect teeth in the upper jaw. The ear laid back confirms the impression of nervous energy: this powerful young animal snorts, resisting easy submission. Despite its frown, the hippocamp's body remains stable above the waves, so that the young woman can maintain her balance without difficulty. A beardless Triton emerges from the water up to the level of his acanthus-leaf-shaped scaly belt, which covers his lower abdomen, above the junction of his human trunk and fish's tail (the latter remaining entirely underwater)<sup>10</sup>. The Triton swims ahead and controls the hippocamp by pulling on the reins, with his left hand: the young woman holds them with two fingers (mentioned above), with one thong loose in the air. The contrast between the domination of the hippocamp by the young male Triton and the graceful control exerted by the young woman is as striking as it is unrealistic.

The artist has displayed an important element of imagination and the great extent of his technical skills by interposing the female body, exposed in full view, between the torsos of two Tritons, who are similar without being identical. While the first Triton, who guides the hippocamp, shows his back in three-quarter pose, revealing his dorsal fin and ridges of the tail fin, the second Triton swims parallel to the hippocamp and displays the frontal musculature of his vigorous torso, from a symmetrical, three-quarter view. The two Tritons look at each other, coordinating their movements, without talking. They each have their left arm stretched out – the first Triton in order to hold the hippocamp, the second to rescue, if necessary, the rider. In the right hand, folded close to the body, the first Triton seems to hold a tiny oar (a rudder in miniature); the second holds a monstrous fish – probably a sea bass or a small dolphin, not well drawn<sup>11</sup>. Their exaggerated eyebrows and hair – including the ruffled locks over their foreheads, recalling the shaggy appearance of Satyrs – underscore their monstrous, amphibian nature. Thus, as in most Roman representations of high artistic quality, the two Tritons, although different, form a generic and functional couple<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Rumpf, *Die Meerwesen...*, p. 101-107.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. N. Icard-Gianolio, "Triton", in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 8 (1997), p. 68-73, nr. 8, 11, 22 and 28 for a fish or a dolphin; N. Icard-Gianolio, "Tritones", in *Lexicon Iconographicum ...* 8 (1997), p. 73-85, nr. 3, 7. More generally, on the evolution of the Triton, K. Shepard, *The Fish-tailed Monster in Greek and Etruscan Art*, New York, 1940 (*non uidi*); N. Icard, A.-V. Szabados, "Cétacés et tritons, de la réalité à l'imaginaire", in S. Llinares (ed.), *Avec vue sur la mer. Actes du 132<sup>e</sup> congrès national des sociétés historiques et scientifiques, Arles 2007*, Paris, 2011, p. 9-23 (online <http://cths.fr/ed/edition.php?id=5686>).

<sup>12</sup> N. Icard-Gianolio, "Tritones...", especially nr. 88 while framing Aphrodite, but also 31-34, 39, 50, 59, 72, 77-79, 92-93, 97. Generally, see, F. R. Dreßler, "Triton, Tritonen", in

Furthermore, through the golden waves, which cover the lower half of the plate, three dolphins of varying sizes swim to the left, coming to meet the hippocamp. The dolphins always seduced the Greeks and Romans with their grace, friendship and intelligence. In texts and figurative representations, they often brighten the atmosphere of a scene<sup>13</sup>. As in other images of the Roman imperial era, a dolphin is caught by a very plump, winged putto: judging from his raised tail, the dolphin tries his best to escape the grip of the putto. Two other putti, on the water's surface and in the air, complete the picture: the whole is remarkable for the harmony of shapes and numbers<sup>14</sup>.

One might think that the artist wanted to highlight the beauty and vitality of a maritime landscape, with its strength, variety of shapes, colors and sounds, but also with its curiosities and even monstrosities. In reality, there is nothing natural or naturalistic in this picture: the articulation of the different characters and gestures follows classical geometrical rules. Thus, half of the inner surface of the plate is decorated with incisions and gilded to represent the waves of the sea; the other half, above, with a smooth background and the original silver color, corresponds to the open sky. On the median line separating the two halves, there are three characters – a putto, the young rider and the Triton preceding the hippocamp; another putto completes a triangle formed by these characters in the upper semicircle, while the second Triton ends an analogous triangle in the opposite, lower semicircle of the decor. These two triangles form the two halves of an imaginary square, which the artist seems to have inscribed in the great circle (by marking the four angles by the two Tritons and the two putti, following the classical pattern of the “triumph” or “Coronation of Venus”, cf. below). The entanglement of these geometric shapes are maybe just a technical artifice, meant to organize a symmetric composition, which had to integrate some formal and structural markers easily discernible by the public. There is, nonetheless, another possible explanation: if one thinks in philosophical terms, the large circle comprising a square composed of triangles may refer to the Platonic (and Neopythagorean) vision of the world, which was conventional in Roman imperial times, being taught in all the schools of rhetoric and philosophy. There is no exaggeration in accepting this philosophical explanation, because the symbolic meaning of numbers and geometric shapes was a very common constituent

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*Roschers Lexikon...* 4 (1909-1915), col. 1150-1207; A. Boulanger, “Triton”, *Le dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines de Daremberg et Saglio* 5 (1912) p. 483-486; A. Ambühl, W. Huß, Werner, “Triton”, in *Der Neue Pauly*, online 2006 ([http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1574-9347\\_dnp\\_e1221040](http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1574-9347_dnp_e1221040)); M. L. Neira Jiménez, “De Tritón a tritones. Su iconografía en los mosaicos romanos”, *Tritão – Revista de História, Arte e Património* (Revista de la Cámara de Sintra, Portugal), 2 (2014), p. 1-24.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Delorme, Ch. Roux, *Guide illustré de la faune aquatique dans l'art grec*, Juan-les-Pins 1987, p. 77-79, 152-155; for the history of the different types: B. S. Ridgway, “Dolphins and Dolphin-Riders”, *Archaeology* 23 (1970), p. 86-95.

<sup>14</sup> For the iconography of the putto, see R. Stuveras, *Le putto dans l'art roman*, Bruxelles, 1969, p. 153-164 (in maritime context); cf. also p. 127-135 (in association with Venus).

of the ‘popular philosophy’ of the Imperial era, learned by all who could have bought this dish<sup>15</sup>.

At the center of the plate, the rider is a divine young beauty, intimately linked to the sea from which she has just arisen. Besides the Tritons, hybrid servants with a long literary and iconographic tradition, her companions are other, particular marine animals – dolphins, mollusks and gastropods. Monsters and animals altogether have mythical and iconographic meanings that would have been well known to the Roman or Romanized public when the plate was made. There are five scallop shells (*pecten Jacobaeus* or the most widespread *pecten maximus*), recognizable by their fan-shaped ribs: four shells are drawn in the waves, two seen from the outside and two other half shells, whose interiors are seen. The fifth shell is displayed, with its inner part, above all the heads as an emblem or a crown (cf. below) by a putto floating in the air, in front of the hippocamp<sup>16</sup>. These shells are neither alive nor in their original environment – the shallows, where the current is weak. They are carefully represented on the plate because of their shape and symbolism.

This is also the case with the gastropods: the artist did his best to mark the differences between a marine snail used as a musical instrument (as a conch or a whelk) by the putto sitting on the tail of the hippocamp, and the shell snail floating in the waves. The first, at the top left when we look at the dish, is a sea snail from the superfamily *Cerithioidea* – to which belong, among others, the *Turritellidae*. Although they were not the only spiral gastropods – the *Epitoniidae* could also have been used as a model – the identification with one of the *Turritellidae* seems preferable, because of the convex shape of the spiral and of its round opening. This shell appears as an expression of virtuosity – both of the artist who made the drawing and of the artisan who made the plate, if these two were not the same person – and also of the putto who uses it as a musical instrument to communicate a message about the event embodied in the whole of the decoration<sup>17</sup>. As for the gastropod floating in the sea,

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<sup>15</sup> The Platonic theory of the reduction of the different parts of the world to simple geometric shapes (and thus to numbers) appears in Plato, *Timaeus* (cf. Th. K. Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy. A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004). Other texts, which made possible its success at the end of the Hellenistic and beginning of the Roman era, are the treaty of Pseudo-Timaeus (cf. M. Baltes, *Timaios Lokros. Über die Natur des Kosmos und der Seele*, Leiden, Brill, 1972) and of Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the World*, a good example of the ‘popular philosophy’ taught in schools (cf. A. Dan, K. Geus, “Weaving Landmarks in Common Sense Geography: numbers in Pseudo-Aristotle’s *On the World*”, in K. Geus, M. Thiering (ed.), *Common Sense Geography II*, forthcoming). On popular Greek and Roman philosophy, see J. C. Thom, “Popular Philosophy in the Hellenistic-Roman World”, *Early Christianity* 3 (2012), p. 279-295.

<sup>16</sup> For the identification, cf. J. Delorme, Ch. Roux, *Guide...*, p. 21-22, 98-99 (fig. 3-4).

<sup>17</sup> See A. Zucker, “Album mythique des coquillages voyageurs. De l’écume au labyrinthe”, *Techniques et culture* 59 (2012), p. 110-125 (en ligne <https://journals.openedition.org/tc/6578>): “De l’escargot de mer (et du génie du labyrinthe)”.

also spiraled but with a smooth surface, it seems to belong rather to the family of *Neritidae*, quite remarkable for the beauty of their shape and coloring (cf. below).

There is no doubt that all the elements were chosen with care, for artistic and symbolic reasons. A reconstruction of the original context – as far as preserved documentation allows – enables us to appreciate the plate as did the cultivated public (in other words, the ancient ‘Hellenized’ or ‘Romanized’ viewer) to which it was directly addressed.

## 2. The charm and mysteries of the sea, from the Antonines to the Severans

It is not easy to identify the central character. Yet identification is essential to an understanding of the plate’s history, both within the Roman Empire and on its margins, in the Caucasus. In the following pages, I will try to explain the reasons and the issues arising from possible interpretations.

### 2.1. *One of Nereus’ numerous daughters?*

For many historians and archaeologists, the identification is clear. Sea monsters in general, and hippocamps in particular, served as means of locomotion or swimming companions to the Nereids from the Greek Archaic era, in painting, sculpture and mosaics<sup>18</sup>. The beauty, nudity and link of our rider with the marine world support this thesis: the Nereids are young women, partially unclothed from the end of the Greek Classical period onwards, when they begin to be represented according to the iconographic type of a naked Aphrodite<sup>19</sup>. They are completely nude, the body more and more exposed from the 1st century BC – 1st century AD (Figs 3 and 4) until the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, during the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, when they lost completely the veil that served as both clothing and locomotion accessory (Fig. 5). This loss of the veil, however, remains rather rare and, as far as one can judge from documents published today, it seems confined to between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, before the spread of auras in

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *supra* n. 7.

<sup>19</sup> In general, for the evolution of the literary and iconographic representations of the Nereids, see especially P. Weizsäcker, “Nereiden”, in *Roschers Lexikon...* 3 (1897-1902), col. 207-240; G. Herzog-Hauser, “Nereiden”, in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 17.1 (1936), col. 1-23; N. Icard-Gianolio, A.-V. Szabados, “Nereides”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum...*, 6 (1992), p. 785-824; S. G. Miller, “Eros and the Arms of Achilles”, *American Journal of Archaeology* 90 (1986), p. 159-170; M. L. Neira Jiménez, “Representaciones de nereidas. La pervivencia de algunas series tipológicas en los mosaicos romanos de la Antigüedad Tardía”, *La tradición en la Antigüedad Tardía. Antigüedad y cristianismo* 14 (1997), p. 363-402. Cf. the analogous evolution of the representations of the Nymphs: M. Halm-Tisserant, G. Siebert, “Nymphaei”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 8 (1997), p. 891-902; J. L. Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, cult, lore*, Oxford, 2001.



Fig. 3 Silver cosmetic box in the shape of a St. James shell, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

the drawings<sup>20</sup>. Representations of Nereids can therefore be compared to the evolution of the iconographic types of the three *Charitai* / Graces, the companions of Aphrodite / Venus, who exposed their completely naked bodies front and back, as sanitary divinities of the baths, from the beginning of the Roman imperial epoch<sup>21</sup>. Born of the dreams of sailors, who imagined the seduction and dangers of the sea in

<sup>20</sup> E.g. N. Icard-Gianolio, A.-V. Szabados, “Nereides...”, nr. 127 (mosaic of Trajan’s baths at Acholla), 237 (golden Egyptian plaque, Louvre X.5340, 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). We could add the mosaics of Neptune at Acholla, showing Nereids without veils (nr. 13, 18, 19, 21) or with one veil which has strictly no role in dressing or navigation. Archaeological excavations confirmed the date in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD: see S. Gozlan, A. Bourgeois, A. El Fourgi, F. Jannin, R. Prudhomme, *La Maison du triomphe de Neptune à Acholla (Botria, Tunisie)*. I. *Les mosaïques*, Rome, 1992; cf. déjà S. Gozlan, “Les pavements en mosaïques de la Maison de Neptune à Acholla-Botria (Tunisie)”, *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 59 (1974), p. 71-135. Also, the mosaic of the birth of Venus at Cártama (Málaga) is dated from the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD: see M. P. San Nicolás Pedraz, “Seres mitológicos y figuras alegóricas en los mosaicos romanos de Hispania en relación con el agua”, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie II. Historia Antigua* 17-18 (2004-2005), p. 301-333 (online <https://doi.org/10.5944/etfii.17-18.2004.4429>), p. 307 et fig. 5.

<sup>21</sup> E. B. Harrison, “Charites”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum*... 3 (1986), p. 191-203; H. Sichtermann, “Gratiae”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum*... 3 (1986), p. 203-210; D. Manacorda, “Per una lettura iconografica delle tre Grazie”, in I. Colpo, G. Ghedini (ed.), *Il gran poema delle passioni e delle meraviglie: Ovidio e il repertorio letterario e figurativo fra antico e risocerta dell’antico. Atti del convegno (Padova, 15-17 settembre 2011)*, Padova, 2012, p. 463-476.



Fig. 4 Fresco of the Villa Arianna in Stabiae, antechamber 8; 4<sup>th</sup> style, 54-68 AD.

the form of the *Other* – pretty woman and / or monstrous animal – the daughters of the Greek god Nereus appear as models of feminine beauty, just like Aphrodite / Venus and the other marine goddesses, in contrast to the strangeness of the fantastic beings who bear them on the waves. Favorable and pleasing to the gods, heroes, humans and animals of all kinds, the Nereids symbolize the attraction of multiple crossings, from one shore to another of the sea or from one end to the other of one's



1 - N° 53. Médaillon 19.



2 - N° 53. Médaillon 20.



3 - N° 53. Médaillon 21.



4 - N° 53. Médaillon 22.

Fig. 5 Examples of Nereid medallions from Acholla.

acrobatic attitudes. Thus, one notices the success of a pair of riding Nereids, one seen from the front, the other from behind, from the beginning of the Hellenistic era, when the famous cosmetics box from the Taranto Museum was carved in silver in the shape of a scallop shell, gilded and inlaid with garnet stones (Fig. 3). The upper valve of the shell, which serves as lid, has a double carved decoration: on the outside, a Nereid, half-naked, reveals her breasts while riding a marine panther; inside, another Nereid, seen from behind, reveals her thigh as she gallops on a hippocamp<sup>23</sup>. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, in the frescoes in Villa Arianna at Stabiae (painted in the interval between 54-68 AD, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Campanian style) two similar Nereids reveal their colors: one, brown-haired and seen from the front, rides a hippocamp; the other, blonde-haired and seen from behind, rides and waters a marine panther (Fig. 4)<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> For the etymology, F. Bader, "Autour de Thétis la Néréide", in F. Jouan (ed.), *Mort et fécondité dans les mythologies. Actes du colloque de Poitiers 13-14 mai 1983*, Paris, 1986, p. 19-37; more generally, L. M. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad*, Berkeley, 1991, and J. M. Barringer, *Divine Escorts. Nereids in Archaic and Classical Greek Art*, Ann Arbor, 1995; lately, A. Ambühl, "Nereiden", in *Der Neue Pauly...*, online 2006 ([http://dx.doi.org/janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1574-9347\\_dnp\\_e820480](http://dx.doi.org/janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1574-9347_dnp_e820480)); on the signification of the nude, M. L. Neira Jiménez, "Desnudo y atracción en los mosaicos. Venus, Europa y las nereidas", in M. L. Neira Jimenez (ed.), *Desudo y Cultura. La construcción del cuerpo en los mosaicos romanos*, Madrid, 2013, p. 32-47.

<sup>23</sup> N. Icard-Gianolio, A.-V. Szabados, "Nereides...", nr. 40.

<sup>24</sup> O. Elia, *Pitture di Stabia*, Napoli, 1957, p. 65-69; A. Allroggen Bedel, "Die Wandmalereien aus der Villa in Campo Varano (Castellammare di Stabia)", *Rheinisches Museum* 84 (1977), p. 27-89; I. Bragantini, V. Sampaolo, L. Spina, *La pittura pompeiana*, Napoli, 2009, p. 449 nr. 238a-b (with further literature).

life<sup>22</sup>. They are decorative elements fitting all kinds of contexts, adaptable to sacred, public or private spaces, to men's meals, women's recreation and to the rest of all those who have died. From the Hellenistic period to the end of Antiquity, artists multiplied the angles of view, Nereids' physical features or the species of monsters they rode, in more or less



Fig. 6 Five silver medallion plates with Nereids from the Sadovyi treasure.

The same combination appears in the decoration of tableware and in thematic series such as that of the Sadovyi kurgan (1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Fig.6)<sup>25</sup>.

Eight gilded silver cups discovered together with a silver basin and two bronze cauldrons, probably to recall a funerary banquet, are decorated with central medallions depicting joyful Bacchic and erotic scenes. Five medallions include Nereids: three (one front view and two identical rear views) ride on the backs of hippocamps, in the company of swimming *putti* (*Erotes / Amores*); two Nereids are led by Tritons carrying arms and a cuirass. Together with the *Erotes / Amores*, *Psychai* and the Silenus of the other medallions, these Nereids and their marine monsters form a veritable series of deities related to the pleasures and the troubles of human life that one can reduce to the tumult of a banquet, of love and war.

<sup>25</sup> V. M. Kossianenko, "Les phiales et phalères du kourgane Sadovyi", in V. Schiltz (dir.), *L'Or des Amazones. Peuples nomades entre Asie et l'Europe. VI<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C. – IV<sup>e</sup> siècle apr. J.-C.*, Musée Cernuschi 16 mars-15 juillet 2001, Paris, 2001, p. 194-202, nr. 219-223.



