

HYBRIDISM OF GREEK RIVER GODS.

ANIMAL TRAITS AS «RELATIONAL ELEMENTS» WITHIN THE FRESHWATER PANTHEON

Continuous metamorphism¹ is one of the more peculiar characteristics of ancient Greek gods: if the view of their divine super-body, as Vernant called it², characterised by beauty, strength and splendour, is unbearable for the mortals, gods can nevertheless manifest themselves in many other ways easier to perceive for men. In Homeric poems, for example, Athena, who is a very epiphanic – and therefore metamorphic – divinity, can assume the aspect of men having different ages or of a woman (*Il.* 22. 227-228, *Od.* 1. 105, 13. 221 and 288-289), of a star (*Il.* 4. 75-84), or a bird (vulture: *Il.* 7. 58-61 and *Od.* 3. 371-372, swallow: *Od.* 23. 239-240)³. Epiphanies as animals are particularly recurrent: Hypnos becomes a bird called *chalkís* to obey Hera's orders (*Il.* 14. 286-291), and Leucothea flies as a seabird on Odysseus' raft after his shipwreck (*Od.* 5. 337-339). Theriomorphic elements can also be present, in a more consistent way, in the representation of many Greek deities, both as epiclesis («cow-eyed Hera», «owl-eyed Athena», «bull-horned Dionysus» etc.⁴) and as iconographic features (Apollo Karneios, Pan, Chiron, the Sirens etc.)⁵. In the XIX and early XX c., the animal traits showing in Greek gods' representations have been considered by scholars, such as Harrison and Cook, as a survival of a stage of religious evolution where «animal gods» were worshipped within the frame of a totemistic religious system⁶. These interpretations were based on the belief that anthropomorphism was a higher conception of the divine than theriomorphism. Better, anthropomorphism was an original invention of ancient Greek religion⁷.

At the same time, Greek religious anthropomorphism also contrasted with their Oriental neighbours, who were represented in a human-animal hybrid form, as the excavation of Nimrud

¹ BETTINI 2016, pp. 34-35 speaks more correctly of «diamorfismo».

² VERNANT 1991, pp. 27-49.

³ The effective presence of divine metamorphosis in Homer has been widely debated, see FERMI 2011 for ancient and modern criticism of this interpretation.

⁴ *Boôpis*: e.g. *Il.* 1. 551, 568, 4. 50, 8. 471; *glaukôpis*: e.g. *Il.* 1. 206, *Od.* 1. 156; *taurokérōs*: Eur. *Ba.* 100.

⁵ On theriomorphic deities, see ASTON 2011.

⁶ COOK 1894; HARRISON 1903, pp. 257-260; HARRISON 1912, pp. 445-453; ASTON 2011, pp. 11-12, 200-201.

⁷ PRELLER 1872, vol. 1, pp. 1-2. HARRISON 1855, p. 308, cited by KONARIS 2016, p. 241. On Harrison's view of anthropomorphism see KONARIS 2016, pp. 241-243. Since her *Prolegomena* (1903) Harrison started to criticize harshly the anthropomorphism of Greek gods vs. the «mysticism» of hybrid divine figures, such as Dionysus or Orphic gods.

had shown since the half of XIX c.⁸. In these views, human-animal hybridism is considered a remarkable exception in Greek religion and a possible point of contact between ancient Greek polytheism and the so-called Oriental religions⁹.

Although this view is dismissed, gods with consistent theriomorphic characteristics are often considered a specific group of divinities within the Greek pantheon. In a book consecrated to «mixanthropic deities», Emma Aston argues that deities with theriomorphic traits can be numbered among the so-called nature deities because they both show animal features and are strongly connected with the rural environment, especially caves¹⁰. Gods belonging to this group are usually considered as the personifications of specific landscape elements, such as water springs, trees, and mountains¹¹. From this perspective, the fact that mixanthropic deities often have theriomorphic characteristics is interpreted as a sign of their connection with «nature», as if they belonged to a religious stage where anthropomorphism had not completely developed¹².

