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ON HERAKLES WITH ELEPHANTS, KERKOPES, AND PYGMIES (TOWARDS A PROTOTYPE OF THE ELEPHANT-BEARER FRESCO IN MEROE)¹

Recently, in the light of some new material recovered in the Griffith Institute at Oxford, the writer found it necessary to take a second thought on some earlier scholars' considerations on the Elephant-Bearer fresco (fig. 1),² discovered by the Liverpool University Expedition in the course of the 1909-14 excavations on the site of Meroe³ and known today from two copies.⁴

One of the points to be revised has turned out to be the ingenious hypothesis set forth in 1998 by Eugenio Fantusati, arguing that the composition in Meroe City is likely to have been inspired by representations of the Greek epic hero Herakles carrying on his shoulder two bound captives, which were popular in Graeco-Roman art in the 6-4 centuries BCE.⁵

It is worth recalling that the latter scene refers to the theme in Greek mythology conventionally described as the "Robbery of Herakles" or, to be more comprehensive, as "Herakles' pursuit of the robbers, who tried to steal his weapons



Fig. 1: Line drawing of the fresco of the Elephant-Bearer (Photograph courtesy of the Griffith Institute)

1 I am most grateful to Dr Timothy Kendall for stylistic alterations of this text.

2 Line drawing of the fresco from Ch. Seligman's dossier in the Archive of the Griffith Institute (Photograph courtesy of the Griffith Institute).

3 For the general outline of the problem see A.K. Vinogradov, 'The Elephant-Bearer Fresco from Meroe City: a New Version (Seligman's Dossier in the Griffith Institute Archive)', forthcoming in the proceedings of the 13th International Conference for Nubian Studies (Neuchâtel, 2014).

4 Some aspects of the subject are touched on in A.K. Vinogradov, 'A New Glance at the Portrait of the "Elephant-Bearer" in Meroe', *Der antike Sudan. MittSAG* 24 (2013), SS. 135-39.

5 E. Fantusati, 'Remarks on a Meroitic Painting' in T. Kendall (ed.), *Nubian Studies 1998. Proceedings of the 9th Conference of the International Society of Nubian Studies (Aug. 21-26, 1998, Boston / Mas.)* (Boston, 2004), pp. 250-55.

while he was asleep".⁶ Curiously enough, in Greek mythology the club of this hero, as well as his bow and quiver with arrows, seem to have possessed some magnetic attractiveness, for the theme of Herakles' robbery has been attested in many variants and with different participants.⁷

6 It seems that a "drunken sleep" of Herakles was meant in most cases, because some remains of a repast are often shown in such scenes, the hand of the reclining hero often holding a cup (I. McPhee, 'An Apulian Oinochoe and the Robbery of Herakles', *Antike Kunst*, Bd. 22 (1979), S. 39, Taf. 15, 1-2; cf. 16, 1-3; see also LIMCV.1, p. 117 (no. 2805)).

7 F. Brommer, *Satyrspiele Bilder griechischen Vasen* (Berlin, 1959), SS. 34-39; McPhee, 'An Apulian Oinochoe', SS. 38-42; S. Woodford, 'Herakles' Attributes and Their Appropriation by Eros', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*,



Among the robbers (or more precisely, persons who *attempted* the theft) of Herakles' weapons, and sometimes of his other personal belongings, the extant sources attest some deities or creatures of complex nature, such as Pan⁸ (or rather (aegi) pans),⁹ satyrs¹⁰ or silens¹¹, besides Eros/Amor¹² or Erotes,¹³ etc. Regrettably, the majority of such "stories" remain obscure today, for the meaning of the scenes in visual art monuments, for usual lack of verbal explication, is to be inferred, with all inevitable risk, from the representations themselves.

One case, the story of Herakles' capture of the Kerkopes brothers, stands apart, for not only is it by far more frequently represented in artistic monuments but, unlike the rest, is traceable – though fragmentarily and in many variations¹⁴ – in literary sources as well. A serious problem about this case is its iconographical instability. The earlier examples (particularly those in sculpture) show the Kerkopes as two adults with bodies hardly inferior to Herakles in height. The later representations (mainly drawings on vases) often portray them as miniature anthropomorphic or composite creatures, sometimes with tails and/or exaggerated genitals (perhaps a hint at the etymology of these beings' appellative)¹⁵ and

occasionally with animals' ears,¹⁶ which makes them difficult to distinguish from satyrs, silens, (aegi)pans, etc. This ambiguity greatly complicates precise identification of personages in some of the "Robbery of Herakles" scenes, most problematic of which being, of course, those examples, which show the hero pursuing, capturing and even tethering¹⁷ the thieves, as if with the view of their eventual punishment.