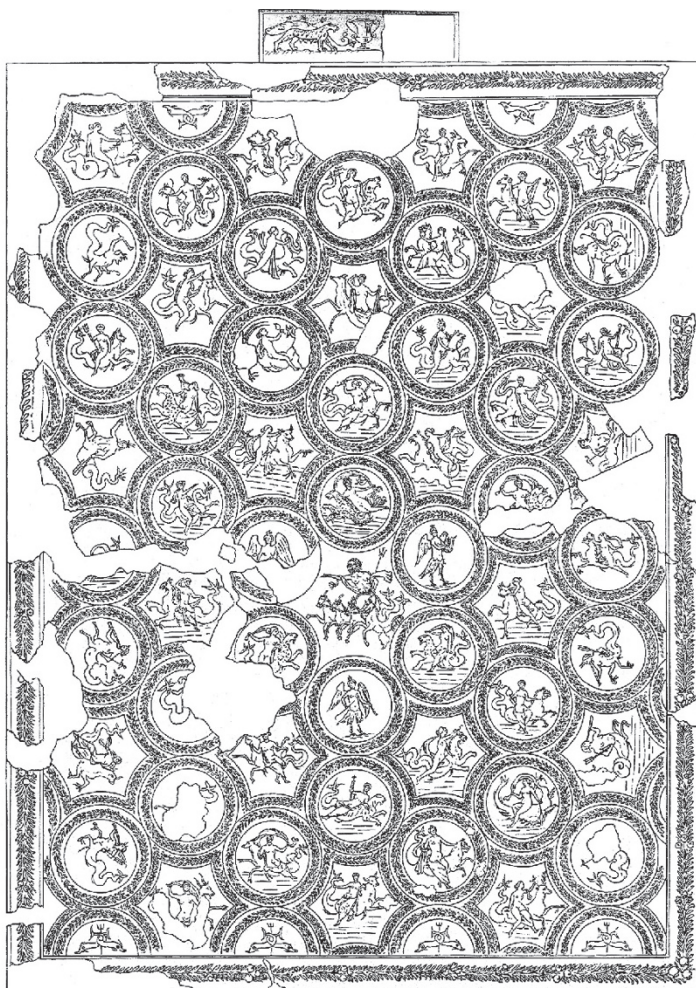


Fig. 7 Drawing of the Nereid mosaic in the *domus* of Sorothus in Sousse.

Until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, artists multiplied the positions of the Nereids and the monsters to which they could be related. Then they invented huge inventories of various figures, preserved to our times on mosaics. These were real exercises in virtuosity for the artists who drew the best from their imaginations while respecting the frame of a relatively simple iconographic canon (Fig 7)<sup>26</sup>. Sometimes, the

<sup>26</sup> J.-P. Laporte, H. Lavagne, “Sousse: la domus de Sorothus et ses mosaïques”, *Comptes-rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 150.2 (2006), p. 1327-1392. The Nereids catalogue is a Homeric motive, going back to the *Iliad* 18.38-49. For the variety of the attitudes of the *Erotas*, combined with that of the Nereids, see also the mosaic of the triumph of Neptune in Utica (preserved in the Bardo Museum and dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD): K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage*, Oxford, 1978, p. 153-156.



Fig. 8 The main dish of the Mildenhall treasure.

Nereids came together with *Erotes*, dolphins and other marine fauna. These companions drew attention to the Nereids' power of seduction, or evoked their mythical and transgressive unions with gods, monsters or men<sup>27</sup>. These literary and iconographic traditions remained alive until the end of Antiquity, in a Christian context, as shown by the great Dionysian dish of the Mildenhall treasure (actually discovered at West Row, Suffolk, UK in 1942, along with 34 other pieces of Roman silver tableware, preserved in the British Museum, Fig. 8)<sup>28</sup>. Around Oceanus' (the cosmic river's) head, within a circle marked by scallop shells, there is a series of four Nereids, two of whom ride a hippocampus and a deer seen from both front and back, while interposed among

them, two other Nereids come together with a Triton and a marine centaur. The alternation of their positions suggests a complete reversal of the naked body of the beautiful goddess of the depths. This makes us think of a dance including the entire sphere of waters, in which Dionysus / Bacchus plunged to escape Lycurgus and from where he brought Ariadne, after extending his power around the Earth. From the same period, we have a silver pyramid casket with gilded decoration, discovered within the so-called Esquiline treasury (also in the British Museum, Fig. 9). The lid has five sides: on the upper, rectangular surface two *Erotes / Amores* present the joint portrait of two Christian spouses, for whose marriage this work has been made. Of the four trapezoidal and richly decorated panels, on the lateral sides of the casket, one represents the birth and toilet of the marine Venus emerging from a shell, supported by two ichthyocentaurs (marine centaurs) with *Amores* bearing gifts. On the opposite large side, six characters divided into two groups of three facing each other, go to some public baths; one of them holds a box, perhaps to be compared to the one that supports these representations. Between these two large images, on the short sides of the lid, there are two Nereids riding a seahorse and another sea monster (Greek *kêtos*)<sup>29</sup>. Here, as on other metal objects, frescoes and mosaics, the Nereids

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the inventories of sources *supra* n. 19.

<sup>28</sup> J. M. C. Toynbee, K. S. Painter, "Silver Picture Plates...", p. 16-17, 22-24, nr. 1, pl. VIIa; lately, R. Hobbs et al., *The Mildenhall Treasure: Late Roman Silver Plate from East Anglia*, London, 2016 (online [www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/200\\_Mildenhall.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/200_Mildenhall.pdf)).

<sup>29</sup> For the treasure, see K. J. Shelton, *The Esquiline Treasure*, London, 1981; A. Cameron, "The Date and Owners of the Esquiline Treasure: The Nature of the Evidence", *American Journal of Archaeology* 89.1 (1985), p. 135-145; K. Shelton, "The Esquiline Treasure: The

are a common decorative motif that fill space in a harmonious way, respectful of the usual iconographic canons. Sometimes, they can be more than mere decorations and have strong, symbolic meaning, as aquatic deities of beauty and the strangeness of life and the passage to the Underworld. Whatever the meaning of their representations, weak or strong, varied as they were, the iconography of the Nereid is always easily recognizable.



Fig. 9 The Projecta Casket in the Esquiline treasure.

## 2.2. *A maritime goddess: Thetis, Amphitrite, Beroe, Amymone or Leucothea?*

On our plate, however, several details – different from the typical iconographic form featuring Nereids – deserve attention: first of all, the young woman, naked and passive, is alone. Nereids are usually represented in larger groups, in active roles, directing, playing or interacting with other characters or, at least, with their sea monster<sup>30</sup>. Also, our rider does not move by her own means: a Triton leads her hippocamp, while a second Triton escorts her from behind. This scenario is, to my knowledge, without parallel in representations of a Nereid without a strong identity. Moreover, her central position on the plate makes such an assumption unlikely, unless one supposes that the plate belonged to a series, now lost, that displayed other Nereids.

Like other researchers before me, I will try to identify the Nereid: this is a difficult task, since she has no particular symbol. Therefore, I cannot call her Thetis, the most

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Nature of the Evidence”, *American Journal of Archaeology* 89.1 (1985), p. 147-155; K. S. Painter, “Il tesoro dell’Esquilino”, in S. Ensoli, E. La Rocca (dir.), *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*, Roma, 2000, p. 140-146; J. Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text*, Princeton, 2007, p. 200-224. For the iconography of Venus’ maritime procession, see, K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa...*, p. 154-159; Sabina Toso, “Il ‘Trionfo di Venere’. Una nuova proposta di classificazione iconografica”, in I. Bragantini, F. Guidobaldi (ed.), *Atti del II Colloquio dell’Associazione italiana per lo studio e la conservazione del mosaico, Roma 5-7 dicembre 1994*, Bordighera, 1995, p. 293-300; A. Papagiannaki, “Nereids and Hippocamps: The Marine Thiasos on Late Antique and Medieval Byzantine Ivory and Bone Caskets”, in L. Kouneni (ed.), *The Legacy of Antiquity: New Perspectives in the Reception of the Classical World*, Cambridge, 2013, p. 71-103.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 19-20.

famous of Nereus' daughters<sup>31</sup>, despite the numerous representations of Thetis in Greek and Roman art<sup>32</sup>. Such an identification could only be supported by a representation of the weapons that Achilles' mother ordered from the god Hephaistos/Vulcan and that she carried from Lemnos to Troy, together with her Nereid sisters<sup>33</sup>. Another candidate, the other very famous Nereid, Amphitrite, the personification of the sea itself, wife of Poseidon / Neptune and mother of Triton. The presence of Triton(s) at his/(their) parents' wedding is anachronistic but is possible in mythical time and often appears in Roman representations<sup>34</sup>. From the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Amphitrite appears on a hippocamp, together with Eros, perhaps on the reverse of a Brettii gold drachma. The identification of Amphitrite on this coin is based on the appearance of Poseidon's face and trident on the obverse.

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<sup>31</sup> W. Roscher, "Thetis", 4 (1909-1915), col. 785-799; M. Mayer, "Thetis", in *Real-Encyclopädie...* II.11 (1936), col. 206-242; L. Séchan, "Légendes grecques de la mer", *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé* 14 (1955), p. 3-47 (p. 37-43); R. Vollkommer, "Thetis", in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 8 (1997), p. 6-14; L. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis...*

<sup>32</sup> The naked rider on our plate could have been compared with supposed representations of Thetis, mother of Achilles, on an ichthyocentaur with a trident on gold medallions from Aboukir, dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD and interpreted as expressions of Caracalla's (188-217 AD) and Severus Alexander's (222-235 AD) *imitation Alexandri*. Nonetheless, despite a significant bibliography (e.g. Elizabeth Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander the Great*, London-New York, 2006, p. 63, 121, 192; K. Dahmen, *The Legend of Alexander the Great on Greek and Roman Coins*, London-New York, 2007, p. 37, 92-93, 166; K. Dahmen, "Alexander in Gold and Silver: Reassessing Third Century AD Medallions from Aboukir and Tarsos", *American Journal of Numismatics* 20 [2008], p. 493-546), these medallions appear to be nothing other than fakes from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See A. Savio, "Intorno ai medaglioni talismanici di Tarso e di Aboukir", *Rivista italiana di numismatica e scienze affini* 96 (1994-1995), p. 73-103; A. Savio, *Veri o falsi? I medaglioni di Aboukir*, Milano, 2011, especially see the critical review of François de Callatay in *Revue Belge de Numismatique* 157 (2011), p. 278-280.

<sup>33</sup> As on the plates of the treasure of Sadovyi, mentioned above, n. 25; see also N. Icard-Gianolio, A.-V. Szabados, "Nereides...", nr. 300-416.

<sup>34</sup> See S. Kaempf-Dimitriadou, "Amphitrite", in *Lexicon Iconographicum ...* 1 (1981), p. 724-735 (especially nr. 67-74); N. Icard-Gianolio, "Tritones...", nr. 70-72. Amphitrite's name probably comes from the same root as Triton, referring to the crackling (τρίζω) of the sea. Starting with Hesiod's *Theogony* (930-931), they are associated in allegorical interpretations of nature (Cornutus, *On the Nature of Gods* 43 Lang; Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 381e; Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Cratylus* 151 Pasquali), in textual and figurative images (Lucian, *Dialogues of the Sea Gods* 15.3; Pausanias 2.1.7-8 = N. Icard-Gianolio, "Tritones...", nr. 72); in mythological texts (Hyginus, *Fabulae. Praef.*; Ps.-Apollodorus, *Library* 1.28; *Orphic Argonautica* 338-339), and more generally in scholarly explanations: J. Tzetzes, *Scholia in Lycophron* 34, 886; Eustathius, *Commentary on the Iliad* III p. 348 van der Valk. More generally, cf. H. W. Stoll, "Amphitrite", *Roschers Lexikon...* 1 (1884-1890), col. 318-321; K. Wernicke, "Amphitrite", in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 1 (1894), col. 1963-1967.



Fig. 10 Gold coin of the Brettii, 4th century BC, with Poseidon and Amphitrite, Aphrodite or one Nereid.

(fig. 10)<sup>35</sup>. It is true that the hippocamp itself is an animal related to Poseidon / Neptune, but since the god is absent, there is no definite proof that the woman is Amphitrite.

Some have considered the identification of the Nereid on our plate with Beroe-Amymone, the Nymph daughter of Aphrodite and

Adonis promised to Poseidon. She was the eponym of the Syrian city of Beroe and her myth was influenced by a namesake Danaid, equally a mistress of Poseidon, mother of Nauplios and source of the springs at Lerna, in Argolis (Peloponnesus). The particular care that at least one of the two Tritons shows to her encourages us to consider this to be Danaid Amymone, who was brought by Triton to Poseidon on a dolphin<sup>36</sup>. Nonetheless, our rider lacks a hydria, the water pitcher specific to the Danaids, which would identify her as one of them and, more generally, as a Nymph. Moreover, there is no particular emphasis on the link with a Triton or with Poseidon on our plate.

The representation should, nevertheless, correspond to a goddess before or at the time of the marriage itself. Two details support this interpretation: first, the rider's hairstyle has three braids on each side (thus six braids in all): this could correspond to the Roman hairstyle of the *seni crines*, characterizing Vestals and brides<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> B. V. Head, *Historia Numorum: A Manual of Greek Numismatics*, Oxford, 1911<sup>2</sup> (1<sup>ère</sup> ed. 1887), p. 91; S. Kaempf-Dimitriadou, "Amphitrite...", nr. 6. Others preferred to see Aphrodite: H. Riggauer, "Eros auf Münzen", *Zeitschrift für Numismatik* 8 (1881), p. 71-99 (p. 74-75).

<sup>36</sup> P. В. Кинжалов, "Грустная Нереида..." has suggested the connection with Amymone-Beroe. The most important textual sources are: Pausanias 2.37-38 et 4.35.2; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Sea Gods* 8; Ps.-Apollodorus, *Library* 2.14; Philostratus, *Images* 1.8; cf. Nonnus of Panopolis 8.240-242, 42.464-474 and Rufinus, *Greek Anthology* 5.75 for the later development of her erotic symbolism. For more complete inventories of occurrences, see J. Escher, "Amymone 4", in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 1 (1894), col. 2002-2003; O. Waser, "Danaïdes", in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 4 (1901), col. 2087-2091; J. Ch. Balty, "Nouvelles mosaïques du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle sous la "Cathédrale de l'Est"", in J. Balty, J. Ch. Balty (ed.), *Apamée de Syrie. Bilan des recherches archéologiques 1969-1971. Actes du Colloque tenu à Bruxelles les 15, 17 et 18 avril 1972*, Bruxelles, 1972, p. 163-185 (p. 174-177); E. Simon, "Amymone", in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 1 (1891), p. 742-752.

<sup>37</sup> N. Boëls-Janssen, *La vie religieuse des matrones dans la Rome archaïque*, Rome, 1999, p. 103-126; K. K. Hersch, *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2010, p. 69-134.

Moreover, the numerous erotic attributes of Aphrodite / Venus may be interpreted as components of an erotic, therefore nuptial atmosphere (see below). Yet, the absence of any trace of a husband – who could have been directly illustrated or at least represented by one of his envoys or by a symbol, like the trident – reduces the wedding hypothesis to pure speculation.

Since the woman has no companion, one could try to identify her with Leucothea, the maritime goddess into which Ino, daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia, and wife of Athamas, was transformed after throwing herself in the sea. Hera drove her insane for having protected the child Dionysus<sup>38</sup>. This interpretation would fit a Caucasian region, close to Colchis, because, according to Strabo (11.2.17), the indigenous Moschoi had an important cult for this goddess. Moreover, there is no surprise in finding a savior goddess (of castaways in the sea) in a house and finally in a tomb. Yet, there are contrary arguments: the rider looks like a young virgin; she has no veil and the scenario does not fit those into which we usually recognize Ino / Leucothea: during her suicide and her metamorphosis.

### 2.3. *The birth and triumph of Aphrodite / Venus of the seas?*

The modern viewer, familiar with the numerous representations of the ‘birth of Venus’, at least from Sandro Botticelli onwards<sup>39</sup>, might identify the young woman as Aphrodite *Pontia* / the maritime Venus, transported by sea beings immediately after her birth<sup>40</sup>. Although this goes against the iconographic and interpretative

<sup>38</sup> See the inventories in H. Schirmer, “Leukothea”, in *Rochers Lexikon...* II. 2 (1894-1897), col. 2011-2017; S. Eitrem, “Leukothea 1”, in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 24 (1925), col. 2293-2306; A. Nercessian, “Ino”, *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 5 (1990), p. 657-661; also J. P. Darmon, “Joueurs de dés et autres énigmes de la mosaïque aux chevaux de Carthage”, *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* 2000 [2004], p. 106-118; J. Hajji, “Le plongeur d’Ino dans la mer sur un *emblema* de Carthage”, *Africa* 24 (2017), p. 135-146.

<sup>39</sup> Online <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/MQEEq50LABEBVg?hl=fr>. See W. S. Heckscher, “The “Anadyomene” in the Mediaeval tradition: (Pelagia-Cleopatra-Aphrodite) a prelude to Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus””, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 7 (1956), p. 1-38. For our plate, the identification with Aphrodite was already suggested by S. Reinach, *Répertoires de reliefs grecs et romains* III, Paris, 1912, p. 482.

<sup>40</sup> Besides the geographical names referring to the sea (at Cyprus, Cos), Aphrodite was worshiped as a maritime goddess with the adjectives (*epiclesis*) of “*Pontia*, *Épipontia*, *Pelagia* / maritime”, “*Euploia* / who guarantees a happy sailing”, “*Limênia* / of the harbour”, “*Eplimênia* / littoral”, “*Naos* / naval”, “*Sôsineôs* / who saves the ships”, “*Ourios* / who sends favorable winds”; “*Nauarkis* / of the fleet”, “*Limênarkhis* / who governs the harbour”. In Hellenistic and Roman times, the best-known iconographic type for Aphrodite’s birth from the sea is that of the *Anadyomene*: Strabo 14.2.19; Pliny the Elder 35.87, 91-92; Athenaeus of Naucratis 13.59 (590f). See D. M. Brinkerhoff, *Hellenistic Statues of Aphrodite. Studies in the History of their Stylistic Development*, New York-London, 1978, p. 56-69; A. Delivorrias, G. Berger-Doer, A. Kossatz-Deissmann, “Aphrodite”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 2 (1984), p. 1-151 (nr. 423-455 for the *Anadyomene*; nr. 977-986 on a

traditions that link hippocampi closely to the Nereids and that place Venus on a shell, a dolphin or directly on two Tritons, several reasons plead in favor of such a hypothesis or, at least, approve a strong erotic and sexual reading of the representation.