River gods are a perfect example of this category because literary texts and iconographic representations depict them as having theriomorphic features: taurine elements (in different combinations) are frequently attested, though serpentine ones are also possible¹³. Their connection with the bull (or snake) is usually taken as a symbol of the generative power of water and, at the same time, of the dangerous and destructive violence of this element¹⁴. At the same time, river gods' standard iconography – the bull with a human face – is reminiscent of Akkadian protectors of gates seen for the first time in Nimrud¹⁵. Which is more important, river gods, along with Pan, are among the rare Greek deities showing theriomorphic traits in their iconography that receive a cult. Most of the others are mentioned in narratives but are not involved in rituals.

In this article, I first consider two ancient texts by Strabo and Aelian, which show how the ancient Greeks interpreted river gods' animal elements. These passages imply that the hybridism of river deities should not be considered an ontological characteristic but a set of traits that may or may not be activated within a representation because they respond to certain needs. Second,

⁸ LARSEN 1996, pp. 125-132; MET DEPARTMENT OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ART 2021.

⁹ FARNELL 1911, p. 54, 79.

¹⁰ ASTON 2011, pp. 144-145.

¹¹ LARSON 2007, p. 56. The notion of personification is very debated, see, for ex. RUDHARDT 1999; PIRENNE DELFORGE 2018; BONANNO 2019.

¹² NILSSON 1949b, pp. 105-117. NILSSON 1949b, p. 105 «In the sequel I shall endeavour to indicate traces of the idea of “power”. It was ousted by the strongly developed anthropomorphism which also transformed the powers. The latter were called *daimons* by the Greeks; but the *daimones* became in great measure personal, anthropomorphic».

¹³ ISLER 1970, p. 12-14, 16-17, ISLER 1981.

¹⁴ LARSON 2007, p. 66.

¹⁵ A full discussion in D'ALESSIO 2004, pp. 23-29.

building on this idea, I focus on tauromorphic traits in river gods' representations. After exploring the cultural representation of the bull in Greek thought, I suggest that tauromorphic elements play a role in creating a relationship with other gods, such as Ares. Thirdly, I show how these elements can also enter into two different relationships, those that river gods entertain with both the nymphs and Poseidon.

1. ANCIENT CONSIDERATIONS ON RIVER GODS' THERIOMORPHIC REPRESENTATIONS

Although river gods are commonly defined as hybrid deities, theriomorphic traits are not always present in their representations. For example, in the *Iliad*, the Scamander does not take on a human-animal hybrid appearance but instead coincides with its water: he swells to express his anger against Achilles, erects a wall of water to protect the Trojans, stops its course and boils over because of Hephaistos' attack (*Il.* 21. 209-382). However, animal elements are not absent from his description: enraged, the Scamander «moans like a bull» (*Il.* 21. 237)¹⁶.

As for the other river gods, theriomorphic traits are far from stable in their literary and iconographic representations. As Aston has already pointed out, «mixanthropic forms are by their essential nature highly impermanent and fluid»¹⁷. In this respect, Achelous' iconography is particularly emblematic. The god is usually depicted as having either a taurine body with a human and horned face¹⁸ or – though very seldom attested – a taurine head on a human body¹⁹. The god can also be represented as a Centaur (with the lower part of a horse's body but with a horned head) and as a human figure with horns²⁰. Finally, Achelous can be portrayed with the lower part of their body having a fish (or serpentine?) tail, as Oceanus²¹. It is worth noting that, on the one hand, theriomorphic elements are not exclusively taurine but also serpentine and horse-like; on the other hand, these animal components are not consistently present together in all representations.

A famous passage from Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (9-14) reflects the same impermanence of theriomorphic traits and adds the element of metamorphism. Dejanira remembers that Achelous

¹⁶ The river Cephissus produces a similar sound in Paus. 10. 33. 5.

¹⁷ ASTON 2011, p. 260.

¹⁸ EDWARDS 1985, pp. 66-68.

¹⁹ Isler 1981, p. 18 (*LIMC s.v. Acheloos*, n° 75 = coin from Metapontum, 490-470 BC).

²⁰ Isler 1981, p. 28 (*LIMC s.v. Acheloos*, nos. 259a-265). CARROCCIO 2013.

²¹ Isler 1981, p. 27 (*LIMC s.v. Acheloos*, n° 245 = Attic stamnos from Cerveteri about 530-520 BC = British Museum 1839,0214.70 / E437) available at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1839-0214-70. For Okeanos as a sort of Triton see for ex. the Attic dinos painted by Sophilos (580-570 BC, British Museum 1971,1101.1, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1971-1101-1 where the god holds in hands a fish and a snake).

came to ask her in marriage in three guises: bull, snake, and a man with a bovine face, whose beard drips with fresh water (that is two fully theriomorphic aspects and a human-animal hybrid form).