More or less reliably the Kerkopes may only be identified in those compositions which display the (pre-)final episode of this novella of the *Epic Cycle*. The main feature of this scene is the fact that the two brigand twins, whether they are portrayed as strong men or puny dwarfs, are always shown tied to the carrying tool (rope or leather strap, carrying pole or simply shaft of the bow) on the shoulder of Herakles, from which they are hanging *head-downwards*.¹⁸ This peculiarity is stipulated by the story about Herakles and the Kerkopes as far as it can be reconstructed from fragmentary allusions in works of many Greek and Roman writers. According to the version of Pseudo-Nonnus (whose concise and integral account is generally accepted as preferable),¹⁹ when Herakles picked up the captives, tied head-downwards to the "(piece of) wood" on his shoulder, they did not lose presence of mind and started poking fun at the hairy bottom of the hero, which opened to their sight.²⁰ The caustic remarks of the Kerkopes, – the text says, – made Herakles laugh so much that he removed their bonds and let them go.

Minor though it might appear to be, this textual detail of Pseudo-Nonnus' account (the Kerkopes' hanging *κατακέφαλα* – "head-downwards") in fact

Vol. CIX (1989), p. 202; V. Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Oxford, 1993), p. 194.

8 Woodford, 'Herakles' Attributes', pp. 201-02, n. 15.

9 McPhee, 'An Apulian Oinochoe', SS. 39, Taf. 15, 1-2; Woodford, 'Herakles' Attributes', pp. 201-02; *LIMC* V.1, p. 180 (no. 3498).

10 McPhee, 'An Apulian Oinochoe', S. 40, Taf. 15. 4(-5); Woodford, 'Herakles' Attributes', p. 201; *LIMC* IV.2, pp. 102 (no. 2687), 120 (nos. 2916-17), 539 (no. 1434); V.1, pp. 156 ("4. Herakles asleep is robbed by satyrs": nos. 3230-38), 157 ("5. Herakles threatens, pursues or captures satyrs": nos. 3239-45a, esp. 3243); V.2, p. 145 (nos. 3230, 3234).

11 Brommer, *Satyrs*, SS. 36-39; McPhee, 'An Apulian Oinochoe', SS. 40-41, Taf. 16, 1-2.

12 Woodford, 'Herakles' Attributes', pp. 200-04; *LIMC*, V.1, p. 173 ("b) Eros/Erotes play with or steal Herakles' equipment": nos. 3419-29); cf. III.1, p. 1028 ("2. Amor tenant seul les attributs d'Hercule": nos. 613-15); III.2, p. 720 (nos. 614-15).

13 Woodford, 'Herakles' Attributes', pp. 202-03; *LIMC*, III.1, p. 1028 ("3. Amores transportant en groupe les attributs d'Hercule": nos. 616-19); III.2, p. 720 (nos. 616, 618-19); V.1, p. 173 (nos. 3419, 3421-24, 3427-29); V.2, p. 157 (nos. 3419, 3428).

14 Not only the number, names and genealogy of the Kerkopes are varying (two persons are usually referred to, but some accounts seem to imply that there were many more ("tribe", "host"?) - cf. Diod. IV. 31, 7; Apollod. II. VI, 3). Even the place of their encounter with Herakles varies (see A. Adler, 'Kerkopen', *RE* XI (Stuttgart, 1922), Sp. 309-13).

15 H.G. Liddel, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1958), p. 943: Κέρκωψ as a derivative of

κέρκος (I. 1. *tail* of a beast; 2. *membrum virile*; II. *handle*; III. *small animal that injures the vine*; IV. *tongue of flame*).

16 Dasen, *Dwarfs*, pls. 73-74.

17 See notes 6-7 above.

18 F. Brommer, *Herakles II. Die unkanonischen Taten des Helden* (Darmstadt, 1984), SS. 29 (Abb. 9-10), 30 (Abb. 11), 31 (Abb. 13); Taf. 7 (a, b), 8; Dasen, *Dwarfs*, pp. 191-93, figs. 13.2-13.3, pls. 71-74; Fantusati, 'Remarks', p. 253 (figs. 5-7).

19 J. Nimmo Smith (ed.), *Pseudo-Nonniani in IV orationes Gregorii Nazianzeni commentarii* (Brepols, 1992), p. 106 (*Comm. in Or. IV, Hist. 39*); id, *A Christian's Guide to Greek Culture: the Pseudo-Nonnus Commentaries on Sermons 4, 5, 39 and 43 by Gregory of Nazianzus* (Liverpool, 2001), p. 29.

20 At this moment the Kerkopes recollected their mother's prophetic warning that one day they might encounter the "Black-bottom(ed)" (*i.e.* the one who would make them pay for their wrongdoings). Liddell, Scott, Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1095 (μελάμ-πυγος); Adler, 'Kerkopen', Sp. 310; Mader, 'Μελάμπυγος', S. 93. Incidentally, this episode seems to give the only extant explanation in classical literature of this piquant sobriquet of Herakles, occasionally found in literary monuments.