Firstly, riding was a common ancient metaphor for the sexual act: if the movements of a dolphin on the plate can be interpreted as an attempt to escape Eros' grip, the young woman on horseback corresponds to a character who dominates through erotic love<sup>41</sup>. She is completely naked, and she offers all her body to the view of the public, probably suggesting sexual power, unusual for a woman<sup>42</sup>. Secondly, the central point of the plate, from which the artist drew the circle and, within it, the scene, is exactly the uncovered sex of the young woman. This is an 'origin of the world', recalling Venus Genitrix, goddess of love and personification of the creative force of Nature<sup>43</sup>. As such, the image could correspond to a word play based on the Latin formula *Genitrix orbis*, which characterizes the goddess as well as the empresses who identified themselves with the goddess, beginning with the first emperor's wife, Livia<sup>44</sup>. The goddess 'who gives birth to the *orbis*' is the origin of both the lands

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dolphin, nr. 1011-1017, in a shell, nr. 1158-1188 for her birth from the sea); M.-O. Jentel, "Aphrodite (*in periphéria orientali*)", in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 2 (1984), p. 154-166 (nr. 40-153); E. Schmidt, "Venus", in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 8 (1997), p. 192-230 (nr. 133-207 for *Anadyomene*, 307-311 for her birth, nr. 312-319 for her triumph, nr. 322-323 for Venus' ship, etc.). More recently, K. Schoch, *Die Doppelte Aphrodite: alt und neu bei griechischen Kultbildern*, Göttingen, 2009; M. E. Wardle, *Naked and Unashamed: A Study of the Aphrodite Anadyomene in the Greco-Roman World*, PhD Duke University, 2010. For the identification of Aphrodite Apatouros in the Cimmerian Bosphorus as a water goddess, see Y. Ustinova, "Aphrodite Ourania of the Bosphorus: The Great Goddess of a Frontier Pantheon", *Kernos* 11 (1998), p. 209-226. For a recent synthesis on the sailors' cult of Aphrodite, see A. Fenet, *Les dieux olympiens et la mer*, Rome, 2016, p. 105-136.

<sup>41</sup> See B. S. Thornton, *Eros. The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, Boulder Colorado, 1997, p. 38-40.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. L. Bonfante, "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art", *American Journal of Archaeology* 93.4 (1989), p. 543-570.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. R. Schilling, *La religion romaine de Vénus: depuis les origines jusqu'au temps d'Auguste*, Paris, 1982<sup>2</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1952); M. B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, Chichester, 2014<sup>2</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2005), p. 293-303. For the cosmic meaning of the circle in figurative arts, see I. Morand, "La structure des mosaïques romaines et ses rapports avec la pensée grecque", *Revue des études anciennes* 101 (1999), p. 143-159.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. F. Chaves Tristán, "Livia como Venus en la amonedación de la Colonia Romula", *Acta Numismática* 7 (1978), p. 89-96; M. B. Flory, "The Symbolism of Laurel in Cameo Portraits of Livia", *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 40 (1995), p. 43-68; R. Schilling, "L'évolution du culte de Vénus sous l'empire romain", in *Dans le sillage de Rome. Religion, poésie, humanisme*, Paris, 1988, p. 152-183; R. Schilling, G. Freyburger, "La religion romaine de Vénus sous l'Empire", in N. Belayche, Y. Lehmann (ed.), *Religions de Rome. Dans le sillage des travaux de R. Schilling*, Turnhout, 2017, p. 243-314. More generally, on the influence of the adaptations of Aphrodite's / Venus' iconographic types to representations

surrounded by seas on the terrestrial globe, in the middle of the celestial sphere, and also of the circular plate on which she is represented.

Thirdly, as a sea goddess<sup>45</sup>, Aphrodite is a mistress who calms the waves, at least from Hellenistic times onwards: the absence of a veil – and, therefore, of any wind – and the graceful balance of her pose corresponds well to a goddess called *Galenaie* / *Galene* (“who calms the sea”)<sup>46</sup>. The dolphins support this identification, even if they are not definite proof: as well as their cleverness and artistic sensitivity, dolphins were known for their love (towards their fellow species, but also towards humans). The depth of their feelings could bring them to die when a beloved disappeared. At the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Aulus Gellius was mentioning ancient and more recent stories about the link these animals had with the goddess, through their epithets: *uenereos et amasios*<sup>47</sup>. Several sculptures represent a dolphin, sometimes with Eros riding, with different types of Aphrodite / maritime Venus – like the Medici Venus and the Doidalsas (or crouching) Venus, as part of *nymphaea* and even small fountains<sup>48</sup>.

There is no doubt that, on our plate, the three *putti* presented in various poses – one in the air, another on the hippocamp, the last swimming on the dolphin – are *Erotes* / *Amores*. Two of them have wings that are quite visible. The third one floats with a scarf extended before and behind, left and right, from his left shoulder. He shows his

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of mortal women, see J. P. Salathe, *Roman Women Portrayed as Venus: political, social and religious contexts*, PhD Baltimore 1997.

<sup>45</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 188-206; Homer, *Hymn to Aphrodite* (5); Plato, *Cratylus* 406c; Cornutus, *Greek Theology* 24. Cf. V. Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque*, Liège, 1994; U. Bittrich, *Aphrodite und Eros in der antiken Tragödie mit Ausblicken auf motivgeschichtlich verwandte Dichtungen*, Berlin-New York, 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Callimachus, *Epigram* 5 Pfeiffer, ap. Athenaeus of Naucratis, *Deipnosophists* 7.106 Kaibel 318b-c; (cf. H. W. Prescott, “Callimachus’ Epigram on the Nautilus”, *Classical Philology* 16.4 (1921), p. 327-337; K. Gutzwiller, “The Nautilus, the Halycon, and Selenia: Callimachus’s ‘Epigram’ 5 Pf. = 14 G. - P.”, *Classical Antiquity* 11.2 [1992], p. 194-209; S. Barbantani, “Goddess of Love and Mistress of the Sea: Notes on a Hellenistic Hymn to Arsinoe-Aphrodite [“P. Lit. Goodsp. 2”, I-IV]”, *Ancient Society* 35 [2005], p. 135-165); Philodemos of Gadara in *Anthologia Palatina* 10.21. Cf. also N. Icard-Gianolio, “Galene I”, in *Lexicon iconographicum*...4 (1988), p. 151-153.

<sup>47</sup> *Attic Nights* 6.8.1; cf. the Hellenistic and Roman erotic epigrams: K. J. Gutzwiller, “Meleager as Erotic Dolphin: a Reading of ‘AP’ 12.52”, *Hermathena* 173/174. *Studies in Hellenistic Poetry* (2002-2003), p. 91-105. For a complete inventory of references, see R. Wagner, “Delphin”, in *Real-Encyclopädie*... 4 (1901), col. 2504-2510; D’A. Wentworth Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes*, London, 1947, p. 52-56 s.u.

<sup>48</sup> See G. Becatti, *Ninfe e divinità marine. Ricerche mitologiche iconografiche e stilistiche*, Roma, 1971, who explains the large diffusion of types by their interpretation as Nymphs, even if he admits (p. 27): “tipi di Afrodite chiaramente e intenzionalmente modificati in nuove creazioni con precisa funzione di statue decorative per fontana, per i quali non sappiamo più se fossero considerati ancora come immagini di Afrodite oppure di generiche Ninfe, nonostante la evidente ascendenza iconografica”.



infantine masculine anatomy and raises a *pecten*, a St. James shell with both arms (mentioned above)<sup>49</sup>. These representations are not surprising, given the large number of *putti* / *Erotes* in Roman decorations and the multiplicity of Eros' nature: he is not only a hunter with the bow, but also a fisher – with a line, a net and even his own hands, as in the case of the dolphin on our plate<sup>50</sup>.

As far back in time as we can go, people of different cultures have made analogies between shell valves and the female vulva<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, given their hermaphroditic specificity, the ancients believed shells were born by spontaneous generation (Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 3.10.8 761b). Their genesis was thus analogous to that of Aphrodite, born from the sea's foam – Uranus' sperm fallen into the water from the sky<sup>52</sup>. Just like the shells, the original Greek goddess seems to have been representative of sexuality without fertility, different from that of a married couple<sup>53</sup>. Among all these shells, the beautiful St. James scallop was one of the best-known symbols of Aphrodite / Venus, before receiving its Christian name as a protective symbol for pilgrims on the Way of Saint James, in order to honor the apostle who was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee.

From Classical and Hellenistic times onwards, the *Pectinidae* are present in archaeological domestic and funerary inventories, connected with female beauty care, as cosmetic wrap or as a model for boxes and metal mirrors<sup>54</sup>. The intentional

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<sup>49</sup> It is not possible to find a unique explanation for these variations in representations of *putti* with or without wings: R. Stuveras, *Le putto...*, p. 165-181.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. N. Blanc, F. Gury, "Eros/Amor", in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 3 (1986), p. 850-1049, nr. 301-331, 739-742. More generally, for the literary image, see F. Lasserre, *La figure d'Éros dans la poésie grecque*, Lausanne, 1946.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. the mimes writer Sophron of Syracuse *ap.* Athenaeus of Naucratis 3.32 86e; Fulgentius, *Mythologies* 2.1. This symbol clearly appears on some fountains featuring Nymphs holding a large shell in front of their lower abdomen: e.g. B. Kapossy, *Brunnenfiguren der hellenistischen und römischen Zeit*, Zürich, 1969, p. 12-14, Abb. 1-3. For the relationship with Aphrodite, K. Tümpel, "Die Muschel der Aphrodite", *Philologus* 51 (N.F. 5, 1892), p. 385-402; A. Zucker, "Album mythique..."; for comparisons with other cultures, M. Eliade, "Remarques sur le symbolisme des coquillages", in *Images et symboles. Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux*, Paris, 1952, p. 164-198.

<sup>52</sup> See the sources in F. Dümmler, "Aphrodite", in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 1 (1894), 2729-2787 (col. 2772-2773); for modern criticism, S. L. Budin, *The Origin of Aphrodite*, Bethesda Maryland, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> For the functions of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexuality who became the Roman goddess of married women, besides the work of R. Schilling (*supra* n. 43-44), see G. Lloyd-Morgan, "Roman Venus: Public Worship and Private Rites", in M. Henig, A. King (ed.), *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1986, p. 179-188; B. Lietz, *La dea di Erice e la sua diffusione nel Mediterraneo. Un culto tra Fenici, Greci e Romani*, Pisa, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Among Roman examples, there is the shell of Graincourt-lès-Havrincourt (Pas-de-Calais), L. 43 cm, l. max. 41,5 cm, h. 14,5 cm, weight 1937 g., and the smaller shells in the Saint-Germain-en-Laye Museum, also dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD: F. Baratte

confusion between the *pecten* (usually *maximus*) and pearl oysters reinforced the link between shells and Aphrodite / Venus, both born out of a union of Sky and Sea. The holder of the goddess – as well as of the pearl<sup>55</sup> – the shell became the goddess's main vehicle on the sea by the end of the Classical era, at least if the Pompeian fresco of the goddess in a shell is a close reproduction of Apelles' painting taken by Augustus to Rome (fig. 11)<sup>56</sup>. Yet, during Antiquity the shell was not the goddess's only sea-based vehicle: Aphrodite is also represented riding dolphins, fishes and birds<sup>57</sup>, as well as marine monsters – especially Tritons and, why not, as here, a hippocamp (fig. 12)<sup>58</sup>. One must make clear, however, that this association is hypothetical and that there is no parallel in ancient iconography that is confirmed by a text.

One of the most beautiful sea snails, the '*nerites*' (nerite) – that we still identify as a member of the *Neritidae* family – was born from the metamorphosis of one of Aphrodite's / Venus' lovers. The snail represented in the sea, under the feet of our rider, could be one of



Fig. 11 Pompeii Fresco II.3.3, house of Venus in the shell, southern wall and 8<sup>th</sup> peristyle; 4<sup>th</sup> style, 62-79 AD.



Fig. 12 Marble statuette in private collection.

(dir.), *Trésors d'orfèvrerie gallo-romains. Musée du Luxembourg – Paris 8 février – 23 avril 1989*, Paris, 1989, p. 149 (nr. 95), 169-171 (nr. 115-116).

<sup>55</sup> For Aphrodite's link with the pearl: Propertius 3.13.6 and Pliny the Elder 9.80, with M. B. Flory, "Pearls for Venus", *Historia* 37.4 (1988), p. 498-504, and J. G. F. Hind, "Caligula and the Spoils of Ocean: a Rush for Riches in the Far North-West?", *Britannia* 34 (2003), p. 272-274.

<sup>56</sup> For the *Anadyomene*, see above n. 40. In Greek iconography, Aphrodite emerges from a shell (oyster), from Classical time onwards: M. Brickhoff, "Afrodite nella conchiglia", *Bollettino d'Arte* 23 (1929-1930), p. 563-569; M. Bratschkova, "Die Muschel in der antiken Kunst", *Bulletin de l'Institut archéologique bulgare* 12 (1938), p. 1-131. In texts, this image is attested only in Plautus, *Rudens* 704 onwards: E. W. Leach, "Plautus' *Rudens*: Venus Born from a Shell", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15.5. A Special Classics Issue on Myth and Interpretation (1974), p. 915-931; A. Zucker, "Album mythique...".

<sup>57</sup> *Anacreontea* fr. 57.1-30.

<sup>58</sup> E. Schmidt, "Venus...", nr. 301.

these fascinating *Neritidae* – univalve, spiraled sea snails, with a smooth surface<sup>59</sup> – whose myth is quoted by Aelianus (*On the Nature of Animals* 14.28, translation A. F. Scholfield, 1959):

Κόχλος ἐστὶ θαλάττιος, μικρὸς μὲν τὸ μέγεθος, ἰδεῖν δὲ ὠραιότατος, καὶ ἐν θαλάττῃ τίκεται τῇ καθαρωτάτῃ καὶ ἐν ταῖς ὑφάλοις πέτραις καὶ ἐν ταῖς καλουμέναις χοιράσιν. ὄνομα δὲ νηρίτης ἐστὶν αὐτῷ, καὶ διαρρεῖ λόγος διπλοῦς ὑπὲρ τοῦδε τοῦ ζώου [...]. τῷ Νηρεῖ τῷ θαλαττίῳ [...] πεντήκοντα μὲν θυγατέρας τὴν Ὠκεανοῦ Δωρίδα Ἑσίοδος ἄδει τεκεῖν. [...] ἓνα δὲ οἱ γενέσθαι παῖδα ἐπὶ ταῖς τοσαύταις θυγατράσιν ἐκείνοι μὲν οὐ φασι, λόγοι δὲ θαλάττιοι ὑμνοῦσι. καὶ Νηρίτην αὐτὸν κληθῆναι λέγουσι καὶ ὠραιότατον γενέσθαι καὶ ἀνθρώπων καὶ θεῶν, Ἀφροδίτην δὲ συνδιαιωμένην ἐν τῇ θαλάττῃ ἡσθῆναί τε τῷ Νηρίτῃ τῷδε καὶ ἔχειν αὐτὸν φίλον. ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀφίκετο χρόνος ὁ εἰμαρμένος, ἔδει τοῖς Ὀλυμπίοις ἐγγραφῆναι καὶ τῆνδε τὴν δαίμονα τοῦ πατρὸς παρακαλοῦντος. ἀνιοῦσαν οὖν αὐτὴν ἀκούω καὶ τὸν ἐταῖρόν τε καὶ συμπαίστην τὸν αὐτὸν ἐθέλειν ἄγειν. τὸν δὲ οὐχ ὑπακοῦσαι λόγος ἔχει τοῦ Ὀλύμπου προτιμῶντα τὴν σὺν ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς καὶ τοῖς γειναμένοις διατριβήν. παρῆν δὲ ἄρα αὐτῷ καὶ ἀναφῶσαι πτερά, καὶ τοῦτο ἐγῶμαι δῶρον τῆς Ἀφροδίτης δωρουμένης· ὁ δὲ καὶ ταύτην παρ' οὐδὲν ποιεῖται τὴν χάριν. ὀργίζεται τοίνυν ἡ Διὸς παῖς, καὶ ἐκείνῳ μὲν ἐς τὸν κόχλον τόνδε ἐκτρέπει τὴν μορφήν, αὐτῇ δὲ αἰρεῖται ὀπαδόν τε καὶ θεράποντα ἀντ' ἐκείνου τὸν Ἐρωτα, νέον καὶ τοῦτον καὶ καλόν, καὶ οἱ τὰ πτερά τὰ ἐκείνου δίδωσιν.

ὁ δὲ ἄλλος λόγος ἐρασθῆναι βοᾷ Νηρίτου Ποσειδῶνα, ἀντερὰν δὲ τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος, καὶ τοῦ γε ὑμνουμένου Ἀντέρωτος

There is in the sea a shellfish with a spiral shell, small in size but of surpassing beauty, and it is born where the water is at its purest and upon rocks beneath the sea and on what are called sunken reefs. Its name is Nerites: two stories are in circulation touching this creature... Hesiod sings (*Theogony* 233) of how Doris the daughter of Oceanus bore fifty daughters to Nereus the sea-god... But they do not state that one son was born after all that number of daughters, though he is celebrated in mariners' tales. And they say that he was named Nerites and was the most beautiful of men and gods; also, that Aphrodite delighted to be with Nerites in the sea and loved him. And when the fated time arrived, at which, at the bidding of the father of the gods, Aphrodite also had to be enrolled among the Olympians, I have heard that she ascended and wished to bring her companion and play-fellow. But the story goes that he refused, preferring life with his sisters and parents to Olympus. And then he was permitted to grow wings; this, I imagine, was a gift from Aphrodite. But even this favour he counted as nothing. And so, the daughter of Zeus was moved to anger and transformed his shape into this shell, and of her own accord chose in his place for her attendant and servant Eros, who also was young and beautiful, and to him she gave the wings of Nerites.

But the other account proclaims that Poseidon was the lover of Nerites, and that Nerites returned his love, and that this was

<sup>59</sup> While ancient sources agree on the beauty of the nerites' colors and shapes, they are in contradiction over the identification of the species: cf., e.g., Aelianus, quoted here, and Aristotle, *The History of Animals* 4.4.26 530a, with D'A. Wentworth Thompson, *A Glossary ...*, p. 176 s.u.). Therefore, it is most probable that several sea snails were called "nerites". Against a precise identification, see A. Zucker, "Album mythique...".

έντεῦθεν τὴν γένεσιν ὑπάρξασθαι. συνδιατρίβειν οὖν τὰ τε ἄλλα τῷ ἐραστῇ τὸν ἐρώμενον ἀκούω καὶ μέντοι καὶ αὐτοῦ ἐλαύνοντος κατὰ τῶν κυμάτων τὸ ἄρμα τὰ μὲν κήτη τᾶλλα καὶ τοὺς δελφίνας καὶ προσέτι καὶ τοὺς Τρίτωνας ἀναπηδᾶν ἐκ τῶν μυχῶν καὶ περισκιρτᾶν τὸ ἄρμα καὶ περιχορεύειν, ἀπολείπεσθαι δ' οὖν τοῦ τάχους τῶν ἵππων πάντως καὶ πάντη· μόνα δὲ ἄρα τὰ παιδικὰ οἱ παρομαρτεῖν καὶ μάλα πλησίον, στόρνυσθαι δὲ αὐτοῖς καὶ τὸ κύμα καὶ δίστασθαι τὴν θάλατταν αἰδοῖ Ποσειδῶνος· βούλεσθαι γὰρ τῆ τε ἄλλῃ τὸν θεὸν εὐδοκιμεῖν τὸν καλὸν ἐρώμενον καὶ οὖν καὶ τῆ νήξει διατρέπειν. τὸν δὲ Ἥλιον νεμεσῆσαι τῷ τάχει τοῦ παιδὸς ὁ μῦθος λέγει, καὶ ἀμειψαί οἱ τὸ σῶμα ἐς τὸν κόχλον τὸν νῦν, οὐκ οἶδα εἰπεῖν ὁπόθεν ἀγριάναντα.

the origin of the celebrated Anteros (mutual love). And so, as I am told, for the rest the favourite spent his time with his lover, and moreover when Poseidon drove his chariot over the waves, all other great fishes as well as dolphins and tritons too, sprang up from their deep haunts and gambolled and danced around the chariot, only to be left utterly and far behind by the speed of his horses; only the boy favourite was his escort close at hand, and before them the waves sank to rest and the sea parted out of reverence to Poseidon, for the god willed that his beautiful favourite should not only be highly esteemed for other reasons but should also be pre-eminent at swimming. But the story relates that the Sun resented the boy's power and speed and transformed his body into the spiral shell as it now is...

