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AFRICAN MOTIFS IN GREEK VASE PAINTING

Jiří Honzl¹

ABSTRACT: In the beginning the paper concisely summarises contacts of Greeks with Egypt, focusing on their interests on the North African coast, up until the Classical Period. The brief description of Greek literary reception of Egypt during the same timeframe is following. The main part of the paper is dedicated to various African (and supposedly African) motifs depicted in Greek vase painting. These are commented upon and put in the relevant context. In the end the individual findings are summarised and confronted with the literary image described above.

KEY WORDS: Greek vase painting – Africa – Egypt – Nubia – Aethiopians – Pygmies – African animals

Greeks of the Archaic (7th century–500 BCE) and Classical (500–323 BCE) periods were well acquainted with the whole North African coast, from the Pillars of Heracles (modern day Gibraltar) via Carthage all the way to Egypt. Their knowledge reached even far to the south along the banks of the Nile to Nubia, where some writers placed the mythical land of Aethiopia. But it was always Egypt which stood in the centre of attention of the ancient Greeks. The Greek perception of Egypt is thus going to be one of the focal points of this paper, although limiting one's attention only to Egypt would surely be wrong.

The Greeks had been aware of Egypt since the earliest times. Lively contacts have been attested on both sides of the Mediterranean already in the Bronze Age (Helck 1979; Russel 1999; Assmann 2000: 13–14). The mentions of Egypt in both Homeric epics (*Iliad* IX: 381–384; *Odyssey* IV: 220–289, 351–584 and more) are to be taken as at least partly echoing these early contacts. Moreover, Egypt significantly features in other Greek myths (Snowden 1948; Kerényi 1998: 27, 37–40). Following the break in the Greek Dark Ages (ca. 11th–8th century BCE), the relations have been re-established in the 7th

¹ Contact: Jiří Honzl, National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures; e-mail: jiri_honzl@nm.cz. The paper was written within the framework of the project “Exploration of the Meroitic Royal City at Wad Ben Naga (Sudan)” supported by the Czech Science Foundation (grant no. 13-09594S). The current paper follows and expands the research of the reception of Africa and Nubia in particular in classical antiquity already begun by Marie Dufková (2013). The author would like to express his gratitude to Pavel Onderka for his numerous inspiring remarks and comments.

century BCE including not only exchange of goods, but also ideas and later even interfering into each other's military and political matters (Helck 1979: 205–209; Boardman 1999: 111–159; Assmann 2000: 15–17; Vittmann 2003: 194–235). The rapidity of these relations is very well attested by the fact that as early as 594 BCE a group of Greek mercenaries inscribed their names on the façade of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel, deep in the heart of Africa (Helck 1979: 205–209; Boardman 1999: 111–159; Vittmann 2003: 194–235).

New geographic discoveries and experiences with foreign culture naturally found its way into literature. Despite being mentioned in most cases only marginally, they still enable us to comprehend how Africa in general and Egypt in particular looked like through the eyes of Archaic and Classical Greeks. Besides the Homeric epics and mythology, Egypt also repeatedly featured in the plays by Athenian tragic poets (Aeschylus: *Suppliants*; Sophocles: *Oedipus at Colonus*; Euripides: *Helen*). Egyptians are unsurprisingly perceived as barbarians. Different appearance, strange language and customs are all presented as negative attributes. On the other hand, Egyptians are also credited with some positive traits like wisdom, learning and piety (Lloyd 2010). Their medical capabilities have already been praised in The *Odyssey* (*Odyssey* IV, 231–235). A truly exceptional case of reception of Egypt in the Classical period is to be found in the second and part of the third book of Herodotus' *Histories* (esp. *Histories* II: 1–98; Assmann 2000: 25–27; Lloyd 2007, for Nubia in particular Dufková 2013: 25–26; Török 2014). Even the extent of the author's geographic-ethnologic-historical excursion demonstrates his extraordinary involvement in the matter. Although Herodotus' accounts included a lot of errors, his observations are surprisingly accurate in many cases. Herodotus looks upon Egypt and Egyptians with a great interest and admiration. However, the general Greek perception of Egypt, as evident by literature, varies from harsh rejection to apparent fascination. These extremes and all between them form together an ambiguous yet coherent image of a strange foreign land deserving great deal of respect.