Fig. 2: Krater from Catania (F. Brommer, *Herakles II. Die unkanonischen Taten des Helden* (Darmstadt, 1984), S. 30, Abb. 12)

conveys the very quintessence of the episode under discussion. Can we consider the corresponding *iconographic* feature as the marker of scenes with the Kerkopes specifically, allowing to distinguish them from the whole lot of other representations connected with the theme of “Herakles’ robbery”?

Interestingly enough, an example can be pointed out which might appear to be a means to verify the above assumption. The drawing in question is on the krater from Catania,²¹ and shows the striding Herakles, easily recognizable due to his usual attributes, the club in his right hand and the bow, using which like a yoke (*cf.* the well known representation of the hero on the Getty Museum pelike)²² he bears on the left shoulder two cages with a small black anthropoid creature sitting inside of either one. The hero is shown as he comes up to a person sitting on a chair (evidently implying throne) with something like a warder in his hand (*fig. 2*).²³

The somewhat strange clothes of both personages (as well as the expression of their faces, not to mention the genitals jutting out their garments)²⁴

betray them being *flyakes*, or comical actors, who took part in various buffoon performances (historically developed from the Dionysian spectacles, often rather scabrous). It has been pointed out that flyakes in particular were parodying the Greek dramatists’ plays (incidentally, including the ones dedicated to the Labours of Herakles).²⁵

One can notice that the drawing on the Catania krater is, strictly speaking, not illustrating the aforementioned novella from the cycle of tales about Herakles, but rather a *staging of this novella by comic actors*. Nevertheless, in the research literature the scene is usually rendered as a “rightful” variation of the theme “Herakles with captured Kerkopes” which is in many ways represented elsewhere. Such was *e.g.* the rendering of Octave Navarre,²⁶ who, at the beginning of the 20th century, published an important study on the *flyakes*. The same view was many decades later expressed by Frank Brommer, the leading expert in the literary and pictorial sources for Herakles’ deeds,²⁷ whose interpretation, in its turn, must have influenced, if not determined, the subsequent interpretations of the drawing under discussion.²⁸

And yet, at closer study of the composition, a number of oddities may attract the attention of a careful student.

The two small creatures in cages hanging from the ends of the carrying tackle on the shoulder of

21 O. Navarre, ‘Phlyakes’, in Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* <...>, T. IV, 1 (Paris, 1907), pp. 435-38 (esp. 437, *fig. 5634*); Brommer, *Herakles II*, S. 30 (Abb. 12); Dasen, *Dwarfs*, p. 193, *fig. 13.4*. *Cf.* Adler, ‘Kerkopen’, Sp. 310.

22 A.J. Clark, M. Jentoft-Nilsen, A. D. Trendall, R. D. De Puma, *Corpus vasorum antiquorum*. [United States of America.], Fasc. 27: *The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, Fasc. 4* (Malibu, 1991), pp. 31-32, pls. 216-17; Dasen, *Dwarfs*, pls. 73-74.

23 After Brommer, *Herakles II*, S. 30 (Abb. 12).

24 Navarre, ‘Phlyakes’, p. 436.

25 Navarre, ‘Phlyakes’, pp. 437-38.

26 Navarre, ‘Phlyakes’, p. 437.

27 Brommer, *Herakles II*, S. 30.

28 See *e.g.* Dasen, *Dwarfs*, pp. 193-94.



the hero, are usually rendered as the Kerkopes in the shape of monkeys.²⁹ However, it can be clearly seen that both beings have purely anthropoid appearance, for they do not seem to have any tail or exaggerated genitalia (which could be a rebus-like hint at the etymology of the brothers' nickname Κέρκωπες "the tailed (ones)", with a possible sexual connotation), nor even animal's ears, displayed by Herakles' captives in some representations where scholars recognize the Kerkopes.

Yet, a still more mysterious member of the composition is the person, evidently a ruler, sitting, with a warder in hand, on the chair/throne in the right part of the scene. The generally accepted interpretation³⁰ holds that this is Eurystheus, the king of Mycenae, during the ten years' service to whom Herakles, according to the *Epic Cycle* tales, performed his famous Twelve Labours in order to attain immortality.³¹ The presence of Eurystheus in the present case is difficult to explain because no other source, literary or pictorial, seems to associate this king in any way whatsoever with the story about Herakles and the Kerkopes.

It is to be recalled that the latter case was a "collateral" adventure of Herakles, which happened apart from (and much later than) the twelve canonical Labours, which he performed for Eurystheus. By the time of his encounter with the brigand twins Herakles had not only been liberated by that king but had again been ritually sold, for three years, into (expiatory) servitude - this time to Omphale, queen of Lydia - this being the condition of his recovery from the insanity he was visited with through the hatred of the goddess Hera.