The identification of the gastropod in the sea with a *Nerita* fits not only the shape it has on the plate, but also explains its position in the waves, together with the Tritons, dolphins and *Erotēs*, all faithful companions of the goddess of love.

It is, however, difficult to distinguish between Aphrodite / Venus and a Nereid and even more difficult to affirm that Aphrodite is riding the hippocamp, characteristic of the Nereids. In fact, the whole iconographic tradition concerning the sea-goddesses – Nereids, Nymphs and Charites –, from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., uses types of Aphrodite / Venus more or less naked, emerging from the water or about to take a bath (announcing seduction and marriage). There are signs enabling a positive identification of Aphrodite – like the characteristic gestures of the *Anadyomene* emerging from the shell or drying her hair, the Aphrodite / Venus *prudica* hiding her sex<sup>60</sup>, the *Pandemos* and the *Epitragia* on a she-goat, especially on copies of the cult statue from Aphrodisias in Caria (in today's Turkey, fig. 13)<sup>61</sup>. We easily recognize the goddess of love on a plate, grooming herself with the help of *Erotēs* (fig. 14). But none of the characteristic attributes and gestures can be seen on our plate. However, in some cases, many scholars prefer to identify Aphrodite as a young woman who looks like a Nereid. For example, at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Aphrodite could be represented in the temple of Poseidon in Thasos as riding a dol-

<sup>60</sup> Cf. A. Pasquier, *La Vénus de Milo et les Aphrodites du Louvre*, Paris, 1985, p. 55-59; C. M. Havelock, *The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors: A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art*, Ann Arbor, 1995; R. Kousser, "The Female Nude in Classical Art: Between Voyeurism and Power", in Ch. Kondoleon, Ph. C. Segal (dir.), *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2012, p. 149-187.

<sup>61</sup> R. Fleischer, "Aphrodite (Aphrodisias)", in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 2 (1984), p. 151-154; L. R. Brody, *The Aphrodite of Aphrodisias*, Mainz, 2007, p. 89-90.

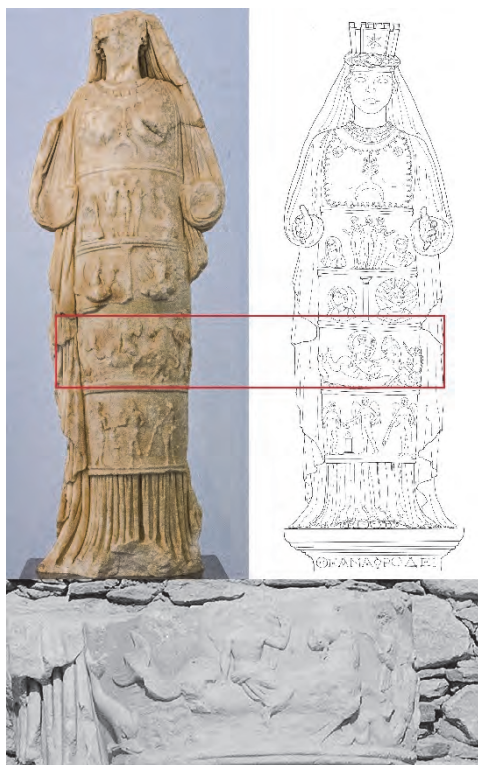


Fig. 13 Ancient copy of Aphrodite's cult statue found in the Bouleuterion, Aphrodisias, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

phin – at least this is the interpretation of the archaeologists who discovered it (fig. 15)<sup>62</sup>. A smiling Aphrodite rides one hippocamp of a group of two, on a Ptolemaic sardonyx cameo. The wind blows the veil wrapped around her left arm and right leg above her head, revealing her naked body (fig. 16)<sup>63</sup>. This identification was also suggested for a Roman



Fig. 14 Silver scoop discovered on the Esquiline and dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 4th century AD.



Fig. 15 Statue of Aphrodite on a dolphin discovered in Thasos.

<sup>62</sup> “Chronique des fouilles et découvertes archéologiques dans l’Orient hellénique”, *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 51 (1927), p. 469-501 (Thasos: p. 488-490); cf. A. Delivorrias, G. Berger-Doer, A. Kossatz-Deissmann, “Aphrodite...”, nr. 978. The identification is questionable, because in most cases the Nereids ride on dolphins: see B. S. Ridgway, “Dolphins...”. Nonetheless, in Thasos, Aphrodite would have already been represented on a dolphin on a 5<sup>th</sup> century BC relief: A. Delivorrias, G. Berger-Doer, A. Kossatz-Deissmann, “Aphrodite...”, nr. 977 (with bibliography).

<sup>63</sup> E. Babelon, *Catalogue des camées antiques et modernes de la Bibliothèque nationale*, Paris, 1897, nr. 54.

marble statue representing the goddess – if not a Nereid or Amphitrite – riding a hippocamp (fig. 11). Finally, Aphrodite / Venus is identified on a dolphin and even on a hippocamp, together with *Erotes*, on Bithynian coins from the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (fig. 17)<sup>64</sup>.

Nonetheless, until now, no written document has confirmed these hypotheses. On the contrary, texts and images exhibit great confusion between the iconographic types of the goddess herself, of her companions the Charites and of the Nereids. We can reconstruct the iconographic genesis of the Nereids, parallel to the undressing of the Aphrodite of the sea / of the baths (and thus of weddings), and to the progressive implication of the goddess in political life, by comparing images and texts of the early Hellenistic epoch. I have already mentioned the famous cosmetic box in the shape of a St. James shell from the Taranto Museum (fig. 3, *supra*). This find from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC is a good illustration of the shell-shaped objects which may have been in the mind, several decades before, of Posidippus of Pella, who wrote an epigram about Aglaia, the oldest of the Charites, engraved on an oyster (11 Austin-Bastianini, translation)<sup>65</sup>:

οὐ[χι λίθο]ς στίλβους ἄγαν ἄργυρον, ἀλλὰ  
 θαλάσσης  
 Περσικὸν αἰγιαλῶν ὄστρακον ἐνδέδεται,  
 οὖνομα μαργαρίτις· ἔχει δ' ἐν γλύμματι κοίλωι



Fig. 16 Cameo representing Arsinoe IV or Berenice IV (?) as Aphrodite, BNF Cabinet des Médailles Luynes.1 (inv.116), middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.



Fig. 17 Coin of Julia Paula (218-222 AD) from Claudiopolis (Bithynia)

No glint of silver on every side, nor is it [stone]  
 that's mounted  
 here, but Persian shell from the shores of the sea –  
 call it mother-of-pearl: and cupped in the hollow of it

<sup>64</sup> A. Delivorrias, G. Berger-Doer, A. Kossatz-Deissmann, “Aphrodite...”, nr. 973b.

<sup>65</sup> C. Austin, G. Bastianini, *Posidippi Pellaei quae supersunt omnia*, Milan, 2002; É. Prioux, *Regards alexandrins. Histoire et théorie des arts dans l'épigramme hellénistique*, Louvain, 2007, p. 187, 190-243; É. Prioux, *Petits musées en vers. Épigramme et discours sur les collections antiques*, Paris, 2008, p. 163-164, 171, 178-179.

χρυσολίθῳ μορφᾷ Ἀγλαίης ἱκέλης·  
ἦδη δ' εἰς ὄπτ' ὄγκος ὑπεκτίθεται διὰ κηροῦ  
αὐγῆν εἰς γλαφυρὸν γλύμμα φυλασσομένου.

Aglaia is depicted, [with the gleam of topaz].  
And there's a film of wax over the surface, keeping  
[the light] on the image rising, [now, to our gaze].

It is no simple coincidence that this epigram occupies a central place in the collection of the Milan papyrus (P. Mil. Vogl. 8:309), a collection that Posidippus seems to have compiled at the court of Ptolemy II Philadelphos. The wife and sister of the king, Arsinoe II, was the first Ptolemaic queen to be identified with Aphrodite Zephyritis of Canope while still alive (cf. Callimachus, *Epigram* 5 Pfeiffer)<sup>66</sup>. Her successor, Berenice, wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes, was honored as the fourth Charis / Grace – a sign of dynastic coherence with her mother-in-law Arsinoe, from whom she could nonetheless preserve her identity. A Charis was, at the same time, a companion and a substitute of the goddess of feminine beauty, with whom she had shared a common iconography from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Just like Aphrodite-Isis in Hellenistic times, a Charis, symbol of Greek euergetism, recalls the attributes of the Egyptian goddess Hathor – with whom Berenice wanted to be identified, also through the story of a lock of her hair taken by the wind from the Zephyrion sanctuary of Aphrodite, before being transformed into a constellation (Callimachus, *Aitia* fr. 110 Pfeiffer; Catullus 66). Other Ptolemaic queens continued to claim identity with Aphrodite-Isis-Hathor until Cleopatra VII Philopator, the first to proclaim herself the “New Isis”, who presented herself and asked to be represented as the goddess herself, accompanied by her son Kaisarion / Eros-Harpocrates, on coins and monuments<sup>67</sup>.

Aphrodite / maritime Venus, her Charites / Graces, the Nereids and even the Nymphs of all kinds continued to share several iconographic features and to be mixed one with another during Roman times. In fact, following R. Schilling's etymology of the Latin Venus, the original meaning of the name was *Charis* (Greek “grace”), because the theonym is derived from *uenus / ueniam*, the Latin word for “grace”<sup>68</sup>. This is a good reason to make no distinction between the iconography of Venus and Charis in Hellenistic and Roman times. Aphrodite / Venus was a perfect symbol of Ptolemaic and then Roman thalassocracies, on both the Indian sea (where pearls came from) and on the Interior Sea, center of the Greco-Roman world. This reciprocal hybridization with her Near Eastern correspondents (Isis-Hathor, Inana-Ishtar-

<sup>66</sup> See A. Kuttner, “Cabinet Fit for a Queen: The Λιθικά as Posidippus' gem museum”, in K. Gutzwiller (dir.), *The New Posidippus. A Hellenistic Poetry Book*, Oxford, 2005, p. 141-163 (p. 148-151).

<sup>67</sup> See W. A. Cheshire, “Aphrodite Cleopatra”, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 43 (2007), p. 151-191; S. Strano, *L'immagine del potere nell'Egitto Tolemaico. Revisione critica dell'iconografia di Cleopatra VII Philopator*, Oxford, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> R. Schilling, “Les origines de la Vénus romaine”, *Latomus* 17.1 (1958), p. 3-26; R. Schilling, “Controverse à propos de la Vénus romaine (réponse aux observations de P. Boyancé)”, *Revue des études anciennes* (1959), p. 107-110; R. Schilling, “La relation Venus-Venia”, *Latomus* 21.1 (1962), p. 3-7.

Atargatis-*Dea Syria*) continued throughout Antiquity<sup>69</sup>. Her beauty, power and fecundity made her a successful goddess in Roman private contexts – where the goddess of ‘grace’, already adored as *Verticordia* in Republican times, became the protector of the bride, who brought her, as an *eikon*, in her new home<sup>70</sup> – but also in public context, where Aphrodite / Venus is procreator, nurturer and finally guarantor of the cosmos’ balance (cf. Lucretius, *On Nature* 1.1-25).

In order to explain the large diffusion of images of the goddess, represented as Aphrodite herself or borrowings of her iconographic type for other aquatic goddess, one could add here the essential part played by Aphrodite / Venus in the divinization of women from the imperial family. Venus’ importance grows from Livia and the Julio-Claudians<sup>71</sup> to the Flavians (with the daughter of Titus)<sup>72</sup> and to the Antonines, following the restoration of the temple of Venus Genitrix by Trajan (with a new dedication, on 12 May 113 AD) and the construction of the temple of Venus Felix and Roma Aeterna by Hadrian (inaugurated on 21 April 121 AD). Sabina, Hadrian’s wife, and Faustina the Elder, Antoninus Pius’ wife, were represented as Venus, especially in the Genitrix type. Faustina the younger, daughter of Antoninus Pius and wife of Marcus Aurelius, took a further step in identification with the goddess, as mother (*Genitrix*) of Caesar and companion to the victories of the emperor (*Victrix*), guarantor of the well-being of the world Empire (*Felix*)<sup>73</sup>. She was represented not only as Venus of Capua, probably in the statuary group with Mars –

<sup>69</sup> For these relationships with Oriental deities, see D. K. McDonald, J. Karageorghis, “Aphrodite’s Ancestors”, in CH. Kondoleon, Ph. C. Segal (dir.), *Aphrodite ...*, p. 17-40.

<sup>70</sup> This is attested by Egyptian papyri (F. Burkhalter, “Les statuettes en bronze d’Aphrodite en Égypte romaine d’après les documents papyrologiques”, *Revue archéologique* 1 [1990], p. 51-60) and archaeological discoveries in the Greek world (H. F. Sharpe, “Bronze Statuettes from the Athenian Agora: Evidence for Domestic Cults in Roman Greece”, *Hesperia* 83.1 [2014], p. 143-187). In Rome, Petronius mentioned the statue among Trimalchio’s Lares: *Satyricon* 29.8. Cf. G. Lloyd-Morgan, “Roman Venus...”; A. Antal, *Venus Cult in Roman Dacia*, Cluj-Napoca, 2016, *passim*. During the 3rd century AD, somewhere between Bactria and India, a silver plate representing the wedding of Pasithea, one of the three Charites / Graces, was offered (probably by the husband) to a young bride: two of the Graces and, especially Aglaia, who is the married one of the three, are represented following the iconography of Aphrodite-Isis-Cleopatra: A. Dan, F. Grenet, Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Homeric Scenes ...”. By the middle of the 4th century AD, the silver Projecta Casket, in the Esquiline treasure, is another example of how Venus could accompany the bride, even in a Christian context.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. R. Pera, “Venere sulle monete da Silla ad Augusto: aspetti storico-politici”, in *Contributi di storia antica in onore di Albino Garzetti*, Genova, 1976, p. 241-268, and the publications of R. Schilling quoted above, n. 44-45.

<sup>72</sup> Martial 6.13; cf. R. Pera, “Venere sulle monete da Vespasiano agli Antonini. Aspetti storico-politici”, *Rivista italiana di numismatica e scienze affini* 80 (1978), p. 80-97.

<sup>73</sup> J. Aymard, “Vénus et les impératrices sous les derniers Antonins”, *Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire* 51 (1934), p. 178-196; T. Mikocki, *Sub specie deae. Les impératrices et princesses romaines assimilées à des déesses. Étude iconographique*, Rome, 1995, p. 63-65, 112-115.



Marcus Aurelius (fig. 18)<sup>74</sup>, but even totally naked and *Felix*, following Praxiteles' model of the Capitoline Venus (fig. 19)<sup>75</sup>. The main reasons for this identification and representations were not her attractive look, nor her adulterous lifestyle, which brought so much criticism to Marcus Aurelius and to their son, the emperor Commodus<sup>76</sup>. The sole purpose was her exemplary role as wife and mother of Caesars, inheritors of the Iulii.

Faustina reproduced the statue of Venus Genitrix on the reverse of many of her coins, sometimes together with a rudder and a dolphin (fig. 20). Yet, regardless of this wide diffusion of representations of maritime Aphrodite from the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, none of the known representations differs from the iconographical stereotypes going back to Late Classical and Hellenistic times, and none looks like the women on our plate. Even if the goddess is represented as a Nereid, in a similar attitude to that of our plate (but half covered and

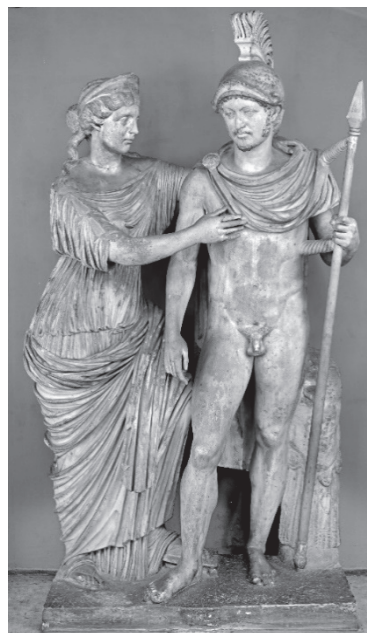


Fig. 18 Statuary group with  
Venus of Capua and Mars

<sup>74</sup> The identification of the imperial portraits on a statuette group from the Ostian necropolis of Isola sacra (now in the Museo Capitolino Salone 34, inv. 652, dated to 145-147 AD) remains questionable. In any case, the group preserved in the temple of Mars Ultor from Augustus' Forum appears on Faustina's coins. Cassius Dio (71.31) confirms the link with Venus. Represented as the gods who are at the origin of the Roman people and power, the imperial couple would signify the unity and stability of the Empire. See E. E. Schmidt, "Die Mars-Venus-Gruppe im Museo Capitolino", *Antike Plastik* 8 (1968), p. 85-94, taf. 60-64; K. Fittschen, *Die Bildnistypen der Faustina minor und die Fecunditas Augustae*, Göttingen, 1982, p. 46; more generally, B. Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, Oxford, 2014. *Contra*, for private portraits, R. Kousser, "Mythological Group Portraits in Antonine Rome: The Performance of Myth", *American Journal of Archaeology* 111.4 (2007), p. 673-691. More generally, for the representation of private women as Venus, L. M. Gigante, "Roman Commemorative Portraits: Women with the Attributes of Venus", in W. Reinink, J. Stumpel (ed.), *Memory and Oblivion. Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art Held in Amsterdam, 1-7 September 1996*, Amsterdam, 1999, p. 447-453. For the Greek origins of the Aphrodite-Ares couple, G. Pironti, "Aphrodite dans le domaine d'Arès. Éléments pour un dialogue entre mythe et culte", *Kernos* 18 (2005), p. 167-184.