The reception of Egypt and Africa is not restricted only to literature, but is represented in the field of fine arts. However, amongst these examples, only the depiction of Africa and Egypt in the context of Ancient Greek vase painting is intended to be discussed in this paper. It aims to explore both real and supposed African motifs that appear on the pottery, the frequency of their occurrence, as well as the extent to which they actually reflect the African reality and their connotations.

Heracles and Busiris

As already mentioned, several Greek mythological stories were in fact connected with Egypt and Africa (cf. e.g. Hicks 1962). They usually only take place there, but in no other way reflect the actual Egyptian reality. The same applies to their depictions. The stories of Io (Kerényi 1998: 27), Danaus (Kerényi 1998: 37–40), Atlas (Kerényi 1998: 131–132), or Antaeus (von Geisau 1979: 365–366; Kerényi 1998: 124–125) are thus going to be left aside. An exception from this rule is an episode in the adventures of Heracles in which the hero stumbled upon Busiris, an imaginary king of Egypt, whose name was derived from the Egyptian designation *pr wsjr* which is, apart from being the name of several other places, also the designation of House (i.e. temple) of Osiris in the city of Djedu in the Delta (von Beckerath 1975: 883–884). According to the myth, Busiris had

every foreigner passing through Egypt seized and bestially sacrificed to Zeus. He intended to proceed with Heracles in a similar way. The hero was captured, but while being led to the altar, Heracles managed to overpower Busiris and his priests and punish them (Kerényi 1998: 125). The earliest depictions of the rampaging Heracles among terrified Egyptian priests appeared already in the era of black-figure painting style (ca. 7th–5th century BCE). One of the most famous and also oldest depictions of this motif can be found on a vessel from the group of the so-called Caeretan hydriae from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Fig. 1; Inv. No. IV 3576; Hemelrijk 1984, Pl. 118–125), decorated by Busiris Painter (named after the depiction on the vase). Composition of the scene became very quickly formalised. By the time of red-figure painting style (ca. 6th–4th century BCE), there is almost always an altar in the middle of the scene with a priest, maybe even Busiris himself, lying on it and being attacked by Heracles. The story is, as a rule, captured in this moment of the culminating struggle. The exception from the rule (if the interpretation of the scene is correct) is shown on a cup in the Berlin State Museums (Antikensammlung; Inv. No. F2534; CVA BERLIN Antiquarium 2: 41, Pl. 100.1–4; BAD 210242) on which Heracles is led in cuffs by priests to Busiris who is dressed in oriental garment sitting on his throne.



Fig. 1 Heracles struggling with Busiris and his priests
(Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum: IV 3576; Drawing: Jiří Honzl).

When picturing this particular scene, artists made efforts to capture the foreign Egyptian setting. The above-mentioned Caeretan hydria may serve as a good example as it contains most of the Egyptian features usually present in this kind of depictions. The priests depicted on this vase are shown wearing long white garments with their faces shaven clean (cf. Herodotus: *Histories* II: 81; Lloyd 2007: 295), contrasting with the heroic nudity of Heracles. Half of these priests appear to be dark-skinned. The shaven heads of these men are the only missing feature usually used by painters to characterise Egyptian priests (cf. Herodotus: *Histories* II: 36; Lloyd 2007: 263). Most of representations of the myth tended to include at least some of the aforementioned characteristics, most often the long garments. One other vase worth mentioning is a pelike of the Pan Painter kept in the National Museum in Athens (Inv. No. CC1175; Collignon – Couve 1902–4: 368–369, Pl. 41.A; BAD 206325). In this case the artist really made an effort to emphasise

the ethnicity of the priests. They wear transparent chitons and both their faces and heads are clean-shaven. Moreover, it is apparent that they were all circumcised (cf. Herodotus: *Histories* II: 36; Lloyd 2007: 264). The facial features of the priests are strongly Sub-Saharan in appearance and thus they are clearly intended to represent Nubians. The Nubians occur not only on these two vases, but they appear (often exclusively) in the majority of the other scenes associated with the myth of Busiris. Such frequency is remarkable and deserves further comment.