According to the most representative version of the story (see above), when Herakles once captured the Kerkopes brothers at the attempt to steal his weapons, he evidently decided to take them to the queen and, with this in mind, tied the twins to "a (piece of) wood" so as to carry them like hunting prey. However, simple-heartedly amused by their coarse

remarks in his regard he changed his mind, "straightway removed their bonds and liberated (them)".³²

Logically, the fact that Herakles *let the brigands go* rules out any possibility to assume that subsequently he "transported" the captives to his suzerain (whether it be queen Omphale, in whose service the hero at that time was, or king Eurystheus, whose servant he had been still earlier), the scene of which scholars usually tend to see in the drawing on the Catania krater. Thus, the generally accepted rendering proves to be very debatable.

It seems that a much more satisfactory – and by far simpler – interpretation of the drawing might be suggested if we view the problem from another perspective, taking as the starting point *king Eurystheus' presence* in this scene. The latter fact makes one recollect another adventure of Herakles, which took place in the period of his ten years' service to this king.

One of the last (eleventh in Apollodorus, twelfth and the final, in Diodorus)³³ Labours ordered by Eurystheus was to fetch the magic golden apples from the Hesperides nymphs' inaccessible gardens. Herakles, in his quest for the gardens, at a certain point of time traversed Libya (general term for (north) Africa),³⁴ where he encountered the giant Antaeus, one of the native rulers. The latter, being a son of Gaia, the goddess of the earth, used to kill foreign strangers compelling them to wrestle with him, while he himself was regaining strength by touching the earth. Herakles, when he was made to wrestle, managed to win a victory over Antaeus, having separated the giant from the earth and broken his back,³⁵ or, according to another version of the story, by smothering his opponent in wrestler's hug.³⁶

29 Adler, 'Kerkopen', Sp. 310; Dasen, *Dwarfs*, pp. 193-94 ("<...> krater from Catania <...> may show the final transformation of the Cercopes into monkeys <...> Herakles brings to Eurystheus two small beings <...> They are so small that they could be monkeys").

30 Navarre, 'Phlyakes', p. 437, n. 3: "La figure 5634, qui représente Héraclès rapportant à Eurysthée les Cercopes <...>"; Adler, 'Kerkopen', Sp. 310: "<...> Herakles dem Eurystheus zwei affenähnliche Zwerge in einem Korbe überbringt"; Brommer, *Herakles II*, S. 30: "<...> Er bringt sie zu einem sitzenden König, wohl Eurystheus"; Dasen, *Dwarfs*, p. 194: "Heracles brings to Eurystheus two small beings <...>."

31 Apollod. II. 4, 12.

32 <...> καὶ εὐθὺς αὐτοὺς τῶν δεσμῶν ἐλυτρώσατο καὶ ἀπέλυσεν (Pseudo-Nonnus, *Comm in Or. IV*, Nimmo Smith (ed.), *Pseudo-Nonniani*, p. 106).

33 Apollod. II. 5. 1; Diod. IV. 26. 2 - 27.4.

34 The mythological version of Apollodorus is remarkably bizarre in geographical aspect. The writer begins stating that the apples from the Hesperides gardens (of whose location Herakles initially was totally unaware) were "not in Libya, as some (people) have said, but on/at the (mount of) Atlas, among the Hyperboreans", *i.e.* in the far North. Yet further the reader is told that the hero, *having ascertained the whereabouts of the magic gardens*, first moved to Libya, reaching far West, then visited Egypt and Ethiopia (thus reaching far South), after which, traversing Asia, he went to the Caucasus and only later proceeded to the land of the Hyperboreans. In any case, the combat of Herakles with Antaeus, according to Apollodorus, took place in Libya (*cf.* Hyg. *Fab.* 31; Lucan, *Pharsal.* IV. 589-660; Philostratus, *Im.* II. 21).

35 Apollod. II. 5. 11.

36 Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica* VI. 285-88; Ov. *Met.* 4. IX. 190 (> 183-84).



The subsequent events are vividly expounded by Philostratus the Elder, who described in his *Imagines* a certain representation (whether real or imaginary, remains unclear),³⁷ illustrating this episode of Heraklean myths. The picture, we are told, showed the hero fallen asleep (evidently tired by his bout with Antaeus) on sand, right on the place of the combat, the dead body of his adversary being also there. While Herakles was asleep, he was surrounded by a host of the Pygmies, small people (of cubit's height, according to their appellation) who lived under the earth like ants. The Pygmies intended to avenge Antaeus' death upon Herakles, for, being like him children of the earth, they considered themselves the giant's brothers. They were "honourable (beings) – by no means athletes and equal (to Herakles) contenders, but earth-born and in a sense formidable, and when they come up out of the earth the sand shakes".

According to Philostratus' description (many centuries later developed by Jonathan Swift in Chapter I of the *Gulliver's Travels*), the picture showed how the Pygmies advanced one phalanx against the left arm of Herakles, and two phalanxes against his right one; the archers and slingers besieged his feet, whereas the principal party, lead by the Pygmy king and supported by siege machines, prepared to attack the hero's head.