<sup>75</sup> H. Wrede, "Das Mausoleum der Claudia Semne und die bürgerliche Plastik der Kaiserzeit", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Römische Abteilung*, 78 (1971), p. 125-166 (p. 155); D. E. E. Kleiner, "Second-Century Mythological Portraiture: Mars and Venus", *Latomus* 40.3 (1981), p. 512-544.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. A. Molinier Arbo, "La piété de Commode et les amants de Faustine: réflexions autour de *Comm.*, 8, 1 dans l'*Histoire Auguste*", in N. Belayche, Y. Lehmann (ed.), *Religions de Rome...*, p. 139-153.



Fig. 19 Venus *Felix* with an Eros, with a woman's portrait (perhaps Faustina the Younger?)



Fig. 20 Silver coin of Faustina the Younger, the reverse showing Venus Genitrix with a dolphin and a rudder

with a flowing veil on her back) she is always transported by a vehicle recalling the shell: never by a hippocamp<sup>77</sup>.

Therefore, all these parallels do not allow us to identify our figure with Aphrodite / Venus, but only to explain and date her iconographic type. The gestures of the putto with the *Turitella* snail and especially of the flying putto, presenting a St. James shell, recalls Venus' coronation by two *putti*, often represented from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD onwards, on the mosaics of the so-called birth, triumph and toilet of Venus<sup>78</sup>. On our plate, Eros' charming scarf recalls Venus' veil, while the shell replaces the crown. The image of two *putti* framing the goddess as she emerges from the sea appears already on the Pompeian fresco which supposedly reproduces Apelles' painting (cf. above, fig. 11). On other representations, the function of guide-companions of the newborn goddess is carried out by two Tritons (when their bodies end in fish tails, as on our plate) or by two ichthyocentaurs (when their bodies end like those of the hippocamps, for example on the Projecta Casket, cf. above fig. 9). They frame the goddess transported on a shell, a ship or by themselves, in triumph for a coronation following her birth from the sea and her toilet. An interesting example is the handle of the

<sup>77</sup> See the mosaic of the navigation of Venus at Volubilis, dated between Commodus and Septimius Severus: R. Thouvenot, "La mosaïque du "navigium Veneris" a Volubilis (Maroc)", *Revue archéologique* 1 (1977), p. 37-52; E. Schmidt, "Venus...", nr. 322-323.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. G. Charles-Picard, "Le couronnement de Vénus", *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 58 (1941), p. 43-108; J. Lassus, "Vénus marine", in G. Charles-Picard, H. Stern (ed.), *La mosaïque gréco-romaine I. Actes du colloque international sur la mosaïque gréco-romaine Paris, du 29 Août au 3 Septembre 1963*, Paris, 1965, p. 175-190; J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie*, Bruxelles, 1977, p. 16-19 (about Venus' toilet in Shahba-Philippopolis, by the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD); J. Balty, *La mosaïque de Sarrîn (Osroène)*, Paris, 1990, p. 50-53, 76-77 (about Venus' toilet, during the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD); K. M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 160-186 (p. 166-167). For a wider inventory, see E. Schmidt, "Venus...", nr. 312-319.

Allan dish (Montélimar, France, fig. 21)<sup>79</sup>: Venus appears from a shell supported by two different Tritons, while two dolphins, two *Erotes* and other maritime animals surround her. One notices here the same number of companions and auxiliaries, comprising a small procession, which has an almost similar composition between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Only the vehicle and the gestures that would have allowed an identification of the goddess are different on our plate. This is why, I think, an ancient viewer would never have identified Aphrodite / Venus on the Yenikend plate.



Fig. 21 Silver handle of a dish of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD

#### 2.4. The literary solution: Galateia

Most Roman viewers who knew the Greco-Roman iconographic codes would have spontaneously identified the young women on the hippocamp with a Nereid. This may be a coincidence not taken into consideration by those who buried the plate, but in the Greco-Roman world the Nereid was the best companion for a dead person traveling to the Other World, beyond the Ocean. Originally, the Nereids accompanied their sister Thetis, the Nereid *par excellence*, bearing either the weapons or the dead body of her son Achilles (cf. above and fig. 6). The etymology of their name and their presence on funerary monuments, as in Lycian Xanthos, or on many Hellenistic and Roman sarcophagi, confirm this essential link between the Nereids and the depths of the sea where the Sun hides at the end of the day, before rising again in the next morning, at the other end of our world<sup>80</sup>. It is probably in this sense that we should interpret one of the first Hellenistic statuary groups including a Nereid riding a Triton near a putto, in the decoration of a fountain: the artist may have intended to represent a procession ready to navigate the Ocean River, travelling to the Islands of the Blessed (fig. 22)<sup>81</sup>. Indeed, Transcaucasia, beyond the Caspian

<sup>79</sup> Preserved in the Louvre, Department of the Greek, Etruscan and Roman antiquities BJ 2065. Cf. F. F. Baratte (dir.), *Trésors...*, p. 229-230, nr. 187. One may compare it with the reliefs: A. Rumpf, *Die Meerwesen...*, p. 36-38, 123-124.

<sup>80</sup> See the references *supra*, n. 22 and A. Rumpf, *Die Meerwesen...*; S. Lattimore, *The Marine Thiasos...*; S. Muth, "Gegenwelt als Glückswelt – Glückswelt als Gegenwelt? Die Welt der Nereiden, Tritonen und Seemonster in der römischen Kunst", in T. Hölscher (ed.), *Gegenwelten zu den Kulturen Griechenlands und Roms in der Antike*, München-Leipzig, 2000, p. 467-498.

<sup>81</sup> R. Stuveras, *Le putto...*, p. 155, n. 5 and photo 3, following G. Becatti, *Arte e gusto negli scrittori latini*, Firenze, 1951, pl. XXII, fig. 48.



Fig. 22 Hellenistic statuary group composed of a Nereid, a Triton and two *Erotes*

Gates, was not far from the Ocean and the Underworld – as imagined by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Nonetheless, there is nothing to prove that the deposit of this plate in the tomb was related to the Nereids' funerary function.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the Nereid is a particular, well-identified figure: if the plate was displayed at a banquet with educated people, it could inspire stories and poems about the mythical unions of one of the maritime deities, discussions about various geographical and historical realities. The erotic component of the representation is so strong that it must characterize if not Aphrodite / Venus herself, at least a deity that is well known for her love, perhaps another Aphrodite.

There are many such goddesses that could be eligible. In the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, Nonnus of Panopolis compiled a short inventory of the maritime goddesses that his erudite readers could recognize in the different iconographic versions of a beautiful virgin emerging from water. While narrating the rape of Europa by Zeus in bull form, Nonnus compares the Nymph with the different goddesses riding maritime monsters and animals. The image of the group he creates can be compared with the mosaic representing the competition between Cassiopeia and the Nereids Doris, Thetis and Galateia, in the house of Aion in Nea Paphos, from



Fig. 23 Mosaic “Judgment of the Nereids”, 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

... ὑπὲρ πόντοιο δὲ κούρη  
δαίματι παλλομένη βοῒφ ναυτίλλετο νότω  
ἀστεμφῆς ἀδιάντος· ἰδὼν δὲ μιν ἢ τάχα φαίης  
ἢ Θέτιν ἢ Γαλάτειαν ἢ ἐνόντιν Ἐννοσιγαίου  
ἢ λοφιῇ Τρίτωνος ἐφεζομένην Ἀφροδίτην.  
καὶ πλόον εἰλπόδην ἐπεθάμβεε Κυανοχαίτης,  
Τρίτων δ' ἠπεροπήα Διὸς μυκηθμὸν ἀκούων  
ἀντίτυπον Κρονίωνι μέλος μυκήσατο κόχλω  
αἰεῖδων ὑμέναιον· αἰερομένην δὲ γυναῖκα  
θαῦμα φόβῳ κεράσας ἐπεδείκνυε Δωρίδι Νηρεῦς,  
ξεῖνον ἰδὼν πλωτήρα κερασφόρον· ἀκροβαφῆ δὲ  
ὀλκάδα ταῦρον ἔχουσα βοοστόλος ἔπλεε νόμφη,  
καὶ διερῆς τρομέουσα μετάρσιον ἄλμα πορείης  
πηδάλιον κέρας εἶχε, καὶ Ἴμερος ἔπλετο ναύτης.  
καὶ δολοίεις Βορέης γαμῆ δεδονημένος αὔρη  
φᾶρος ὄλον κόλπωσε δυσίμερος, ἀμφοτέρῳ δὲ  
ζῆλον ὑποκλέπτων ἐπεσύρισεν ὄμμακι μαζῶ.  
ὡς δ' ὅτε Νηρείδων τις, ὑπερκύψασα θαλάσσης,  
ἐζομένη δελφίνι χυτὴν ἀνέκοπτε γαλήνην,  
καὶ οἱ αἰερομένης ἐλελίζετο μυδαλέη χεῖρ,  
νηχομένης μίμημα, φέρον δὲ μιν ἄβροχον ἄλμυς  
ἡμφανῆς πεφόρητο δι' ὕδατος ὑγρὸς ὀδίτης,  
κυρτώσας ἐὰ νῶτα, διερπύζουσα δὲ πόντου  
δίπτυχος ἄκρα κέλευθα κατέγραφεν ἰχθύος οὐρή·  
ὡς ὄγε † ταῦρον αἶερε. τιτανόμενοι δὲ ταύρου  
βουκόλος ἀγχένα δοῦλον Ἔρωσ ἐπεμάστει κεστῶ  
καὶ νομῖν ἄτε ράβδον ἐπομίδι τόξον αἰείρων  
Κυπριδίη ποίμαινε καλαῦροπι νυμφίον Ἥρης  
εἰς νομὸν ὑγρὸν ἄγων Ποσιδίηον.

the second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (fig. 23)<sup>82</sup>. In Nonnus' verses, besides Europa and her bull and another Nereid with a dolphin, there are, without any particular distinction, Thetis, Galatea, Amphitrite and Venus on a Triton (*Dionysiaca* 1.55-83, translation W.H.D. Rouse 1940):

High above the sea, the girl throbbing with fear navigated on bullback, unmoving, unwetted. If you saw her you would think it was Thetis perhaps, or Galatea, or Earthshaker's bedfellow, or Aphrodite seated on Triton's neck. Aye, Sea-blue-hair marvelled at the waddle-foot voyage; Triton heard the delusive lowing of Zeus and bellowed an echoing note to Cronos' son with his conch by way of wedding song; Nereus pointed out to Doris the woman carried along, mingling wonder with fear as he saw the strange voyager and his horns. But the maiden, a light freight for her bull-barge, sailed along oxidizing, with a horn for steering-oar, and trembled at the high heaving of her watery course, while Desire was the seaman. And artful Boreas bellied out all her shaking robe with amorous breath, love-sick himself, and in secret jealousy, whistled on the pair of unripe breasts. As when one of the Nereids has peeped out of the sea, and seated upon a dolphin cuts the flooding calm, balanced there while she paddles with a wet hand and pretends to swim, while the watery wayfarer half-seen rounds his back and carries her dry through the brine, while the cleft tail of the fish passing through the sea scratches the surface in its course, – so the bull lifted his back: and while the bull stretched, his drover Eros flogged the servile neck with his charmed girdle, and lifting bow on shoulder like a pastoral staff, shepherded Hera's bridegroom with Cyprus' crook, driving him to Poseidon's watery pasture.

<sup>82</sup> W. A. Daszewski, D. Michaelides, *Guide des mosaïques de Paphos*, Nicosie, 1989, p. 63-71; K. M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World...*, p. 223-235 (p. 229-231).

What are the criteria according to which Nonnus or his readers could recognize one of these goddesses around them? Judging by the Nea Paphos mosaic, where the names of the Nereids were written in order to differentiate them, they had no specific attribute<sup>83</sup>. Only the context of the representation or an expectation determined by the general culture of the public, could indicate an identification.

While we have lost everything about the context of the making and the discovery of the Yenikend plate, we still have a preserved echo of the expectation of a Roman viewer of a plate decorated with a naked Nereid. Four epigrams of the *Latin Anthology* – a collection assembled in Africa during the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD of poems from different earlier times – refer to Galateia. Three of them are *ekphraseis* of silver vases and, in my opinion, offer an appropriate key for the interpretation of the decoration of our plate (151-154 Riese = 140-143 Shackleton Bailey, translation N.M. Kay 2006<sup>84</sup>):

<p><i>Defugiens pontum siluas Galatea peragrat, Custodem ut pecorum cernere possit Acim. Nam eneros gressus infigit sentibus ardens Nec tamen alta pedum uulnera sentit amor. Ipsa Cupidineae cedunt elementa pharetrae, Cuius et in mediis flamma suburit aquis.</i></p>	<p>Fleeing the sea, Galateia scours the woods to catch sight of the guardian of the flocks, Acis; for in her sight she skewers her tender soles on thorns, yet her love does not feel the deep wounds of her feet. The very elements yield to Cupid's quiver; his flame smoulders even in the midst of water.</p>
<p><i>De Galatea in uase Fulget et in patinis ludens pulcherrima Nais, prandentum inflammans ora decore suo. Congrua non tardus diffundat iura minister, ut lateat positis tecta libido cibis.</i></p>	<p>On Galateia on a salver. The loveliest of Naiads sports playfully and she shines out even on the salver, making the diners' faces blush by her beauty. May the waiter not be slow in splashing around the sauce accompaniment in order that the arousing image may lie hidden, covered by the food on it!</p>
<p><i>Ludere sueta uadis priuato nympha natatu exornat mensas membra uenusta mouens. Comptas nolo dapes; uacuum mihi pone boletar. Quod placet aspiciam; renuo quod saturat.</i></p>	<p>The nymph, accustomed to disport herself in private swimming at the beach, decorates the table, moving her lovely limbs. I do not want fancy food; put down the salver empty, as far as I'm concerned.</p>

<sup>83</sup> Cf. also the inscriptions on African mosaics: M. L. Neira Jiménez, "Inscripciones con nombres de nereidas y ninfas\* en los mosaicos romanos del Norte de Africa e Hispania", *L'Africa romana* 9 (1992), p. 1013-1023.

<sup>84</sup> We translate here the text of A. Riese (Teubner, 1894), with the corrections of D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Towards a Text of Anthologia Latina*, Cambridge 1979; D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Anthologia Latina I. Carmina in codicibus scripta 1. Libri Salmasiani aliorumque carmina*, Stuttgartiae, 1982; cf. also N. M. Kay, *Epigrams from the Anthologia Latina: Text, Translation and Commentary*, London, 2006; L. Zurli, *Apographa Salmasiana II. Il secolo d'Or di "anthologia Salmasiana" (continuazione e fine)*, Hildesheim, 2010; Francisco Socas, *Antología Latina. Repertorio de poemas extraído de códices y libros impresos*, Madrid 2011; I. Bergasa, É. Wolff, *Épigrammes latines de l'Afrique Vandale (Anthologie latine)*, Paris, 2016. Bailey's main emendations are: 151.3 *teneros* (for *eneros*); 151.5 *cedunt elementa* (for *laedunt tormenta*), 152.2 *ora* (that we prefer to keep was corrected as *corda*), 152.3 *congrua* (that we prefer to keep was corrected in *pinguia*, *diffundat* as *defundat*); Bailey writes (154.4) *ieiuno lumina tentet / ieiunus inguina tendat* (for *ieiunus lumina tendat*, that we prefer to keep).

	Let me look at what gives me pleasure; I reject what fills me up.
<i>In medio generata salo nunc arte magistra perueni ad mensam; hic quoque nuda nato. Si prandere cupis, differ spectare figuram, ne tibi ieiunus lumina tendat amor. Quae sim, ne dubites: ludens sine nomine lympha quod Galatea uocer, lactea massa probat.</i>	Born in mid-sea, now, by the art of a master, I have come to the dining table; here too I swim naked. If you want to eat, put off gazing at my lovely figure so that your hungry passion does not divert your eyes. Do not doubt who I am: I am a nameless nymph disporting herself – that I am called Galatea the salver’s milky mass indicates.

According to the anonymous poet, a clearly identified Nereid / Nymph on a silver dish, on which food could be served or which could be used as decoration at a Roman banquet, was the loveliest Galatea. Why Galatea? Because she was the only one of the Nereids who, just like the goddess Aphrodite / Venus, had an aquatic origin but became the protector of plants and terrestrial animals<sup>85</sup>. Her name (Greek *gala* = “milk”), derived from the milky sea foam, was later, in Classical times, associated with the milk of the flocks – to which she was directly related herself or through the intermediary of her lovers and herdsman, Polyphemus the Cyclops or the young shepherd Acis (who recalls to some extent Aphrodite’s lover, Adonis). The name of Galatea, the ‘milky / the Milkwhite’ fitted the shining aspect of the body of a young woman shown naked in the middle of the silver plate. The brilliance of the metal was a kind of metonymy of her name. Moreover, its gastronomic sonority was entirely adapted to the dining atmosphere. Furthermore, by the play between the geometric curves, the artist could suggest the Nereid’s steady force of calming down the waves. Finally, her love stories with satiric, tragic and comic accents – echoed in the epigrams by the verb *ludere*, which refers at once to the Nereid’s innocent game in the waves and to sexual frolics – justify the erotic components of the decoration. The

<sup>85</sup> Galatea is attested in Homer’s catalogue of Nereids (*Iliad* 18.45; Hesiod, *Theogony* 250; Ps.-Apollodorus, *Library* 1.11); she is especially present in etiological stories (Douris of Samos, *BNJ* 76 F58) and in lyrics: Theocritus (*Idyls* 6, 11); Callimachus fr. 378-379 Pfeiffer; Propertius 1.8.17-18, 3.2.7-8; Virgil, *Bucolica* 1.30-31, 3.64-65, 72, 7.37, 9.39; *Aeneis* 9.102-103; Ovid, *Amores* 2.11.34; *Metamorphoses* 13.738-968; *Fasti* 6.733-736; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 1.134-136; Martial, *Book of Spectacles* 30.3-4; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 14.221-226; Statius, *Silvae* 1.4.76, 2.2.19-20; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Sea Gods* 1, *True Histories* 2.3; Philostratus, *Images* 2.18, and *infra* n. 86; cf. P. Weizsäcker, “Galatea 1”, in *Roschers Lexikon...* 1 (1884-1890), col. 1586-1589; G. Weicker, “Galatea 1”, in *Real-Encyclopädie...* 13 (1910), col. 517-519; L. Séchan, “Légendes...”, p. 34-37; S. Montón Subias, “Galatea”, in *Lexicon iconographicum...* 5 (1990), p. 1000-1005; A.R. Ghiotto, “Il mito di Polifemo e Galatea nella pittura della prima età imperiale”, *Antenor* 2 (2000), p. 29-51. For the epigrams in the *Latin Anthology*, S. T. Stevens, *Image and Insight: Ekphrastic Epigrams in the Latin Anthology*, PhD University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1983, p. 132-169; W.J. Schneider, “Zu Tisch mit der Schönen Galatee. Zur missglückten Textkonstitution zweier Epigramme im Salmasianus”, *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 50 (1999), p. 189-192; P. Paolucci, “Il ‘Ciclo di Galatea’ (*Anth. Latina* 140-143 S.B. = 151-154 R.)”, *Bollettino di Studi Latini* 32 (2002), p. 111-127.