It is hard to imagine, that Greek artists, who were familiar with the dress and ritual treatment of the priestly body, would not know what an Egyptian truly looked like. In fact, the depiction of Nubians can reflect the reality of Egypt in the Late Period (664–332 BCE) which was called home by numerous foreign minorities including the Nubians. On the other hand, the preference of dark-skinned Africans is such, that it cannot be explained just as a reflection of Egyptian cosmopolitanism. A more probable explanation of this may be found in the main message of the myth. The main theme of the Busiris story is of barbarism and its defeat by the hands of Heracles. The choice of the episode pictured on vases serves only to emphasise it. Human sacrifice, also thematised in other myths, e.g. the story of Tantalus (Kerényi 1998: 48–52), was perceived as a typical example of an ultimate taboo. Only barbarians were capable of breaking such a prohibition. The main reason for a strong characterization of priests is the emphasis on their strangeness, i.e. barbarism. The depiction of priests as Nubians could therefore serve to even more clearly underline the contrast between Heracles, the Greek, and the Egyptian barbarians.

Inhabitants of Africa

Greeks named the dark-skinned inhabitants of Africa Aethiopians. In literature, they were described as flat-nosed, dark-skinned and curly-haired (Snowden 1948: 31–33; Dufková 2013: 25). Their representation in the fine arts matches this description (Snowden 1948; Hemingway – Hemingway 2008). Aethiopians not only feature in the story of Busiris, they also appear in many other scenes, including mythological ones, where they usually take the role of servants (e.g. Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden: Inv. No. K94.9.15; CVA LEIDEN Rijksmuseum van Oudheden 2: 10–11, Fig. 11, Pl. 62.7–9, 63.3; BAD 768), squires (e.g. Houston: de Menil Collection: Inv. No. 83.035DJ; Hornbostel *et al.* 1980: 88–89; BAD 6409) or by-standing warriors (e.g. Munich: Staatliche Antikensammlungen: Inv. No. J541, CVA MÜNCHEN Antikesammlungen ehemals Museum antiker Kleinkunst 9: 13–14, Pl. 1.3, 4.1–2, 6.3; BAD 302202). They generally do not have an important part in these narrative scenes. However, an exception to this rule can be seen on the lekythos from the Archaeological Museum in Gela (Inv. No. N41; CVA GELA Museo Archeologico Nazionale 3: Pl. 22.5, 23.1–4; BAD 680). On this vessel, there are two Aethiopians carrying the dead body of Memnon, their king (Dufková 2013: 25). It is noteworthy that Memnon himself is depicted as a typical Greek hero without any foreign features at all.

Beside various scenes, the motif of Aethiopians appears most often in three clearly defined groups of pottery, namely so-called “Negro alabaster” (e.g. Boardman 1975) and two groups of figure vases, i.e. vases sculpted into the shape of a figural representation. “Negro alabaster” are decorated with black outline painting on the white ground. The motif depicted on most is a simply sketched figure of a black warrior (e.g. London: British Museum: Inv. No. B674; Boardman 1999: Fig. 195; BAD 202779), or

(rarely) an Amazon (e.g. Karlsruhe: Badisches Landesmuseum: Inv. No. 69.34; CVA KARLSRUHE Badisches Landesmuseum 3: 55–56, Pl. 25.1–4; BAD 4703). These warriors wear the same oriental garment as Amazons and carry the same set of weapons, namely a bow and a *pelta* shield. The scenes are often supplemented by other depictions, such as palm trees. Throughout the history, the Nubians were revered for their archery skills. However, their occurrence and way of portrayal on the “Negro alabastra” is probably not a reflection of this stereotype. It is rather contamination with typical features of Amazons, as also suggested by their eastern dress.