For my suitor was a river, Achelous, I say, who asked my father for me in marriage in three manifestations (*morphē*): approaching in the form of a visible (*enargēs*)²² bull, and then as a quick moving, coiled snake, then as oxen faced man (*bóuprōros*)²³.

Dejanira's description makes clear that these are metamorphic appearances taken by Achelous to manifest himself before men's eyes. This is also proved by the term *enargēs*, which usually designate the visible form that gods take during their epiphanies²⁴. In this respect, Achelous' different transformations reflect the peculiar shape-shifters powers of water deities such as Proteus (*Od.* 4. 456), Nereus (*Apollod.* 2. 5. 11) or Thetis (*Soph. fr.* 618 Radt). Several lines below, when the chorus recalls the fight between Achelous and Heracles under the eyes of Aphrodite, the term employed to designate the appearance of the river god is *phásma* (507-510): «There was the strength of the river, a high-horned apparition of a four-hooved bull (*phásma táurou*), Achelous». Again, *phásma* here likely refers to the visible form taken by the river's power (*potamoû sthénos*) to communicate with men²⁵.

The different aspects taken by Achelous and the precise wording employed by Sophocles suggest that we deal here with a series of metamorphoses rather than a description of the god's «real» body as theriomorphic. In this text, Achelous is no different from other gods who change their appearance to manifest themselves among mortals. However, it can be observed that as other gods can transform themselves into whatever they like, Achelous' transformations are limited to the bull and the snake, as they were «preferential metamorphoses» for river gods. In commenting

²² D.H. *Lys* 7 «This [*scil. enárgeia*] consists in a certain power he [*scil. Lysias*] has of conveying the things he is describing to the senses of his audience, and it arises out of his grasp of circumstantial detail»; Theon *Prog.* 119. 32 (Patillon-Bolognesi): «Ekphrasis is a descriptive passage which sets its subject vividly (*enargēs*) before the eyes»; Quint. *Inst.* 8. 3. 62: «(things are) shown to the eyes of the mind» (*enárgeia*). KEULS 1978, pp. 124-125, 132; ZANKER 1981.

²³ transl. JONES 1927. I follow Strabo's reading of vv. 12-13 (10. 2. 19 ἀνδρείω κύτει βούπρωρος) with JEBB 1962, while mss. containing Sophocles' tragedy have ἀνδρείω τύπῳ βούκρανος, accepted by KAMERBEEK 1959, pp. 32-33. For JEBB 1962, pp. 8-9 Sophocles represents a human figure, with human face and a shaggy beard, but with the forehead, horns and ears of an ox. For a possible parallel, see Empedocles, *fr.* 52 Wright «Many creatures with a face and breasts on both sides were produced, man-faced (βουγενῆ ἀνδρόπρωρα) bulls arose and again bull-headed men, (others) with male and female nature combined, and the bodies they had were dark» (transl. WRIGHT 1981).

²⁴ In the *Iliad* (20.131), for example, Hera states that «the gods are dangerous when they appear in a manifest form» (*enargeís*). See also, *Od.* 3. 420 and 16. 161. PLATT 2011, pp. 73-174, 216-224; CALAME 1991.

²⁵ The same expression refers to Ocean represented on the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* 18.607 (*potamoío méga sthénos Okeanoío*). On *phásma*, see BENEVENTANO DALLA CORTE 2016/2017, though she does not take this passage into account.

on this passage, Strabo (10. 2. 19) provides some interesting reflections on this topic, highlighting that bulls and snakes show particular affinities with water in ancient thought:

Others, conjecturing the truth from the myths, say that the Achelous, like the other rivers, was called «like a bull» from the roaring of its waters and also from the bendings of its streams, which were called horns, and «like a serpent» because of its length and windings, and «with the front of an ox» for the same reason that he was called «bull-faced».