St. James shell used as a crown by the floating Eros indicates that the whole scene must be read under the sign of passion: this is the passion through which Galatea transcends her maritime condition in order to join her shepherd. The imaginary sound of the sea snail, used as a trumpet, replaced the hymenaeum song, in this triumphal wedding procession, framed by the two Tritons. The presence of the Nereid's brother, transformed into a *Nerita*, refers to the dangers of love (cf. above). What other decoration would fit better the atmosphere of a Roman diner, then another Aphrodite / Venus, a goddess symbolizing the beauty of the seas, the prosperity of lands, the strength and dangers of love altogether?

### 2.5. *From Greek models to Roman extensive distribution*

In the previous bibliography, this plate raised two difficult questions: the identification of the Nereid – to which I answer with the name Galatea – and the date of production. Since the inventory of the Yenikend tomb is lost and no study could be done before its dispersion, it is difficult to give a precise date of manufacture or to formulate any hypothesis about the plate's ancient lifespan. Most researchers have remained very cautious and proposed a long-time span, between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, without further detail of earliest or latest date<sup>86</sup>. By a combination of iconographic and historical hypotheses, I will try to reduce this to the period from the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, maybe between the last Antonines and the Severi. This refers at least to the elaboration of a model that many artisans could later reproduce for an indefinite period. This model is based on late Hellenistic and early Roman (1<sup>st</sup> century BC-1<sup>st</sup> century AD) figures; but the composition of the scene could hardly be earlier than the Antonines. The data we have about the Roman presence in the Caucasus fit this possible date of distribution, especially up to the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD and the Sasanian conquests. Even if the wars did not break the connections with Rome, which even continued to have political influence and attract indigenous elites with its luxurious products throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, it is clear that the Albanians, even more than the Iberians, looked more and more towards Persia. This explains the mix of luxurious Roman and Sasanian items already in some Iberian tombs from the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD: a situation which appears different from that of the Yenikend tomb. In fact, if the *aureus* reported lost after the discovery of the tomb was Roman, it should have been dated between the reigns of Nero and Valerian, like other coins found in Albania and Iberia. The latest possible date would be 260 AD, when Valerian was captured by the Sasanians<sup>87</sup>. This date would also fit our knowledge of the diffusion of Christianity during the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD: even if Christians used Greco-Roman mythological iconography – as on the Projecta Casket, cf. above – the choice of such an isolated object would be strange after the baptism of Caucasian kings.

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 6.

<sup>87</sup> Now see O. Coloru, *L'imperatore prigionero: Valeriano, la Persia e la disfatta di Edessa*, Bari, 2017.



Unfortunately, we lack documents allowing us to be more precise about chronology. We do not know when the epigrams quoted from the *Latin Anthology* were written: our plate – together with a later one (dated to 541 AD) from Carthage, representing a Nereid on a sea panther, with an Eros<sup>88</sup> – is, to date, the only known illustration of these epigrams. The poems are in Latin, the myth of Galateia was originally connected with Sicily and the representation of the goddess with the Tritons is especially attested in the West. Thus, one should think of an early date, when this type of object, and the whole cultural context in and for which it was decorated, was still shared by the Eastern and the Western parts of the Roman Empire. Such a date would also seem to be supported by the double-shell technique used to produce the plate – even if our present knowledge of the history of the making of Roman plates is not precise enough to use this in a chronological argument<sup>89</sup>.

From the iconographical point of view, there are several details that can be used in a discussion about chronology: first, the Nereid is nude, with no sign of a veil, is better attested by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (cf. above). The Nereid's hairstyle has historical parallels, especially between the reigns of Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, but not under the Severi, although it is not impossible to have here the reuse of an earlier model for a mythological character during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD<sup>90</sup>. Actually, the golden diadem, around which the hair from above the temples is turned, matches a well-known portrait of Aphrodite from Hellenistic times (illustrated, for example, on Caesar's *denarius* of 47-48 BC, or on the statuettes in the *Sandalbinder* pose). This diadem came into fashion again on Roman copies of the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (when the marble copy of the Aphrodite of Capua was made; this type was used for making the group of Aphrodite and Ares, mentioned above, fig. 18, as well as the 'Marine Venus' of the Ostia Museum, inv. 110)<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> J. M. C. Toynbee, K.S. Painter, "Silver Picture Plates...", p. 19, pl. XVIIa; F. Baratte, "La vaisselle d'argent dans l'Afrique romaine et byzantine", *Antiquité tardive* 5 (1997), p. 111-132, fig. 16.

<sup>89</sup> See D. E. Strong, *Greek...*; for the Greek period, cf. M. Yu Treister, *The Role of Metals in Ancient Greek History*, Leiden-New York-Köln, 1996.

<sup>90</sup> For the Severan *Melonfrizur*, see J. Meischner, *Das Frauenporträt der Severerzeit. Inaugural-Dissertation ...*, Berlin, 1964. I shall mention also the comparison with the statue of Fortuna of Sainpuits (Yonne), with a bigger diadem, dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD by F. Baratte (dir.), *Trésors...*, p. 182-183 (nr. 129). Atalanta and Meleager's silver show-plate in the Hermitage (Inv. W-1), dated by an imperial stamp at the beginning of the 7th century AD, is an excellent example of the models' long life, since its archetype could go back to the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD: see J. M. C. Toynbee, K.S. Painter, "Silver Picture Plates...", p. 33 nr. 28 pl. XIIIId.

<sup>91</sup> G. Becatti, *Ninfe...*, p. 17-18, tav. I-VI. We should also note Aphrodite's hairstyle on the Arras cup (published in 1568 by Stephan Vinand Pighius), which was dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD: F. Baratte (dir.), *Trésors...*, p. 156-157. More generally, for the type of Venus of Milo, A. Pasquier, *La Vénus de Milo...* p. 66-78; more recently, F. Queyrel, *La sculpture hellénistique. I. Formes, thèmes, fonctions*, Paris, 2016, p. 57-69.



Fig. 24 Marble statue of a Triton; copy of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD after a Hellenistic original.



Fig. 25 Double-faced relief with a Triton mask on one side; 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

The young, beardless Tritons, with short locks, a belt of scales shaped like acanthus leaves around their waists – as one can see already in Pergamum and as reproduced during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (fig. 24) – also fits a date early in the Empire. This was a period when the older type of bearded Triton or the ichtyo-centaur, recalling the Old Man of the Sea and his metamorphic skills, had not yet returned to fashion. Also, a hairstyle for the marine gods tangled with seaweed and crustaceans, familiar on Hispanic and African mosaics, was not yet widespread<sup>92</sup>. The torsos of the Tritons are not yet covered by scales – as described by Pausanias (9.21) and as we see on monuments of the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD: this is probably a sign that the artist wanted to remain close to his late Classical models (fig. 25)<sup>93</sup>.

At the same time, the multiplication of the *putti*, with their various, more or less burlesque poses, and the setting of a maritime triumph, with a coronation scene

<sup>92</sup> Cf. M. P. San Nicolás Pedraz, “Seres mitológicos ...”, p. 310-312, especially fig. 8, the unbearded Triton of the Conimbriga mosaic, dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. For the evolution of the iconographic type, M. L. Neira Jiménez, “De Tritón a tritones...”.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. A. Hekler, *Die Sammlung antiker Skulpturen. Die antiken Skulpturen im Ungarischen Nationalmuseum und im Budapester Privatbesitz*, Wien, 1929, Nr. 101; N. Icard-Gianolio, “Tritones”, n<sup>os</sup> 22-24, 54-55, 62.



Fig. 26. “Rape of Europa” mosaic preserved in the Archaeological Museum in Aquileia; 1<sup>st</sup> century AD with restoration.

alluding to Venus, seem also more likely in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The silver component, perhaps equivalent to 500 *denarii*, especially following the reign of Commodus – if our interpretation is right – might be a further argument for this date, between the Antonines and the Severi.

The task of the historian trying to date these objects is all the more difficult since the models were used and reused over long periods, supported by the long life of myths and symposiastic tradition. Texts and images can be compared to follow the popular success of Galateia in love and her maritime procession,

between the end of the Classical and early Hellenistic times – when Nicochares and Alexis brought her onto the comic scene and when Callimachus composed the lyric poem which seems to have served as a frame for most of the later traditions. After Praxiteles, the naked love goddess appeared more and more frequently in Greek sculpture; after his contemporary, Skopas, unbearded Tritons became successful not only in the Hellenistic East but also in Rome, from Augustan times onwards. Between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, a sketch of our maritime procession is already apparent on the so-called ‘Abduction of Europa’ mosaic in Aquileia (fig. 26)<sup>94</sup>: the goddess is riding a sea bull, accompanied by at least an Eros and a Triton. All have poses similar to those on our plate. At the same time, judging by the evidence preserved, the tragic love of Galateia and Polyphemus was widespread in the private sphere, thanks to Ovid’s poetry and paintings in the second and third styles (fig. 27). The artists emphasize the sharp contrast between beauty (white) and the beast (black) therefore the impossibility of a meeting between the divine, aquatic world and the world of barbarian highland monsters or fragile

<sup>94</sup> The identification with Europa was sometimes questioned, because of an interpretation of the monster’s fish tail as a veil, depending on the restorations of this very damaged part of the mosaic: see now F. Ghedini, M. Bueno, M. Novello, F. Rinaldi, *I pavimenti romani di Aquileia. Contesti, tecniche, repertorio decorativo*, Padova, 2017. For the interpretation as a veil, see the critical review of A. Blanchard for “Wattel-de Croizant (Odile). Les mosaïques représentant le mythe d’Europe (I<sup>er</sup> -VI<sup>e</sup> siècles). Évolution et interprétation des modèles grecs en milieu romain, Paris, De Boccard, 1995”, *Revue des Études grecques* 112 (1999), p. 274.



Fig. 27 Two frescoes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Campanian style, showing the love between Galateia and Polyphemus, one from Pompeii I,7,7, house of Amandus the priest, triclinium b, southern wall.

humans. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Galateia's passion was famous enough to open the series of Lucian of Samosata's *Dialogues of the Sea Gods*: just like the mother, Doris, the public seemed ready to listen to arguments in favour of a sentimental relationship between the Nereid Galateia and the Cyclops. Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 9.9.4-6) compared the erotic provocation of flung apples in Theocritus (*Idylls* 5.88-89) and Galateia's mention by Vergil (*Bucolica* 3.64-65). In 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Egypt, at the beginning of Athenaeus of Naucratis' *Banquet of the Sophists*, (1.11 6e-7a), the participants learn the story of the myth of Galateia and Polyphemus: in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Philoxenus of Cythera, in love with one Galateia, mistress of Dionysios, tyrant of Syracuse, composed a poem that played an important part in the tradition about the Nereid. Therefore, as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, Nonnus is not an isolated witness of late prolongations of these traditions: in sophisticated, well-educated circles, until the end of Antiquity, Galateia remained an elegant symbol of beauty and feminine eroticism<sup>95</sup>.

<sup>95</sup> E.g. Claudian 30.122-133, *The Rape of Proserpine* 3.335-356; Nonnus of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca* 1.57-59, 6.229-325, 9.80-81, 14.64-66, 34.79-80, 39.257-291, 40.553-558, 43.266-267, 390-393; Sidonius Apollinaris 11; Paulus Silentarius in the *Palatine Anthology* 5.244, 256; Cassiodorus, *Variarum* 2.40; Dracontius, *Romulea* 30-37; Theophylact Simocatta, *Letters* 33.

I cannot say anything definite about where this plate was made: previous scholars situated it in the East, on the basis of geographical proximity and a hypothesis that many metallurgic workshops would have been active in Roman Asia Minor, Syria and even Alexandria – if one thinks about the diffusion of other ‘Syrian’ / ‘Antiochean’ or ‘Alexandrian’ metal vases on the Eurasiatic steppe<sup>96</sup>. As a matter of fact, without extensive scientific analysis, it is impossible to say anything about the production center, especially since the Galateia myth is anchored rather in the western provinces, mainly in Sicily and on Adriatic shores. Moreover, besides the epigrams in the *Latin Anthology* that support this identification, most of the literary references to Galateia are in Latin. At least until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the myth seems to have been well known in the Greek East. At the same time, iconographic models were circulating – as drawings for models or already reproduced on plates<sup>97</sup>. But we ignore almost everything about these transfers between West and East within the Roman world, even if we can be quite sure about the function of the plate: it was coherent with the atmosphere of an aristocratic symposium, in which participants preferred physical beauty in the decorations and more or less erudite discussions about love<sup>98</sup>.

In the end, if the plate was more than a common decoration of a rich person’s table, one could offer or sell it for any occasion. It could even be a wedding gift, in private or more official circumstances, supporting a vow like the one expressed in the refrain of the *Pervigilium Veneris* (“Venus’ Vigil”), dated by R. Schilling to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD:

“*Cras amet qui numquam amavit quique amavit cras amet!* / Love tomorrow, you who never loved; you who have already loved, love again tomorrow!”<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> For a possible Syrian production, see Ch. Kondoleon, *Antioch: The Lost Ancient City*, Princeton, 2000, nr. 71, 73, 75. For the possible Alexandrian influence during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, see A. Dan, F. Grenet, N. Sims-Williams, “Homeric Scenes...”.

<sup>97</sup> This can be noted for the circulation of the mosaics’ models: cf. M. L. Neira Jiménez, “The Sea Thiasos of Nereids and Tritons in the Roman Mosaics of Turkey”, in M. Şahin (ed.), *Mosaics of Turkey and Parallel Developments in the Rest of the Ancient and Medieval World*, Istanbul, 2012, p. 631-655.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*, Cambridge, 2003.

<sup>99</sup> *Pervigilium Veneris* / “The Vigil of Venus” v. 1, 8, 12, 27, 36, 48, 57, 68, 75, 80, 93 (in the edition of Robert Schilling, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1961<sup>2</sup>. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1944); cf. also the Italian edition of Andrea Cucchiarelli in the BUR collection (2003), who took into consideration the text of D. R. Shackleton Bailey.

### 3. From the Interior Sea to the slopes of the Caucasus: the multiple issues of contacts with *Others*

#### 3.1. *Approaching cultural transfer through gender studies*

Galateia's plate, made somewhere inside the Roman Empire about the end of the Antonine or the Severan epoch, could have been exported beyond the Taurus mountains (our Lesser Caucasus) and reach the Greater Caucasus (the true western Caucasus of the ancient writers) in at least three ways. First, it could have been sold and bought as a silver object of certain value. Second, it could have been brought as a spoil of war from a neighboring region or directly from the Roman Empire, after a barbarian raid or as a payment for the engagement of a Caucasian soldier as a mercenary. Third and last, it could have been offered as a political or military gift to a member of the Caucasian elite. Although Greek and Roman objects are rarer in Albania (corresponding roughly to present-day Azerbaijan) than in Iberia (today Eastern Georgia) and despite Strabo's testimony about the absence of coins or any coherent system of measurement in Albania (*Geography* 11.4.4), coins and precious metal objects made in the Roman Empire between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, have been found on the territory of Azerbaijan<sup>100</sup>. They do not seem to be more

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<sup>100</sup> For Roman political manipulation in Strabo's text and sources, see R. Nicolai, "Strabone e la campagna partica di Antonio. Critica delle fonti e critica del testo", in G. Traina (ed.), *Studi sull'XI libro dei Geographika di Strabone*, Lecce, 2001, p. 95-126, and G. Traina, "Roman Representations of Caucasian Albania", in A.K. Alikberov, M.S. Gadjeiev (ed.), *Albania Caucasica I*, Moscow, 2015, p. 42-47; their commentary on Strabo's book XI (2000) remains the reference, despite the more recent notes of S. Radt (2008) and D.W. Roller (2018). For coins discovered in Azerbaijan, see e.g. E. A. Пахомов, "Античные монеты в Албании (в пределах Азербайджанской ССР)", in К. Г. Алиев (ed.), *Вопросы истории Кавказской Албании*, Баку, 1962, p. 48-51. The most important texts about the Albanians are brought together and translated into French by Z. Aleksidzé, J.-P. Mahé, "Découverte d'un texte albanien: une langue ancienne du Caucase retrouvée", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 141.2 (1997), p. 517-532; in Russian, A. A. Акопян, *Албания – Алуанк в греко-латинских и древнеармянских источниках*, Ереван, 1987. For the history and archaeology of the Albanian kingdom, see especially К. В. Тревер, *Очерки по истории и культуре кавказской Албании. IV в. до н. э. – VII в. н. э.*, Москва-Ленинград, 1959; P. N. Tretiakov, A. L. Mongait, *Contributions to the Ancient History of the USSR*, Cambridge Ma, 1961, p. 72-106; Дж. А. Халилов, *Материальная культура Кавказской Албании (IV в. до н. э. – III в. н. э.)*, Баку, 1985; К. Г. Алиев, *Античная Кавказская Албания*, Баку, 1992; Т. М. Мамедов, *Кавказская Албания в IV-VII вв*, Баку, 1993; Ф. Л. Османов, *История и культура Кавказской Албании IV в. до н.э. – III в. н.э.: (на основании археологических материалов)*, Баку, 2006; М. М. Расулова, *Торгово-экономические и культурные связи Кавказской Албании с античным и эллинистическим миром: IV век до н.э. – III век н.э.*, Баку, 2008 (p. 177-178 about our plate). For the historical geography of Albania, С. В. Муравьев, "Птолемеева карта Кавказской Албании и уровень Каспия", *Вестник древней истории* 1 (1983), p. 117-147; М. С. Гаджиев, "Кавказская Албания и Дагестан: историко-географический и



Fig. 28 Golden ring with agate seal  
representing Eros driving a two-horse  
chariot, 3rd century AD

numerous than Parthian objects, which reflect a longer and stronger connection between Albanians and their Iranian neighbors. But the Baku Archaeological and Ethnographical Museum preserves at least one other luxury item of Greco-Roman origin or at least inspiration and with an erotic topic: a gold ring with an agate, on which a winged charioteer, who could be Eros, was carved to be used as a seal (fig. 28)<sup>101</sup>.

However, as long as we do not know anything else about the archaeological site of Yenikend and about the other items discovered in the tomb at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot know if the owner of the tomb – a warrior, man or woman – was the first owner of the plate in the Caucasus or if the plate arrived in the region long before<sup>102</sup>. We also cannot know if the tomb was part of an aristocratic necropolis – quite far from the Albanian capital of Kabalaka / *Cabalaca* / modern Qabala, situated further to the north in the same valley (fig. 1)<sup>103</sup>. Two reasons could convince this possible member of the military or political elite to be buried with this plate, via a conversion of the plate's original meaning and use to suit local beliefs and traditions: first, the value of silver. According to Strabo (11.4.8), the Albanians used precious metals especially as funerary furniture: “συγκατορύττουσι μέντοι τὰ χρήματα αὐτοῖς, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πένητες ζῶσιν οὐδὲν πατρῶον ἔχοντες / they bury all their valuables with the dead; this is why they live very poorly, without any heritage”. In a region in which

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административно – политический аспекты”, in A. K. Alikberov, M. S. Gadjiev (ed.), *Albania Caucasia* I..., p. 28-40. For Iberia, see especially C. Toumanoff, “Chronology of the Early Kings of Iberia”, *Traditio* 25 (1969), p. 1-33, and D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC – AD 562*, Oxford, 1994.