Sub-Saharan Africans are quite common as a motif for so-called figure vases. The first group of them included vessels modelled in the shape of human heads, mostly of Aethiopians (e.g. Hannover: Kestner Museum: Inv. No. 1893.7; CVA HANNOVER Kestner-Museum 2: 47, Pl. 34.11–13; BAD 9031987), rarely of women (e.g. London: British Museum: Inv. No. 1005; CVA LONDON British Museum 4: Pl. 44.1A–B; BAD 7773) and satyrs (e.g. Cleveland: Museum of Art: Inv. No. 1979.69; CVA CLEVELAND Museum of Art 2: 40, Pl. 78.1–4; BAD 10160). Two heads connected by the nape are also quite common for this group, randomly combining aforementioned types (cf. examples above). The Sub-Saharan African figures depicted are in most cases youths, except for vases in the shape of a female (e.g. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum: Inv. No. 3714; CVA WIEN Kunsthistorisches Museum 1: 36–37, Pl. 45.1–2; BAD 9031263) or of an old man’s (cf. examples above) head which can also be found. The exact connection between Aethiopian, female and satyr heads is not known. The possible solution could be the identification of female heads as maenads and thus connecting the Aethiopians with the Dionysiac circle. Or the heads could just simply represent various beings outside proper, i.e. free male Greek, society.

The second relevant group of figure vases is very homogenous and mostly originated in the workshop of the potter and sculptor Sotades. These vases are rhyta embedded into statuettes of naked Sub-Saharan African youths ambushed by a crocodile. All these vessels appear to be very similar and had to be inspired by a single model. One of the finest rhyta of this group is nowadays in the City of Paris Museum of Fine Arts (Inv. No. 349; CVA PARIS Musée du Petit Palais: 26–28, Pl. 26.1–3, Pl. 27.1–8; BAD 209467). This vessel catches the viewer’s eye, drawing them in with the elaborate detail of the youth’s face, where his pain is mixed with his terror.

Apart from Sub-Saharan Africans, mythological Pygmies are also popular amongst Greek vase painters. In most cases, they are depicted in battle with their archenemies; cranes (Dasen 1993: 175–178). Some depictions of this fight are composed of many figures and thus evoke famous representations of big mythological fights like centauiromachy or gigantomachy. This can also be said about one of the oldest depictions of Pygmies on the notorious François Vase kept in the Etruscan Archaeological Museum in Florence (Fig. 2; Inv. No. 4209; Shapiro – Iozzo – Lezzi-Hafter 2013; BAD 300000). The fight of the Pygmies with the cranes also appears on smaller vessels and is often represented by only one pair of combatants (e.g. Prague: Museum of Applied Arts: Inv. No. Z260.1K18, Dasen 1993: Pl. 68.1; BAD 21358). This motif remained popular until the final decline of the Attic vase painting in the fourth century BCE. It is important to remark, that Pygmies too found their place in the repertoire of the workshop of Sotades, as some of the figural rhyta are shaped as statuettes of a victorious Pygmy carrying an unconscious crane on his back (e.g. Bonn: Akademisches Kunstmuseum: Inv. No. 545, Dasen 1993: Pl. 63.3, 70. 2; BAD 209481). The oldest depictions show Pygmies merely as