Yet, the storm seems never to have happened. "While all this (develops) around the sleeping (man), – concludes Philostratus, – see how he awakes and how he laughs at the danger, collecting all his adversaries, sweeps them into the lion's skin and, I think, takes them to Eurystheus" (Philostratus, *Im.* II. 22).

The last phrase of this description is of particular importance for us now, for it seems to give the clue to the correct understanding of the aforementioned drawing on the Catania krater. As a matter of fact, the scene with Herakles delivering his captives to Eurystheus looks as a straightforward logical continuation of the painting (or paintings ?),³⁸ described by the author of the *Imagines*.

37 Brommer, *Herakles II*, S. 47.

38 It might seem that Philostratus is not describing just one, but two (or more ?) paintings, because his text depicts several consecutive actions/states of Herakles (sleeping, awakening, and "fighting") and the Pygmies, which it would be hardly possible to show by one single representation. Attempts to convey several actions "synchronically" can be seen on some Greek and Roman monuments, where the whole cycle of the hero's Twelve Labours are represented as one composition (*LIMC* V.1, pp. 9 (no. 1711), 10 (nos. 1715, 1720, 1723), 11 (no. 1728), 12 (no. 1734)) or as a series of relatively independent scenes (*LIMC* V.1, pp. 7 (no. 1703), 8 (no. 1705), 9 (no. 1706), 11 (no. 1730)). A much later attempt to present the story of

In support of the assumption that the captives borne by Herakles in the drawing on the Catania krater are Pygmies (rather than the Kerkopes, as usually stated in the research literature) point some peculiarities of their iconography:

- a) the unusually small size of these creatures (quite corresponding to the appellation *πυγμαῖος* "(of) cubit's (height)"),³⁹ which does not seem to have been attested in any representation of the Kerkopes, despite their noticeable "miniaturization" in the later Graeco-Roman pictorial monuments (whereas in the earliest ones, it should be recalled, they are usually shown normal-sized);⁴⁰
- b) the dark colour of the body (skin or hair ?), which makes one recollect Herodotus' mention of the black-coloured (*χρῶμα δὲ μέλανας*) people of unusually short stature (*ἄνδρας μικρούς*) encountered by the Nasamons' expedition into inner Libya,⁴¹ as well as some of the more accurate representations of the Pygmies in the artistic monuments of the Greeks and Egyptians.⁴²

The only divergence of the Catania krater representation from the text of Philostratus is the fact that Herakles is shown with two captives only instead of the whole "army" and that we see them placed in (bird ?) cages but not packed in the renowned lion's skin. To explain these contradictions "rationally" (if contradictions in mythological collisions need any explanations at all) it could be argued that, following the logic of the Heraklean saga, the hero, after his encounter with the Pygmies, still had to complete

Herakles and the Pygmies in development is the diptych "Der schlafende Herkules und die Pygmäen (von Pygmäen angegriffen)" and "Der erwachte Herkules und die Pygmäen (die Pygmäen vertreibend/ vertreibt die Pygmäen)" by Lucas Cranach der Jüngere in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (<http://www.lucascranach.org/digitalarchive.php?&page=35>). Dated to 1551, it is undoubtedly drawn under the influence of the *Imagines*. Interestingly, Cranach's second panel ("The awakened Herakles and the Pygmies") includes the "additional" third scene, showing Herakles bearing (incidentally, on a carrying pole, just like in the case(s) under discussion) four tied captives, which looks like a "rational" adaptation of Philostratus' description.

39 Liddell, Scott, Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1550: *πυγμαῖος* as a derivative of *πυγμ-ή* "a measure of length". Alternative rendering emphasized the latter word's primary meaning - "fist" (W. Becher, 'Πυγμή', *RE*, XXIII, 2 (1959), Sp. 2076).

40 See e.g., C. Marconi, *Temple Decorations and Cultural Identity in the Archaic Greek World. The Metopes of Selinus* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 150ff, figs. 75-78.

41 Hdt. II. 32. 6-7; cf. E. Wüst, 'Pygmaioi', *RE*, XXIII, 2 (1959), Sp. 2066, 2068.

42 Dasen, *Dwarfs*, p. 185; pls. 24 (1), 60 (2).



the order of Eurystheus and fetch the golden apples of the Hesperides. Thus, he would hardly bear his captives all the time packed in the lion's skin which is known to have been his main, if not the only, apparel. As to the number of the captives, by the time of Herakles' appearance before Eurystheus in Mycenae it could have "naturally" diminished during the hero's dangerous wandering accompanied by many incidental adventures (marking his travels between Libya and, say, the Caucasus, the land of the Hyperboreans, etc.).⁴³

To sum up, in view of the observations set forth above it seems that the representation on the krater from Catania, usually rendered⁴⁴ as an illustration to the *Epic Cycle* novella about Herakles' encounter with the Kerkopes brigands somewhere in Lydia (Asia Minor), should be reconsidered. In fact there is every reason to link the drawing with quite a different tale of the saga, narrating about the hero's encounter with the Pygmies in Libya, visited by him in quest for the golden apples of Hesperides at the order of king Eurystheus.⁴⁵