<sup>101</sup> See N. Vālixanlı, *Azərbaycanın arxeoloji qızıl və gümüş əşyaları / Gold and Silver Archaeological Items of Azerbaijan*, Baku, 2013. We could not see the previous publication of N. Vālixanlı, *Milli Azərbaycan Tarixi Muzeyinin kolleksiyasının inciləri / Gems from the Collection of the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan*, Baku, 2010. This stone can be compared with some examples listed in R. Vollkommer, “Eros”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum...* 3 (1986), p. 850-942, nr. 280-282; I. Bingöl, O. Bingöl, “Der Kameo aus Magnesia”, *Anadolu / Anatolia* 25 (2003), p. 27-35.

<sup>102</sup> Objects of different times and origins were discovered in Iberian tombs: e.g. A. Apakidze, V. Nikolaishvili, “An Aristocratic Tomb of the Roman Period from Mtskheta, Georgia”, *The Antiquaries Journal* 74 (1994), p. 16-54.

<sup>103</sup> Pliny the Elder 6.29; Ptolemy, *Geography* 5.11-12, 8.19.7-9. For the history and archaeology of the city, И.А. Бабаев, Г.М. Ахмедов, *Кабала*, Баку, 1980; И. Алиев, Ф. Гадиров, *Кабала*, Баку, 1986.

exchanges of precious metals could be rare and, in an epoch, when the Roman silver coin was losing value, one hoarded gold and coins – perhaps like the gold coin lost after the find – as well as silver vessels. This explains the significant quantities of Roman silver vessels found in tombs and hidden hoards from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD onwards<sup>104</sup>. The dead person, her / his relatives, or at least the person who originally brought this object to Transcaucasia must have had some appreciation of Roman luxury. This does not mean that (s)he would have recognized the myth represented on the dish; but (s)he could at least recognize the prestige of a Greco-Roman work of art. Also, if this person took a closer look at the decoration, even without identifying Galateia, (s)he would have seen the water, a woman riding a sea horse, a dominant erotic figure. All these were in sharp contrast with the surrounding realities of Caucasian society, with strongly polarized social spheres for men and women.

This contrast makes us think that the plate was probably not brought by chance to Transcaucasia, nor because of a widespread diffusion of Nereid decoration – especially not of Galateia the Sicilian – in the Eastern Mediterranean. This commercial or prestigious dish could have been exported to the Caucasus, to the mythical land of the Amazons, as part of a subtle intellectual game. For an Albanian man or woman – thus for an ‘Amazon’, a vigorous warrior woman the Romans met on the battlefield during the campaigns of Pompey the Great, in 66-65 BC<sup>105</sup> – this plate illustrated Roman otherness. The beautiful Galateia, without any weapon except the shine of her naked body, rides a horse as a mistress of the seas and of love generating life, and seduces the herdsmen. Nereus’ delicate daughter, famous beyond the seas, ventures into the savage, but rich, mountains of the Cyclops, the barbarian *par excellence* in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Evidence in favour of this interpretation is Strabo’s statement about some Roman writers – including most probably Theophanes of Mytilene, who accompanied Pompey on his Caucasian campaign and whose texts were perhaps echoed by those of Posidonios of Apamea, and Q. Dellius, who took part in the Parthian wars of Mark Antony. These writers described the Albanians as Cyclops and their land, on the edge of the inhabited earth, as a utopia of the savage Golden Age (Strabo 11.4.3, translation H. L. Jones, 1928):

<sup>104</sup> Cf. the inventory of R. Hobbs, *Late Roman Precious Metal Deposits, c. AD 200-700: changes over time and space*, PhD London, 1997, for the Roman West.

<sup>105</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 35.5-6; Appian, *Mithridatica* 103; cf. Strabo 11.5 with M. Dreher, “Pompeius und die kaukasischen Völker: Kolcher, Iberer, Albaner”, *Historia* 45 (1996), p. 188-207. For the Amazons, see especially J. Carlier, “Voyage en Amazonie grecque”, *Acta antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 27.4 (1979), p. 381-405, and “Les Amazones font la guerre et l’amour”, *L’ethnographie* 74 (1980), p. 11-33; F. Thélamon, “Amazones et Gargaréens: la disjonction des masculins et des féminins au Caucase”, in *Mélanges Pierre Lévêque VII. Anthropologie et société*, Besançon, 1993, p. 319-338. More recently, the sources on the reality of the Amazons were discussed by I. Lebedynsky, *Les Amazones: mythe et réalité des femmes guerrières chez les anciens nomades de la steppe*, Paris, 2009, and A. Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*, Princeton-Oxford, 2014.



Τάχα μὲν οὖν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ γένοι τῶν  
ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲν δεῖ θαλάττης· οὐδὲ  
γὰρ τῇ γῆ χρωῶνται κατ' ἀξίαν, πάντα μὲν  
ἐκφερούση καρπὸν καὶ τὸν  
ἡμερώτατον, πᾶν δὲ φυτόν· καὶ γὰρ τὰ  
ἀειθαλῆ φέρει· τυγχάνει δ' ἐπιμελείας  
οὐδὲ μικρᾶς „ἀλλὰ τάγ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ  
ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται,” καθάπερ οἱ  
στρατεύσαντές φασι, Κυκλώπειόν τινα  
διηγούμενοι βίον.

Now perhaps a people of this kind have no need  
of a sea; indeed, they do not make appropriate  
use of their land either, which produces not  
only every kind of fruit, even the most highly  
cultivated kind, but also every plant, for it bears  
even the evergreens. It receives not even slight  
attention, yet the good things “all spring up for  
them without sowing and ploughing” (*Odyssey*  
9.109), according to those who have made  
expeditions there, who describe the mode of  
life there as ‘Cyclopeian’.

As it appears on this plate, Galatea is the *Other* of the Amazon, who is herself the *Other* of the Mediterranean, Greek and Roman masculine ideal of warrior. Galatea is therefore the civilized answer to anything that the Caucasian-Caspian Amazon, the monstrous woman-warrior invented by the Greeks, could represent for educated Romans in contact with the Albanians.

More than literary sources, archaeological discoveries can nourish reflections on the origin and transportation of this plate to the Caucasus. Without the opportunity to conduct direct analyses of the plate or the rest of the inventory, we only recall some possible parallels and the most important moments in contact between Caucasian peoples and the Romans, as they appear in the texts, before concluding on the difficulties and provocations in current studies on this middle ground.

### 3.2. *The Iberian parallels from Mtskheta (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD)*

The closest comparisons with the warrior tomb of Yenikend were discovered on the higher course of the Kyros, in the land called Iberia by ancient authors. Numerous tombs, very rich in luxury objects from the East, Near East and the Roman Empire, from different epochs, have been found near the capital of Iberia, on the site of Armaziskhevi, near the modern city of Mtskheta (at the confluence of the Kyros River and its tributary, the Aragvi, north of Tbilisi, on the road to the pass of Dariali, corresponding to the present-day Georgian Military Road). The tombs of the Iberian elites of Roman times contained various gold and silver objects that could have been ordered or bought by rich members of the Iberian court. Besides these objects, archaeologists also found Roman silver plates whose decoration left no possible doubt: they were diplomatic gifts, offered to client kings by the Roman emperor, governors or military chiefs, at some particular moments in time, as is partially confirmed by literary texts – especially in the case of the Antonine dynasty<sup>106</sup>. These objects could have been brought from the nearby Oriental *limes* (from the Euphrates,

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<sup>106</sup> For this client-patron relationship, see D. Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King: The Character of the Client Kingship*, London, 1984.

between Syria and Cappadocia) following the usual commercial routes across the Taurus (in present-day Armenia) or through Colchis (today Western Georgia).

There is, however, agreement in texts and archaeological discoveries about a contrast between Iberia and Albania: Iberia, closer to the Roman provinces and to the client kingdom of Armenia, was a sedentary, agricultural country, with a less warrior-like people, mainly loyal to Rome. Its Eastern neighbor and rival, Albania took a longer time to become united in one kingdom; therefore, its people had a stronger tribal identity, characteristic of mountain groups. The land was apparently less urbanized – or, more exactly, was occupied by small urban centers of Parthian inspiration, which were not considered to be real cities by Strabo's Roman sources. The Albanians appeared to the Romans as being mainly herdsmen and hunters, close to a nomadic lifestyle. Yet, during Pompey's invasion, the Albanian kingdom defended itself with an infantry of 60,000 and a cavalry of 22,000 or, at least 12,000 people (Strabo 11.4.4-5, cf. Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 35.3). From the Greek perspective, this contradiction between the ability to organize a sizeable army and the cliché about the nomads' lack of strength that characterized both Asiatic and northern peoples, could be explained by Albania's remoteness from the civilized world, by the savagery and even the monstrosity of the high mountains of the Caucasus. Indeed, Albania was closest to the Caspian-Caucasian land of the Amazons, companions of the Gargareans (Strabo 11.5). In fact, Albania had already been part of the Achaemenid Empire (because the Albanians are listed in Darius III's army at Gaugamela, in 331 BC., cf. Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.8.4, 3.11.4, 3.13.1). Thus, Albania maintained its attachment to its powerful Iranian neighbors in Parthian times and fully integrated into the Sasanian Empire from the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, after conquest by Shapur I (240-272 AD)<sup>107</sup>. Besides the texts, the discovery of a Sasanian silver plate with a royal hunting scene is further proof of the Persians' political and military domination of Albania (fig. 29)<sup>108</sup>. The difference with Iberia, where the

<sup>107</sup> *Res gestae diui Saporis* (ca. 262 AD), and the inscription of Kirder 12-13 (ca. 276-293 AD); translations in M. H. Dodgeon, S. N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363. A Documentary History*, London-New York, 1991, p. 29-30, 56; for the Sasanian influence on Albania in the later period: G. Greatrex, S. N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars II. AD 363-630. A Narrative Sourcebook*, London-New York, 2002. For the archaeological discoveries, Sir J. Simpson, "Sasanian Glassware from Mesopotamia, Gilan, and the Caucasus", *Journal of Glass Studies* 57 (2015), p. 77-96.

<sup>108</sup> Дж. А. Халилов, "Серебряное блюдо с позолотой из древней Шемахи", *Вестник древней истории*, 3 (1976), p. 146-149; P. O. Harper, P. Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period: Royal Imagery*, New York, 1981, p. 52, 56, pl. 8; К. О. Кошкарлы, *Античная и раннесредневековая торевтика из Азербайджана*, Баку, 1985, p. 63-72. For the analogous influence in Iberia, see Ch. Amiranachvili, "Une coupe en argent du début de l'époque sassanide provenant des fouilles d'Armasiskhevi (Géorgie)", *Rivista degli studi orientali* 34.3/4 (1959), p. 149-162, corrected by Ch. J. Brunner, "Middle Persian Inscriptions on Sasanian Silverware", *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 9 (1974), p. 109-121; cf. P. O. Harper, P. Meyers, *Silver Vessels* ..., p. 24-25.

elites were more attracted by the Greco-Roman culture, seems real, despite the geographical and historical (dynastic, diplomatic, cultural) links between these two kingdoms and with Armenia (a Roman client kingdom or even province)<sup>109</sup>. We lack the sources to answer modern questions about the very complex history of this neighborhood. Therefore, we cannot know if our plate was obtained directly from the Romans or if it was bought or taken from a neighboring zone, following commercial or diplomatic exchange or conflict. In any case, although rare, such a discovery is not totally surprising: the Caucasus has always had an extraordinary strategic importance and Rome was fully concerned with Caucasian issues during the centuries of its maximum expansion.



Fig. 29 Silver Sasanian plate with a royal hunt, 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

### 3.3. *The crossroads of all frontiers: a rich zone of contacts*

The median zone between the Caucasus and the Taurus played an essential role in the consolidation of a common frontier between the great powers of the Ancient world – the Romans and the Parthians – on the Euphrates and Tigris. This southern Caucasian corridor opened military access to the Black Sea (through the ports listed in Arrian's *Periplus of the Black Sea*, in 131-132 AD) and offering access to the Caspian, but also to Media (cf. Aelianus, *On the Nature of Animals* 17.32), Syria and Mesopotamia, therefore up to the Red Sea<sup>110</sup>. The kings of Iberia, Albania and

<sup>109</sup> Cf. the important discoveries of writing tools showing the diffusion of Greek culture between the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD: A. Apakidze, G. Kipiani, V. Nikolaishvili, "A Rich Burial from Mtskheta (Caucasian Iberia)", *Ancient West & East* 3.1 (2004), p. 104-123.

<sup>110</sup> For Rome in the Caucasus, see: M.-L. Chaumont, "L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran. I. De l'avènement d'Auguste à l'avènement de Dioclétien", in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II. 9.1, Berlin-New-York, 1976, p. 71-194; M.L. Chaumont, "Albania", in *Encyclopædia Iranica* I/8, p. 806-810, online <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/albania-iranian-aran-arm>; A. Giardina, "Roma e il Caucaso", in *Il Caucaso: cerniera fra culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia sec. IV-XI. Atti delle Settimane di Studio del centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, Spoleto 20-26 aprile 1995*. I. Spoleto, 1996, p. 85-141; E Dąbrowa,

Armenia played an important part in the military and political balance between the Roman and Parthian Empires, but also in the defense of these two sedentary empires in the face of the northern nomads – especially Sarmatians, Alans and Huns. On several occasions these peoples, following trails for transhumance, crossed the Caucasus from North to South, through the Caucasian and Caspian Gates, with or without the permission of Albanians and Iberians, and threatened the safety of all sedentary peoples to the south<sup>111</sup>.

The first Albanian union of tribes, covering territories from the southern slopes of the Caucasus and the Ceraunian mountains to the lower valley of the Kyros-Araxes and to the Caspian, seems no older than the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – early 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC. The first contact with Rome goes back to Pompey's Iberian campaign: the Roman leader reached the Caucasian Gates (also called Sarmatian and Alanian at the Dariali passage), during the last Mithridatic war<sup>112</sup>. Rome's presence in the region was reaffirmed during the Albanian mission of P. Canidius Crassus, in preparation for Mark Antony's Parthian campaign<sup>113</sup>. Several years later, Tiberius Claudius Nero and C. Domitius Corbulo, under Nero, were active in the region<sup>114</sup>. In 75 AD, Roman soldiers helped in the construction of the Iberian fortress of Harmozica / Harmastus,

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“Roman Policy in Transcaucasia from Pompey to Domitian”, in D. H. French, C. S. Lightfoot (ed.), *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire. Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at Ankara in September 1988*, Ankara, 1989, p. 67-76; D. Braund, “Coping with the Caucasus: Roman Responses to Local Conditions in Colchis”, *ibidem*, p. 31-43; D. Braund, “Hadrian and Pharasmanes”, *Klio* 73.1 (1991), p. 208-219; D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity...*; M. Bais, *Albania Caucasia. Ethnos, storia, territorio attraverso le fonti greche, latine e armene*, Milano, 2001; more recently, I. Gagoshidze, “Kartli in Hellenistic and Roman Times. General Aspects”, in A. Furtwängler, I. Gagoshidze, H. Löhr, N. Ludwig (dir.), *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplist Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Langenweissbach, 2008, p. 1-40; L. Zerbini, G. Gamkrelidze, T. Todua, *I Romani nella Terra del Vello d'Oro. La Colchide e l'Iberia in età romana*, Soveria Mannelli, 2012. For a comparison between Greco-Roman and Georgian sources: G. L. Kavtaradze, “Caucasica II. The Georgian chronicles and the raison d'être of the Iberian kingdom”, *Orbis Terrarum* 6 (2000), p. 177-237.

<sup>111</sup> For literary sources on the Alans, see especially A. Alemany, *Sources on the Alans. A Critical Compilation*, Leiden-Boston-Köln, 2000; A.B. Bosworth, “Arrian and the Alani”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 81 (1977), p. 217-255; G. Gnoli, “Il nome degli Alani nelle iscrizioni sassanidi: considerazioni linguistiche e storiche sul tema dell'opposizione tra Iran esterno e Iran interno”, in *Il Caucaso: cerniera fra culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia (secoli IV-XI)*, Spoleto, 1996, p. 831-866.

<sup>112</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 34-37; Cassius Dio 37.1-7, cf. 41.16; Appian, *Mithridatica* 477-496.

<sup>113</sup> Strabo 11.3.5; Plutarch, *Life of Mark Antony* 34; Cassius Dio 49.24. Following the *Res gestae Diui Augusti* (5), the Albanian king recognized Roman suzerainty.

<sup>114</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 13.6-8, 30-41; 14.23-36; 15.24-31. On Nero's projects, Pliny the Elder 6.40; Tacitus, *Histories* 1.6; Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 19.2; Cassius Dio 63.8.1.

controlling access to the pass of Dariali<sup>115</sup>. In Albania, on the road to Derbent, between 84 and 96 AD, the *Legio XII Fulminata* consolidated the fortress of Bejuk / Boyuk Dash (in the region of Gobustan), 70 km south-west of Baku. Domitian's involvement in the protection of the "thresholds of the Caspian Gate one must fear" / *metuenda portae limina Caspiacae* finds a direct echo in the poems of Statius (*Siluae* 4.4.63-64). This is not an isolated reference in Latin imperial poetry: more generally, C. Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* answer the interest of the Flavians in the Pontic-Caucasian edges of the Empire<sup>116</sup>. In 114 AD, Trajan transformed Armenia into a Roman province. He also gave a client-king to Albania and accepted the submission of the Sarmatians from the Northern Caucasus, as well as that of the Iberians. The Roman emperor was actually accompanied by the Iberian prince Amazaspus during his Parthian expedition to Nisibis (*IG XIV 1374 = IGR I 192*)<sup>117</sup>. Despite a moment of tension between the Roman emperor Hadrian and Pharasmenes II of Iberia, who refused to renew his submission to Rome at Satala in 129 AD, the exchanges of diplomatic gifts continued. They are attested by the *Historia Augusta* and by the discoveries in the royal necropolis of Iberia, mentioned above: in particular, a silver plate with the portrait of Antinous, found in the tomb supposed to have belonged to the high Iberian dignitary Aspaurukis, is a direct proof of these contacts during Hadrian's reign<sup>118</sup>. Ca. 141 AD, under Antoninus Pius, maybe due

<sup>115</sup> *CIL* III 6051 = *OGIS* 379 = *ILS* 8795 = *IGRR* III 133 = *SEG* 20 112 (cf. Strabo 11.3.5; Pliny the Elder 6.29-30); see A.I. Boltunova, "Quelques notes sur l'inscription de Vespasien trouvée à Mtskheta", *Klio* 53 (1971), p. 213-222; H. Halfmann, "Die Alanen und die römische Ostpolitik unter Vespasian", *Epigraphica Anatolica* 8 (1986), p. 39-50; voir aussi G. Migliorati, "L'incarico militare di M. Hirrius Fronto Neratius Pansa e gli interessi militari romani in area caucasica", in A. Valvo-G. Manzoni (ed.), *Analecta Brixiana. Contributi dell'Istituto di Filologia e storia dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, Milano, 2004, p. 125-153.