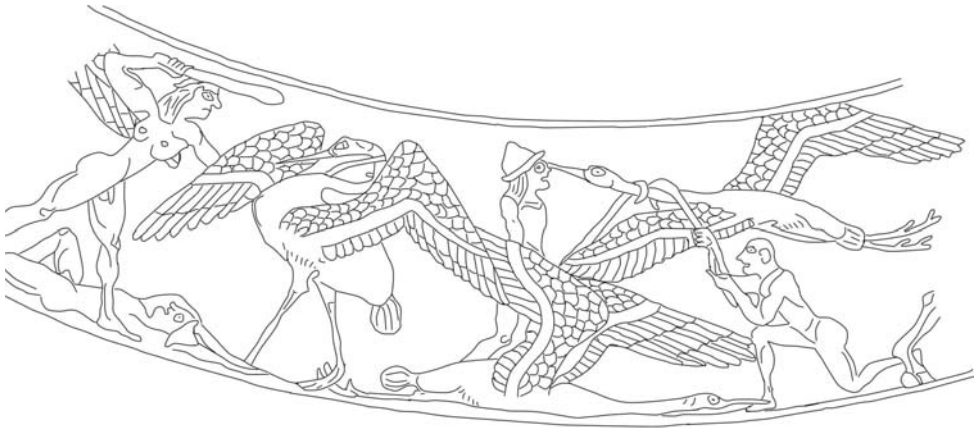


Fig. 2 The fight of Pygmies and cranes
(Florence: Museo Archeologico Etrusco: 4209; Drawing: Jiří Honzl).

miniatures of grown-up men similarly to the contemporary canon for children. Later they appear with characteristics typical for people afflicted by dwarfism (Dasen 1993: 7–15). Some representations of Pygmies have the dwarfish features strongly or even grotesquely emphasised (cf. Dasen 1993: 294–304).

African Animals

Greek artists of the Archaic and Classical periods were also familiar with a number of typically African animals, i.e. animals not known from other parts of the ancient world (e.g. lions entered the Greek vase painting from the Near Eastern sources of inspiration). The Sotadean figural rhyta with crocodiles have already been mentioned. The level of detail of the reptile's anatomy, as pictured by the Greek artists, is striking. It is highly improbable that they could have encountered the real animals that could serve as patterns. It is more probable that this is the result of study of some satisfyingly accurate model, for example an imported bronze statuette.

It is much less surprising that Greeks were very familiar with camels. One of the most famous representations of this ungulate originated again from Sotades' workshop. Unfortunately, the figure vase, signed by the master himself from Louvre (Inv. No. CA3825; Boardman 1989: Fig. 101; BAD 275887), is preserved only in fragments, however its suggested reconstruction is quite certain. The terracotta statuette depicts a camel led by a bearded man in a high cap, clearly an eastern barbarian. Such a representation points rather to the connection of camels with the east rather than with the south. This presumption is also corroborated by the fact that most of the camels on vases are depicted with two humps, i.e. representing the species of the Bactrian camel, which originated and further spread in Asia (not in Africa). On the other hand, there is also a single depiction of a camel with a man of Sub-Saharan features in Hermitage in St. Petersburg (Inv. No. ST1603; Boardman 1975: Fig. 183; BAD 202617). Nevertheless, the animal has two humps on its back too. The Greeks were also familiar with other African ungulates, namely the antelope, which appears as a motif in the East Greek painted pottery production (e.g. Berlin: Berlin State Museums: Antikensammlung: F1340; CVA BERLIN Atiquarium 4: 30, Pl. 168.3–4; BAD 1004939).

Monkeys are another species of African mammals found on Greek painted vases. They are mainly connected with one distinctive group of containers. It is a class of East Greek alabastra mostly in the shape of a simply formed seated monkey (e.g. Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek: Inv. No. 3383, CVA COPENHAGEN Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 1: 157–158, Pl. 130.4–6; BAD 9018542). A particularly interesting piece of this group, today in the Badisches Landesmuseum in Karlsruhe (Inv. No. 66.50; CVA KARLSRUHE Badisches Landesmuseum 3: 28, Pl. 6.1–3; BAD 1006318), even depicts a mother holding her youngling. Other representations such as a beautiful pottery fragment from the Archaeological Museum in Eleusis (BAD 9033664) show monkeys as pets.

Apart from crocodile and some mammals, Greeks knew and depicted some of the African birds. A proto-geometric krater bears a painted silhouette of a bird who could represent no other species but flamingo (Heraklion; Boardman 1998: Fig. 23.1). It is necessary to mention that flamingos also live outside of Africa, and thus this depiction does not have to relate to Africa at all. The other decoration on the krater recalls later orientalisising motifs pointing rather to the eastern inspiration of the piece.