(transl. JONES 1927)

It is very significant that, in Strabo's view, the similarity of bulls and rivers is not due to their «generative power», as in most modern scholarship: their resemblances concern rather the sound they produce and the curve shape that characterises both bovine horns and the flow of the river. Strabo's reading is based on an inferential mechanism quite common in antiquity, similar to the *argumentum* in Latin culture. The *argumentum* is an «iconographic symbol» on whose basis the spectators could identify the subject of the representation they were looking at²⁶. In the imperial period, these iconographical attributes were increasingly considered as an «allegorical artistic medium» and became very important in characterising and making divine figures recognisable²⁷. Therefore, the ancient geographer interprets the theriomorphic elements as «signs» that hint at the «real» nature of the river.

We find similar reflections to those of Strabo in a passage from Aelian's *Historical Miscellany* (2. 33), a rare text that considers the river gods' iconography:

The nature of rivers, and their streams are visible to us. But men who honour them, and have statues made of them, in some cases, set up anthropomorphic statues, while others give them bovine form. A likeness to cattle is attributed by the Stymphalians to the Erasinus and Metope, by the Spartans to the Eurotas, by the Sicyonians and Phliasians to the Asopus, and by the Argives to the Cephissus. The form of a man is adopted by the Psophidians for the Erymanthus, and by the Heraeans for the Alpheus; the Chersonesians from Cnidus treat the same river in the same way. The Athenians portray the Cephissus as a human bust but with horns just showing. And in Sicily the Syracusans represented the Anapus as a man, whereas they honoured the spring Cyane with the statue of a woman. The Egestans honour the Porpax, Crimissus, and Telmessus in the form of men. The inhabitants of Acragas portray the river of

²⁶ BETTINI 2011, pp. 245-247.

²⁷ MYLONOPOULOS 2010.

the same name as a handsome boy and make sacrifices to him. They also made an offering at Delphi, carving an ivory statue with the river's name inscribed on it, and the statue is of a boy²⁸.

In this passage, Aelian deals with statues (*agálmata*) and especially with cultic context, as the verbs *hidrúein* («consecrate»), *timân* («honour»), and *thúein* («sacrifice») suggest. Unfortunately, we do not know which sources he relied on for this detailed excursus²⁹. However, Aelian organises his list of river gods on a scale of growing anthropomorphism, going from rivers with fully theriomorphic aspects to fully anthropomorphic ones. He only names one river with hybrid features, the Cephisus, described as a man with little horns. Significantly, Aelian places him right in the middle of the sequence.

At a closer glance, it seems clear that geographical criteria have been involved in creating this list because all the mentioned rivers mainly belong to two regions – Peloponnesus and Sicily – a choice that could depend on the unknown source of Aelian. It is also worth noting that all the Peloponnesian rivers mentioned in this passage show a theriomorphic aspect, while all the Sicilian rivers are represented anthropomorphically. However, this description is especially puzzling because it does not match the iconographic evidence. There was indeed a big trend in representing Sicilian rivers as beardless youths, but bulls or bulls with a human face are also well attested³⁰.

The criteria underlying the list of river gods given by Aelian suggest that the aspect of these divinities, in Aelian's perspective, is more a matter of representation than the reflection of the «real» body of river gods. In this passage, Aelian briefly reflects on how the representation of gods «works» in Greece. First, he establishes a clear boundary between water, as a natural and physical element, and the gods related to water. While rivers are perfectly visible, mortals must conjecture what river gods look like and «put on them» (*períethēkan*) a specific aspect. This process involves both those who honour river gods and artists who represent them: these expressions suggest that