<sup>116</sup> *AE* 1951.263; F. Grosso, "Aspetti della politica orientale di Domiziano I. Albania, iberia caucasica e Armenia", *Epigraphica* 16 (1954), p. 117-179; R. Heindereich, "Zur östlichsten lateinischen Inschrift", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 52 (1983), p. 213-214.

<sup>117</sup> Arrian, *Periplus of the Black Sea* 11.2-3; Eutropius, *Breviarium* 8.2-3; Rufus Festus, *Breviarium* 20.2; Hieronymus, *Chronicon* (the 223<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad).

<sup>118</sup> *Historia Augusta, Hadrian*, 13.8-9; 17.10-12 ("... he gave many gifts to many people, but to nobody more than the ones for the Iberians ... / *multis ingentia dedit munera, sed nulli maiora quam Hiberorum...*"), 21.13. The medallion vase showing Antinous' portrait must date from the period following Antinous' accidental death in the Nile, but before Hadrian's death (therefore between 130/131 and 138 AD). In a nearby tomb, archaeologists found a high relief medallion vase showing the goddess Tyche / Fortuna with cornucopia and a vase with a Roman portrait, maybe with Heracles' features. Heracles is one of the mythical characters most connected with the Caucasus, where he was believed to have set Prometheus free. Among the numerous publications, see K. Matchabeli, "Les coupes d'argent d'Armaziskhevi (Géorgie)", *Bedi Kartlisa. Revue de kartvéologie* 29 (1972), p. 291-293; Th. Opper, "Hadrian's Diplomatic Gifts in Georgia", in *Hadrian, Empire and Conflict*, British Museum, 2008, p. 190-193; G. Gamkrelidze, *Archaeology of the Roman Period of Georgia (Essay and Catalogue)*. *Iberia-Colchis (The Journal of the Otar Lordkipanidze Centre of Archaeology of the Georgian National Museum) Supplement*, 2014. For analogous

to the Caucasian mission of Q. Iunius Rusticus, this Pharasmenes II received new territories as well as an equestrian statue in the temple of Bellona in Rome. As a sign of his submission to the emperor, the Iberian king came to Rome with his family; they made a sacrifice on the Capitol and organized a military demonstration<sup>119</sup>. Following the Parthian invasion of the client kingdom of Armenia and of the Roman province of Syria, during the Roman-Parthian wars of 161-166 AD, Roman troops were brought from the north-western front in order to reinforce the Roman presence in the Caucasus. Under orders from Statius Priscus, parts of the *Legio I Minerua* crossed the Caspian Gates (at Derbent, *CIL* XIII 8213). Over the following two years, the Romans took Seleucia and Ctesiphon and entered Media Atropatene. Under the governor Avidius Cassius, a border was established on the Khabur and Euphrates Rivers; the Romans were also able to reinstall their favorite, Sohaemus, on the Armenian throne until the 180s and the return of the Parthians, under their king Vologases V. As a direct expression of the strong links between Rome and Iberia, in the necropolis of Mtskheta there is also a silver plate with a medallion representing Marcus Aurelius<sup>120</sup>. Under Commodus, in 184-185 AD, the *Legio XV Apollinaris* was still stationed in Armenia (*CIL* III 6052 = *ILS* 394). Without any other historical documents, we tend to consider that the situation was stable under the Severi and, more generally, until the Sasanian invasions of the 250s (cf. above). Afterwards, contacts were not interrupted but were certainly less intensive – although they could be reinforced at certain points, as under the emperor Aurelianus (270-275 AD)<sup>121</sup> or under Domitian, after the peace of Nisibis of 298, when the Romans took control of Iberia. The diffusion of Christianity and the creation of the three Caucasian alphabets were effects of the strong historical links with Armenia and the West. Yet, from the 4th century AD onwards, Sasanian dominion seems strongly rooted in Albania. Its concrete expression was the consolidation of defenses at the passages through which the northern nomads could invade the Empire. Another originality of Late Antiquity was the cultural dimension of the conflicts: Christians seem to have looked for support to Armenia and the Roman Empire during conflicts with the pagan barbarians and Zoroastrians. But altogether, after the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Iranian influence seems to have predominated in Albania.

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discoveries in the Bosporan Kingdom, see М.Ю. Трейстер, “Посуда и предметы утвари из серебра и бронзы”, in А.М. Бутягин (dir.), *Тайна золотой маски. Каталог выставки [Санкт-Петербург, 21 апреля -3 сентября 2009 г.]*, Санкт-Петербург, 2009, p. 43-62; Н. И. Винокуров, М. Ю. Трейстер, “Портретные медальоны краснолаковых чаш I в. до н.э. – I в. н.э. на поселении Артезиан в Крымском Приазовье”, in *Боспорский феномен. Греки и варвары на Евразийском перекрестке: Материалы международной научной конференции (Санкт-Петербург, 19-22 ноября 2013 г.)*, Санкт-Петербург, 2013, p. 270-278.

<sup>119</sup> *Historia Augusta*, Antoninus Pius 9.6; Cassius Dio 69.15.

<sup>120</sup> A. Miron, W. Orthmann (ed.), *Unterwegs zum goldenen Vlies. Archäologische Funde aus Georgien*, Saarbrücken, 1995, p. 313, n° 325, Abb. 181.

<sup>121</sup> *Historia Augusta*, Aurelianus 27.4-5, 33.4.

Caucasian Albania appears therefore as a true *middle ground* between the two great ancient empires, the Roman and the Iranian, in fragile balance during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. The situation of the other Caucasian kingdoms, Iberia and Armenia, was somewhat analogous, with some important differences: Armenia remained the main object of conflict, because of its direct access to Syria and Asia Minor; Iberia was readier to join the Roman cause – because of its vicinity with Colchis, Cappadocia and Pontus. On the other hand, Albania was near Media (Atropatene, present-day Iranian Azerbaijan). The frontiers of these three states changed frequently, depending on temporary alliances and conflicts, within these states or with their respective neighbors, or with the Roman and Persian Empires, but we lack the documentation necessary to determine such changes. All we can establish is that the Romans and Persians fought for the intermediary space between the Taurus and the Caucasus, thus for influence upon Iberia and Albania, in order to control the Caucasian passages and to protect their connections with both the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea<sup>122</sup>.

The Albanian kingdom controlled the Derbent pass (fig. 1)<sup>123</sup>. It was sometimes an ally, at other times an enemy of the Iberian and of the Armenian kingdoms, sometimes being helped by the nomads, at other times by the Romans or the Persians. It took also advantage of the East-West routes between the Caspian and the Black Sea, following the valleys of the Kyros, the Araxes and the Phasis rivers, and their tributaries. This was the last segment of what was considered, rightly or wrongly, a road connecting India and Bactria to the Black Sea<sup>124</sup>. Although incomplete, the

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<sup>122</sup> These two passages are rather like crossroads of mountain passes in a network of ways across the Caucasus. See D. Braund, “Map 88. Caucasia”, in R. Talbert (dir.), *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, Princeton, 2000, and D. Braund, “Notes from the Black Sea and Caucasus: Arrian, Phlegon and Flavian Inscriptions”, *Ancient Civilisations from Scythia to Siberia* 9.3-4 (2003), p. 175-191.

<sup>123</sup> For the Sasanian fortification system, see D. Lawrence, T. J. Wilkinson, “The Northern and Western Borderlands of the Sasanian Empire: Contextualising the Roman / Byzantine and Sasanian frontier”, in E. W. Sauer (ed.), *Sasanian Persia. Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia*, Edinburgh, 2017, p. 99-125.

<sup>124</sup> The main Hellenistic and Roman sources are Ps.-Scymnos fr. 20 Marcotte (= 925-237 Diller) *ap.* Pseudo-Arrian, *Periplus of the Black Sea* 45 Podossinov; Strabo 11.7.3; Pliny the Elder 6.52; Procopius 2.25.1-3. See also the debate between, on the one side, the more critical – and even skeptical – voices of D. Magie, “Roman Policy in Armenia and Transcaucasia, and its Significance”, *American Historical Association Annual Report* 1 / 1910, Washington 1923, p. 297-304, and D. Braund, “Indian Traders at Phasis: Neglected Texts on Ancient Georgia”, in M. Faudot, A. Fraysse, É. Geny (ed.), *Pont-Euxin et commerce. La genèse de la “route de la soie” (Actes du IX<sup>e</sup> Symposium de Vani [Colchide] 1999)*, Besançon, 2002, p. 287-295, and *Georgia in Antiquity...*, p. 40-41, and, on the other side, those who believe in the existence of this path: M. Wisseman, “Rom und das Kaspische Meer”, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 127.2 (1984), p. 166-173; P. Callieri, “La presunta via commerciale tra l’India e Roma attraverso l’Oxus e il Mar Caspio: nuovi dati di discussione”, *Topoi* 11.1 (2001), p. 537-546, and P. Schneider, “From India to the Black Sea: an overlooked trade

*Peutingar Table* is important proof of a network of paths, which made possible, at least at some time, the indirect transportation of exotic products across Asia beyond the Taurus (fig. 30).



Fig. 30 Reconstruction of the network of paths following the *Tabula Peutingeriana*

Yet, this strategic position for control of the northern Asiatic frontiers and passages was only one of Albania's advantages. The land had many other quite exceptional natural resources, which could fully justify the interest of the greater powers in this area and, therefore, the arrival of our luxury plate in Yenikend. Between the high mountains, the great rivers and the sea, the organization of Albanian territory was determined by the valleys of the major tributaries of the Kyros River – like the Göyçay and its hydrographic basin – which were also the connective axes between the highlands and the plain. These valleys were a considerable factor in ethnic fragmentation – as proved by the 26 tribal languages mentioned by Strabo and as it is still shown today by the general map of Caucasian languages and dialects. Nonetheless, the resources of their lands, raw materials, animals and people had already been exploited and coveted from antiquity. They were the objects of laudatory discourses upon Caucasian Albania, which was presented as a Golden Age utopia of the Greeks and Romans (in Strabo's words) and as a Persian *paradeisos*, in the *longue durée* (in the work of Movsēs Dasxurancı, by the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD):

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route?”, preliminary publication online <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01376630> (where P. Schneider adds not only Procopius but also a new testimony of the poet Persius 5.132-136).



Strabo 11.4.3-4

ποτίζεται δὲ πᾶν τὸ πεδῖον τοῦ Βαβυλωνίου  
καὶ τοῦ Αἰγυπτίου μᾶλλον τοῖς ποταμοῖς καὶ  
τοῖς ἄλλοις ὕδασι ὥστ' αἰεὶ ποώδη  
φυλάττειν τὴν ὄψιν· διὰ δὲ τοῦτο καὶ  
εὐβοτόν ἐστι· πρόσεστι δὲ καὶ τὸ εὐάερρον  
ἐκείνων μᾶλλον· ἄσκαφοι δ' αἰεὶ ἄμπελοι  
μένουσαι διὰ τέλους, τεμνόμεναι δὲ διὰ  
πενταετηρίδος, νέαι μὲν διετεῖς ἐκφέρουσι  
ἤδη καρπὸν, τέλειαι δ' ἀποδιδόασιν  
τοσοῦτον ὥστ' ἀφιάσιν ἐν τοῖς κλήμασι  
πολὸν μέρος· εὐερνή δ' ἐστὶ καὶ τὰ  
βοσκήματα παρ' αὐτοῖς τὰ τε ἡμέρα καὶ τὰ  
ἄγρια· Καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι κάλλει καὶ μεγέθει  
διαφέροντες, ἀπλοῖ δὲ καὶ οὐ κατηλικοί...

The plain as a whole is better watered by its  
rivers and other waters than the Babylonian  
and the Egyptian plains; consequently, it  
always keeps a grassy appearance, and  
therefore is also good for pasturage. In  
addition to this, the climate here is better  
than there. And the people never dig about  
the vines, although they prune them every  
fifth year; the new vines begin to produce  
fruit the second year, and when mature they  
yield so much that the people leave a large  
part of the fruit on the branches. Also, the  
cattle in their country thrive, both the tame  
and the wild. The inhabitants of this  
country are unusually handsome and large.  
And they are frank in their dealings, and not  
mercenary...

Movsēs Dasxurancı, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, translation C.J.F. Dowsett,  
London, 1961

Chap. 5. The fertility and abundance of the regions of Albania, and what it contains for  
the needs of Man

Situated among the towering mountains of the Caucasus, the land of Albania is fair and  
alluring, with many natural advantages. The great river Kur flows gently through it bearing  
fish great and small, and it throws itself into the Caspian Sea. In the plains round about  
there is to be found much bread and wine, naphtha and salt, silk and cotton, and  
innumerable olive-trees. Gold, silver, copper, and ochre are found in the mountains. As  
for wild animals, there are the lion, the leopard, the panther, and the wild ass, and among  
the many birds, the eagle, the hawk etc. And it has the great Partaw as its capital.

### Conclusion: The transfer of clichés or how myth makes history

The silver plate of Yenikend is a trace of the Greco-Roman influence on the edges  
of the known world, most probably between the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the first  
half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Its design must not have been unusual inside the Roman  
Empire – perhaps especially in the Western part of the Empire – but its transportation  
to the slopes of the Caucasus must have been intentional, with clear motivation. Its  
design has allowed different levels of interpretation – from the simple admiration of  
the physical beauty of a young naked woman to the pleasure of recognizing a Nereid  
under the influence of Aphrodite / Venus (goddess of the seas, of beauty, of love,  
nature, unions and fecundity, of the Romans) and finally Galateia herself, for the  
most educated viewers, those who were also most knowledgeable about the practices  
of the Greco-Roman symposium.

For the modern historian of the Taurus (Lesser Caucasus) and of the Greater  
Caucasus, this archaeological find, interpreted in the light of literary evidence, is a

fine illustration of a particular middle ground: a mountainous zone between the great sedentary, urbanized empires to the South and the nomads' steppe to the north. A mountain cuts a space into segments, isolating its inhabitants but also protecting and making the people of the valleys rich. At the same time, the valley crystallizes the tracks of contact through the passages used to circulate that no historical obstacle can block forever.

This plate is an example of cultural transfer because it does not reflect only possible acculturation by the Caucasian elites, who could be attracted by Roman luxury goods. It also shows that the plate had lost its original function – of table vessel – for use according to local tradition, known by Strabo and its sources. Despite the sparse information we have about the plate itself, or the context of its discovery, we may suppose that this transfer was made when contacts between Albanians and Romans were more than one century old. The plate could have been obtained – at least by its first Caucasian owner – not only by purchase, but also as a political or military gift, like those offered to the Iberian aristocrats buried in the same epoch in their capital Mtskheta.

If the plate was chosen to honor, recompense or compensate an indigenous warrior, it necessarily echoes the image the one who chose it had about the land and the people where the plate was meant to go. From the outside, a mountainous land, far from the civilized center, may easily be represented in very contrasting ways. The Albanian country was presented as both savage barbarian dystopia, with monsters like the Cyclops and the Amazons; but also, as a prosperous utopia, inhabited by fair, uncorrupted people. If the two representations contain some aspects of truth, observed at some point by the rare witnesses who reached the country in time of war, they are no less the result of intellectual constructions, nourished by the clichés of classical education<sup>125</sup>.

Strabo clearly explains how, precisely in the case of Albania, it is impossible to distinguish between myth and history, since those who saw the Caucasus and lived its history, did so by taking into account the myth of the Amazons (Strabo 11.5.3):

<p>Ἰδιον δέ τι συμβέβηκε τῷ λόγῳ [τῷ] περὶ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοι τὸ μυθῶδες καὶ τὸ ἱστορικὸν διωρισμένον ἔχουσι· τὰ γὰρ παλαιὰ καὶ ψευδῆ καὶ τερατώδη μῦθοι καλοῦνται, ἢ δ' ἱστορία βούλεται ἀληθές, ἅν τε παλαιὸν ἅν τε νέον, καὶ τὸ τερατώδες ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἢ σπάνιον· περὶ</p>	<p>A peculiar thing has happened in the case of the account we have of the Amazons; for our accounts of other peoples keep a distinction between the mythical and the historical elements; for the things that are ancient and false and monstrous are called myths, but history wishes for the truth,</p>
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<sup>125</sup> Cf. also G. Traina, “Due note sull’identità politica nel Caucaso antico”, in C. Bearzot, F. Landucci, G. Zecchini (ed.), *Gli stati territoriali nel mondo antico*, Milano, 2003, p. 317-326; L. Fabian, *Examining the Archaeology of 'Antik'-quity: The Eastern Caucasus Beyond*, Phd., University of Pennsylvania, 2018.

δὲ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων τὰ αὐτὰ λέγεται καὶ νῦν  
καὶ πάλαι, τερατώδη τε ὄντα καὶ πίστεως  
πόρρω.

whether ancient or recent, and contains no  
monstrous element, or else only rarely. But  
as regards the Amazons, the same stories  
are told now as in early times, though they  
are marvelous and beyond belief.

I interpret Galateia as a Roman response to the Greco-Roman myth of the Amazons: the hippocamp rider, emerging from the sea to walk on the savage grounds of the herdsmen, has no other weapon than her feminine sensuality. Also, Rome, founded and ruled by the descendants of Aphrodite / Venus, wants to seduce the Cyclops of the Caucasus with the charm of Roman luxury. If so, the plate could be the response of someone knowledgeable of Greco-Rome culture and opinions about the Caucasian Amazons. This would be a case of history made by myth, to which the response comes via another myth.

True or false, this mythic-historic reading shows what we can tease out of ancient texts and images. Over recent decades, ancient history and historical geography have become essential references in current debates about frontiers, land rights and ethnic identities in the Caucasus. The history of this plate shows not only what a middle ground means and how complex can be the transfers over long distances, but also the important part played by imagination in making history: ancient texts and images are not pieces of objective realities, from which we can extract objective answers to current questions. We must not forget that ancient histories are creations of another epoch, by authors using partial sources and empirical methods – not adapted to modern methodological requirements – in order to answer interests different from ours. Today, it is not enough to read Strabo to know the past of the Caucasus; one must understand the way Strabo elaborated his work, his concepts, his vision of the world and of the world's evolution, that Strabo shared with his contemporaries, but which are not explicit in his *Geography*. This involves a Homeric filter through which the Caucasian reality was perceived, imagined and represented through the myths of the Cyclops and the Amazons. In the end, past and present historiography is nothing other than a partial, subjective interpretation of the past, depending on the constraints and aspirations of the historian.

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