The last animal, to which the attention will be paid, is an ostrich. The depictions of ostriches appear rarely on Greek vases, but are shown in very interesting context. In both known cases, they are depicted within grotesque processions accompanied by music. The first example of this is on the skyphos from the Louvre (Inv. No. F410; Dasen 1993: Pl. 75, B; BAD 4557), where an ostrich is seen in the company of a camel laden with goods and a Pygmy armed with a club. The ostrich itself served as a riding animal for a female figure. The second depiction on a skyphos from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Fig. 3; Inv. No. 20.18; Flickinger 1918, Fig. 15–16), shows several ostriches

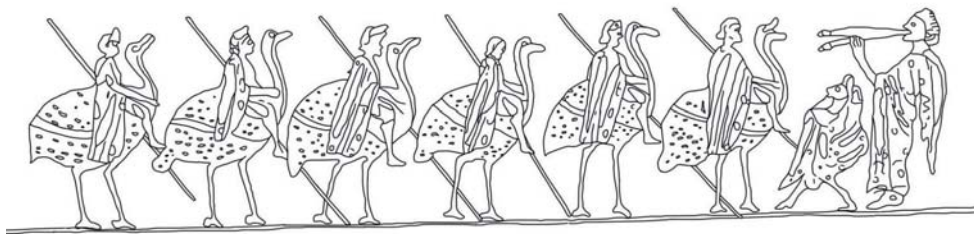


Fig. 3 Grotesque procession with piper, dwarf and warriors riding ostriches (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts: 20.18; Drawing: Jiří Honzl).

used again as a riding animal in this case by draped figures of men with spears. The scene also includes a dwarf and a piper standing in front of the procession playing double flute (*diaulos*). There is a similar motif on the other side of the vessel where soldiers in crested helmets ride on backs of dolphins. In both cases ostriches are used as exotic elements serving as a device to emphasise the oddity and strangeness of the scene, and as a result underline the grotesque effect of the image.

Apart from real animals, there is also a single creature of myth, the sphinx, which ought to be mentioned. The vast majority of representations of the sphinxes on Ancient Greek painted pottery follows the iconographic canon established in the Near East, which had penetrated Greece already by the Bronze Age (Crowley 1977: 45–46). It is also, however exceptionally, possible to find depiction of the sphinx seemingly drawing

inspiration rather from Egypt. Such a sphinx (note especially the headdress similar to the Egyptian *nemes*) appears on the cup in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen (Inv. No. 3259; CVA COPENHAGEN National Museum 2: 72, Pl. 92.4A–C; BAD 1013161).

Conclusions

African motifs do not rank among the most frequent depictions of Greek vase painting. Greek vase painters – quite naturally – focused in the first place on the Greeks themselves and on their mythology in particular. It is not surprising then, that especially the story of Busiris or the fight of the Pygmies and cranes (which both originate from Greek mythology) became the most popular among the African themes depicted. Other motifs are rare or even unique. Yet the diversity of the motifs is far from being narrow. Individual representations, as far as can be judged, are close to the reality. Such depictions had to draw on personal experiences of the authors, or had to be based on short transmission of ideas through narration, imported works of art or other media. Various motifs often appear in similar contexts and on similar ceramic forms.

In comparison with the literary image, Egypt and Africa were viewed by painters through somewhat different lenses. The emphasis was, as in the case of literature, on the strangeness and barbarism of the foreign lands, all the more so, as the painting enabled a more expressive representation of them. The respect shown for the advanced Egyptian culture declared in the literature is completely missing. The prevailing way of perception of the African motifs is further corroborated by the fact that these representations often feature together with the eastern ones or even in some sort of confusion and mixture with them. As such, African depictions clearly share the similar subtext of barbarism so typical for the eastern motifs. On the other hand, the view of Greek pottery painters on Africa is not completely negative and rejecting. There can also be seen the fascination with difference, the view of Egypt and Africa as an exciting and exotic landscape. In that way, they were viewed by Herodotus and were also going to be viewed by most of the other Greeks in the following historical periods.

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