²⁸ (transl. HENDERSON 1997) Τὴν τῶν ποταμῶν φύσιν καὶ τὰ ρεῖθρα αὐτῶν ὀρώμεν· ὅμως δὲ οἱ τιμῶντες αὐτοὺς καὶ τὰ ἀγάλματα αὐτῶν ἐργαζόμενοι οἱ μὲν ἀνθρωπομόρφους αὐτοὺς ἰδρύσαντο, οἱ δὲ βοῶν εἶδος αὐτοῖς περιέθηκαν. βουσι μὲν οὖν εἰκάζουσιν οἱ Στυμφάλιοι μὲν τὸν Ἐρασῖνον καὶ τὸν Μετώπην, Λακεδαιμόνιοι δὲ τὸν Εὐρώταν, Σικυώνιοι δὲ καὶ Φλιάσιοι τὸν Ἄσωπόν, Ἀργεῖοι δὲ τὸν Κηφισόν· ἐν εἴδει δὲ ἀνδρῶν Ψωφίδιοι τὸν Ἐρύμανθον, τὸν δὲ Ἄλφειον Ἑραιεῖς, Χερρονήσιοι δὲ οἱ ἀπὸ Κνίδου καὶ αὐτοὶ τὸν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν ὁμοίως. Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ τὸν Κηφισὸν ἄνδρα μὲν δεικνύουσιν ἐν προτομῇ, κέρατα δὲ ὑποφαίνοντα. καὶ ἐν Σικελίᾳ δὲ Συρακόσιοι μὲν τὸν Ἄναπον ἀνδρὶ εἴκασαν, τὴν δὲ Κυάνην πηγὴν γυναικὸς εἰκόνι ἐτίμησαν· Αἰγισταῖοι δὲ τὸν Πόρπακα καὶ τὸν Κριμισὸν καὶ τὸν Τελμησσὸν ἀνδρῶν εἶδει τιμῶσιν. Ἀκραγαντῖνοι δὲ τὸν ἐπώνυμον τῆς πόλεως ποταμὸν παιδί ὠραίῳ εἰκάσαντες θύουσιν. οἱ δὲ αὐτοὶ καὶ ἐν Δελφοῖς ἀνέθεσαν ἐλέφαντος διαγλύψαντες ἄγαλμα, καὶ ἐπέγραψαν τὸ τοῦ ποταμοῦ ὄνομα. καὶ παιδὸς ἐστὶ τὸ ἄγαλμα.

²⁹ In NA 16, 34, speaking about Sicily, Aelian cites the work of Nymphodorus.

³⁰ CARROCCIO 2013. On South Italian coins showing bulls (with or without a human face), see GIANNELLA 1920, CARROCCIO 2000.

the context of these reflections is that of a local cult, as it is usual for river gods³¹. It is worth noting that the verb *peritíthemi* recurs in a significant passage of the *Essay on Homer* (1218-1224) erroneously attributed to Plutarch, which has been thoroughly analysed by Maurizio Bettini³². In this text, roughly contemporary to Aelian, the author asks himself why Homer has given gods a human aspect, using the same expression as the *Historical Miscellany* (*periéthēken ... sōmata*). In his answer, not only he underlines that anthropomorphic representation responds to the need to have the gods actively intervening in the story and interacting with men, but he also points to the fact that, by representing anthropomorphic gods in his poems, Homer has shown the way artisans should represent gods when sculpting statues or drawing a picture. Therefore, both Aelian and the anonymous author of the *Essay on Homer* assume that the aspect of gods is given by poets or artists and does not reflect the «reality» of divine bodies but only hints at the «real» nature of gods.

Probably, we are not so far from the idea expressed by Herodotus, when, in a famous passage of his *Histories* (2. 53), he credits Hesiod and Homer for having shaped Greek gods³³: they not only created divine genealogies (*theogoniēn*), gave gods their names (*eponumías*), determined their spheres and functions (*timás te kai téchnas*) but also «signified their aspects» (*éideá autôn sēménantes*). The verb used by Herodotus (*sēmáinein*) is highly significant, as Gagné and Herrero de Járegui have recently underlined: the different aspects of gods are the result of a complex reflection, where poets do not describe the «real» aspect of gods but rather suggest it, or alludes to it, through significant elements³⁴. These attributes, as Pirenne Delforge has demonstrated through a careful analysis of Artemidorus' *Interpretation of Dreams*, can be referred to as *parasēmata*, features that are essential to identify a precise god³⁵.

It is, therefore, possible to suggest that, at least in the imperial period, theriomorphic features were not stable traits of river gods' representations: they could or could not be activated according to different criteria, such as geographical preferences or epiphanic contexts, and narrative requirements, often in order to identify more clearly these gods³⁶. In this respect, animal traits are not so different from other attributes, such as Athena's owl. These observations show how the category of hybrid deities is far from rigid and suggest re-evaluating its usefulness.

³¹ Cfr. Hes. *Th.* 367-370 («and there are just as many other loud-flowing rivers, sons of Ocean, to whom queenly Tethys gave birth. The names of them all it is difficult for a mortal man to tell, but each of those who dwell around them knows them», transl. MOST 2018).

³² [Plut.] *Vit.Hom.* II 113. BETTINI 2019, pp. 264-265.

³³ Among the overabundant bibliography on this passage, see at least PIRENNE DELFORGE 2020.

³⁴ GAGNÉ - HERRERO DE JÁREGUI 2016, p. 14.