Although short-statured peoples were reported by some Graeco-Roman writers to live in different parts of *terra cognita*, including India and even far North,⁴⁶ the Pygmies who dared to attack Herakles in revenge for the death of their brother Antaeus, were usually localized in Libya,⁴⁷ which place-name in antiquity referred to the whole (known part of) Africa westwards from the Nile. This localization is *inter alia* supported by the fact that, according to Greek mythographers, Herakles, after his combat with Antaeus and "victory" over the Pygmies, first made his way to Egypt (where he "punished" its king Busiris who attempted to sacrifice the hero in order to save his country from drought)⁴⁸ and then sailed up the Nile to Ethiopia (where he killed its king Emathion, who "started a fight").⁴⁹

Any attempts to identify the persons and places mentioned in mythological accounts of the "African track" of Herakles are extremely complicated (although already in antiquity emerged the popular belief that the giant Antaeus' grave was situated in the

vicinity of Tingis or Linx in Mauritania),⁵⁰ but there are reasons to suppose at least that these stories may have reflected, in a very specific way, some very early bits of knowledge of the Greeks about the peoples inhabiting the remotest areas of *terra cognita*, or in the present case – extreme West and South.

As for the views reflected in the Catania krater drawing, it should be pointed out that the identification of the central personage of the scene as Herakles carrying Pygmies, but not Kerkopes, brings about some interesting consequences. As mentioned above, if one follows the traditional rendering of this drawing, the latter should be considered as an *exception* among the rather numerous relevant representations, because the captives of Herakles are shown sitting in normal position (*head-upwards*) in cages bound to the carrying tackle on the shoulder of the hero, whereas in all other comparable examples they are tied, directly to the carrying pole, *head-downwards* (which, it will be recalled, reflects the very essence of the episode with the Kerkopes as it is set in the literary sources).

Alternatively, proceeding from the considerations set forth above we can state that the aforementioned "exception" *does not exist*, since the drawing on the Catania krater has no connection to the novella "Herakles and the Kerkopes" of the Greek *Epic Cycle*. In other words, whereas the so-called "Robbery of Herakles" theme (with various anthropomorphic or mixomorphic creatures, often difficult to identify, attempting to steal Herakles' weapons and/or other belongings, and the hero trying to prevent the stealth or punish for it) could be represented in Greek and Roman art in various ways, the clear marker of the scenes with the Kerkopes *specifically* is the fact that the robbers are shown as not only captured, but bound to his carrying tackle *head-downwards*.

Interestingly, this simple observation is of some relevance to the Elephant-Bearer fresco in Meroe City, the starting point of the present note. If the two small elephants bound to the carrying pole on the shoulder of the central personage were shown hanging from it *head-downwards*, we would have every reason to assume that these animals allegorically replace two "classical" Kerkopes, well known from many Graeco-Roman parallels. The identification of the personage as Herakles, suggested by Fantusati, then might have been considered as ultimately proved.

However, the fact that the Meroe fresco shows the elephants bound to the carrying pole *head-upwards*, makes one doubt whether the linking of this pain-

43 See note 34 above.

44 See note 30 above.

45 *LIMC* V.1, p. 3 (nos. 2804-06).

46 Athenaeus IX. 390 b; Plin. HN IV. XI. 44; V. XXIX. 109; VI. XXII. 70; VII. II. 27; Philostr. *Vit. Apoll. Tyan.* III. 47; cf. Wüst, 'Pygmaioi', Sp. 2065.

47 Hdt. II. 32. 1-7; IV. 43. 5-6; cf. Wüst, 'Pygmaioi', Sp. 2065.

48 Diod. IV. 27, 3; Apollod. II. 5. 11; cf. *LIMC* III.1, pp. 147-52.

49 Diod. IV. 27, 3 (the meaning of the phrase "(who) started a fight" (κατάρχοντα μάχης) is obscure); Apollod. II. 5. 11.

50 Strabo XVII.3.8; Pomp. Mela III.10; Plut. *Sertorius* 9.



ting with representations of Herakles carrying two Kerkopes is altogether correct. This ambiguity is further aggravated by the long standing observation of experts that the representations of Herakles with the Kerkopes had been popular in Greece and Southern Italy in the 6-4 centuries BCE (after which they almost disappeared),⁵¹ whereas the Elephant-Bearer fresco in Meroe is (provisionally) dated by the researchers to the 4th century CE. What could then be the reason for this reanimation of the theme?

A possible explanation of these obscurities could be found if we suppose that, however attractive seems to be the hypothesis suggested by Fantusati, the prototype of the Elephant-Bearer fresco in Meroe was not the composition “Herakles with the Kerkopes”, once popular in classical art, but some other one.

As a matter of fact, the wall painting under discussion displays almost as much similarity with a different group of representations, showing Herakles as water carrier. Of particular interest is the well known drawing on the Attic pelike from Cambridge/Mass. on which we see the hero holding a club with one hand (which seems to be the case in the Meroe fresco as well)⁵² and carrying a yoke with two pointed amphorae, bound to it, naturally top-upwards (fig. 3).⁵³ The latter composition (also noted by Fantusati)⁵⁴ evidently portrays Herakles during the period of his voluntary servitude (as expiation for the unconscious killing of his own children) to Omphale, queen of Lydia, when, according to the myths, he was made to do some domestic work. This picture shows, by the way, that the hero’s use of a carrying pole was not confined to the tale about his encounter with the Kerkopes, and consequently may be expected in any relevant scenes showing him performing hard physical work.

As for the fresco in Meroe, it seems to be an adaptation (perhaps, a somewhat ironical one)⁵⁵ to the Ancient Sudanese conditions of a composition,

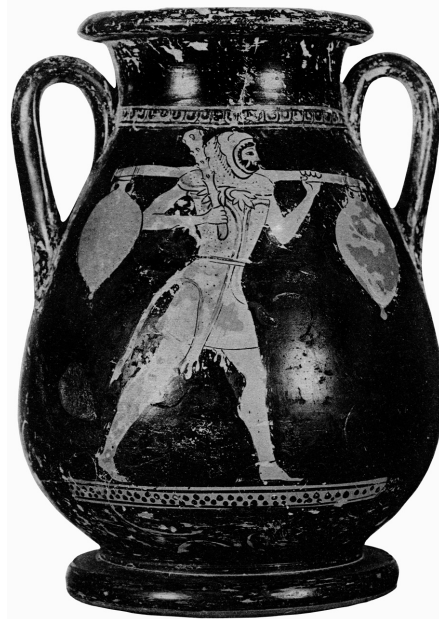


Fig. 3: Attic pelike (*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Vol. IV, 2 (Zürich und München), S. 531, no. 1324)

probably seen by the painter, not very skillful it must be admitted, on some object from Mediterranean. The real message of this wall-painting is not yet altogether clear due to the lack of data about the archaeological context in which it was found by the Liverpool University expedition sometime during the 1909-14 excavations on the site of Meroe. We can only make guesses as to whether this is a scene of triumph after a “sporting” hunt, or after a combat with dangerous beasts as in the case with the Nemean lion, Lernaean hydra, Erymanthian boar, Cretan bull, etc.

Of course, it would be extremely tempting to associate this scene with a passage from Diodorus’ panegyric, showing how Herakles, obviously the most popular hero of Greek mythology, was perceived in Graeco-Roman world in the last decades BCE:

“<...> he subdued Libya, which was full of wild animals, and large parts of the adjoining desert, and brought it all under cultivation, so that the whole land was filled with ploughed fields and such plantings in general as bear fruit, much of it being devoted to vineyards and much to olive orchards; and, speaking generally, Libya, which before that time had been uninhabitable because of the multitude of the wild beasts which infested the whole land, was brought under cultivation by him and made inferior to no other country in point of prosperity. <...> And the myths relate that he hated every kind of wild beasts and lawless men and warred upon them because of the fact that it had been his lot <...>” (Diod. IV. 17. 4-5, tr. C.H. Oldfather).

51 Brommer, *Herakles II*, S. 32.

52 The recently recovered Oxford copy of the fresco in Meroe, found among the papers of C.G. Seligman, omits for an unknown reason the left hand of the Elephant-Bearer, holding the club (reproduced in the Liverpool water-colour copy). The disappearance of such an important attribute might impede the identification of this personage with Herakles, which would, further, complicate the general interpretation of the wall painting under discussion. For the details see Vinogradov, ‘The Elephant-Bearer Fresco’ (cf. note 3 above).

53 After *LIMC* IV.2, p. 531 (no. 1324); cf. IV.1, p. 798 (no. 1324, note also 1325-26).

54 Fantusati, ‘Remarks’, p. 252 (para 5); 253, fig. 9 (reversed).

55 For the discussion of this aspect see Vinogradov, ‘The Elephant-Bearer Fresco’ (cf. note 3 above).



The name “Libya” here implied what was then the whole known part of Africa west of the Nile, but there are good reasons to assume that Diodorus’ appreciation referred *inter alia* to the civilizing activities of Herakles in the Nile Valley as well, since the author of the *Historical Library* does give an account of the hero’s adventures in Egypt and Ethiopia. The appearance of this hero’s portrait, representing him as an Elephant-Bearer, in one of the halls in the Royal quarter in Meroe, the southern capital of Kush, in the first centuries CE, might be an indication of the gradual hellenization of native elite pointing to the diffusion of “ivory and ebony,” much in the spirit of the idyll represented (though evidently with some exaggeration) in the final chapter of Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*.⁵⁶

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Eins der eigenartigsten Denkmäler altsudanesischer Kunst ist die Wandmalerei in Meroe, die eine hellhäutige Person mit zwei Miniatur-Elefanten auf einer Tragegestange zeigt. Das Thema des Freskos, heute durch zwei Kopien bekannt, ist durch das Fehlen eines archäologischen Fundkontextes unklar. Gemäß der aktuellen Interpretation von E. Fantusati (1998) ist diese Malerei eine umgeformte Variante der in der griechischen und römischen Kunst populären Komposition, die den mythischen Helden Herakles zeigt, als er über seiner Schulter zwei Kerkopen trägt. Diese räuberischen Zwillinge wurden von ihm gefasst, als sie ihm während des Schlafs seine Waffen stehlen wollten.

Diese Wiedergabe ist aber fraglich, da in allen bekannten klassischen Darstellungen dieser Episode die Gefangenen des Herakles auf dem Tragebalken mit dem Kopf nach unten hängend gezeigt sind. Dies ist durch das Geschehen nach der schriftlich erhaltenen Ausführung dieses Mythos, insbesondere in der Version des Pseudo-Nonnus, bezeugt.

Bisher scheint nur ein einziges Beispiel eine Ausnahme darzustellen: die berühmte Darstellung auf dem Krater von Catania. Üblicherweise ist sie als eine Szene aus einem von flyakes (Komikern) gespielten Stück interpretiert, in dem Herakles seine Gefangenen zu König Eurystheus, in dessen Diensten er

zehn Jahre stand, brachte. Die Gefangenen sind dort als zwei ungewöhnlich kleine, dunkelhäutige Kreaturen in zwei kleinen Käfigen gezeigt. Die weithin akzeptierte Ansicht, besonders vertreten durch den Experten der textwissenschaftlichen und ikonographischen Zeugnisse der herakleischen Mythen Frank Brommer, ist, dass diese Szene Herakles mit den Kerkopen zeigt. Allerdings ist diese Interpretation anzuzweifeln. Es gibt vielmehr Gründe, dass diese Szene eine andere Episode aus dem Mythos illustriert - die Begegnung des Heroen mit den Pygmäen, nach der er einige als Gefangene zu Eurystheus bringt. Daher ist die Zeichnung am Krater von Catania nicht eine ikonographische Ausnahme bei den Darstellungen von Herakles mit den Kerkopen. Mit anderen Worten, während Herakles in der griechisch-römischen Kunst in unterschiedlichen Arten mit verschiedenen Gefangenen dargestellt werden kann (insbesondere in den populären Szenen des Diebstahls seiner Waffen durch Satyren, (Aegi)pane, Erogen etc.), ist das Merkmal der Szene mit den Kerkopen ein ikonographisches Detail: Sie sind am Tragebalken kopfüber hängend gezeigt.

Diese Beobachtung hat einige Relevanz für das Fresko des Elefantenträgers aus Meroe. Wenn die Elefanten kopfüber vom Tragebalken hängend dargestellt wären, könnte man annehmen, dass der Maler, auf eine Metapher zurückgreifend, einfach die Kerkopen durch diese Tiere substituiert hätte. Dadurch wäre die Interpretation von Fantusati bewiesen worden. Aber wir sehen das Gegenteil und so stellt sich die Frage, ob tatsächlich irgendeine Darstellung von Herakles mit den Kerkopen als Vorbild für das Fresko in Meroe gedient hat.

Diese Wandmalerei zeigt, formal gesprochen, genau solche Ähnlichkeit mit einer anderen Gruppe von Darstellungen des Herakles, in der er als Wasserträger gezeigt wird. Besonders interessant hierbei ist die Malerei auf der Pelike aus Cambridge/Mass., auf der der Heros, in einer Hand eine Keule haltend, zwei große Amphoren auf seinem Tragebalken trägt - natürlich mit der Öffnung nach oben. Diese Szene zeigt wahrscheinlich eine Episode im Leben des Herakles aus der Zeit, in der er zu freiwilligen Diensten als Sühne für den unwissentlichen Mord an seinen eigenen Kindern verpflichtet war. Er diente Omphale, Königin von Lydien, und musste Hausarbeiten verrichten. Die Komposition des Freskos von Meroe kann eine Adaption - möglicherweise mit einem Quentchen Ironie - an die Gegebenheiten des antiken Sudan gewesen sein. Der Maler kann eine Malerei auf einem importierten Objekt, vielleicht eine Vase, aus dem Mittelmeerraum gesehen haben.

⁵⁶ It might be recalled that some representations of the Greek myths’ personages (ἡρώων εἰκόνας “effigies of heros” - Memnon, Perseus, and Andromeda), “whom the kings of the Ethiopians honour as their ancestors”, are mentioned in the novel to have been in the royal residence in Meroe (X. 6. 3; 14-15).