³⁵ PIRENNE DELFORGE 2019, p. 165.

³⁶ Cfr. BONANNO 2019.

2. TAUROMORPHIC FEATURES FROM A «POLYTHEISTIC PERSPECTIVE»

The theriomorphic components of rivers, although not always present, are, as we have seen, predominantly taurine. This preferential association suggests that bulls express some specific facets of the *dúnamis* of river gods. So far, the taurine aspect of river gods has been explained almost exclusively as an expression of force and fertility. Without denying the correctness of this reading, it seems nevertheless useful to re-evaluate this element by adopting a different point of view, that is, by replacing the theriomorphism of river gods within the broader frame of the relationships between divinities in the Greek pantheon. In the first place, this means finding which role theriomorphism plays in linking or opposing river gods to other gods. By doing so, theriomorphism ceases to be a trait belonging to the «real» body of a whole category of deities to become a relational element capable of building a network of relationships within the Greek pantheon.

Among the many possible case studies, three relationships that river gods entertain with other gods seem especially promising to analyse under this perspective: their interaction with the domain of Ares, both because the bull has a well-known bellicose attitude and because rivers metaphors are often used to express the violence of war; the complementarity between river gods and water nymphs, who are usually depicted as fully anthropomorphic, but are closely associated with bees; finally, their association with Poseidon, because both are connected with water and with the bull³⁷. The snake will not be considered in this work because of the rarity of serpentine traits in river gods' representations³⁸ and the complexity of divine associations of this animal in Greek religion, the discussion of which would exceed the limits of this article³⁹.

2.1 BULL'S REPRESENTATIONS IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT

If we look at the representations of the bull in ancient Greek thought, aggressivity is by far its most characterising element. According to Aristoteles (*PA* 2. 651a 3-4), bulls and boars are among the most violent and irascible animals. When the bull attacks, he charges head-on, and no animal can

³⁷ In Greek pantheon, taurine elements are also regularly attested for Dionysus, but here I find more useful to focus on the Greek water pantheon. Dionysus' connection with foaming liquids has been however fully explored by PIRONTI 2007, pp. 168-171.

³⁸ Serpentine traits are very seldom found in river gods' iconography: for Achelous see for ex. Soph. *Tr.* 12 and LIMC «Acheloo» n° 245 (Attic red-figure stamnos, 530-500 BC, British Museum 1839,0214.70, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1839-0214-70). PANCIONI 2019, pp. 96-98. For Okeanos see above n. 21.

³⁹ OGDEN 2013.

resist him except bears and wolves⁴⁰. In a famous episode of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, for example, the bull sent by Poseidon adopts this technique to kill the son of Theseus: by constantly facing his quadriga, it caused the horses to bolt, dragging Hippolytus to his death⁴¹. This frontal assault technique corresponds to the very particular gaze of the bull. In physiognomic texts, casting a bullish look, like Socrates or Medea, means looking straight in the face, that is, having an aggressive attitude towards someone, most obviously in anger⁴². Moreover, the resemblance to bulls connotes individuals with thick necks and frowning foreheads and signals a brave but indomitable temperament⁴³. It is not surprising then that in Hesiod's *Scutum* (v. 104), Poseidon defending Thebes is invoked as *tauréos* («bull-like»).

Aristoteles (*PA* 2. 651a 5-14) states that the aggressivity of the bulls has biological causes. Their violent attitude is provoked by the high density of their blood, which is very earthy (*geōdéstera*) because it contains more fibres than water. Because of its thickness, bull blood heats up quickly, causing the anger (*thumós*) and the dullness so characteristic of this animal. Also, the nature of the bull's blood affects its aspect: its fearsome horns – the physic concretisation of its aggressivity – are produced precisely by the coagulation of this earthy blood component (*PA* 2. 651a 30-37).

The density of the bull's blood also seems directly connected to its destructive power: Themistocles, Psammetichus, Smerdis and other famous people are said to have killed themselves by using such a poison⁴⁴. Ancient authors, such as Pliny and Nicander, believed that bull's blood, once ingested, immediately congealed in the bowels, causing death⁴⁵. The reason why the bull's blood instantly thickens in the human body is never clearly explained by ancient sources. However, man's and bull's different body temperatures likely play a role in Aristotle's theory. In the philosopher's view, earthy blood behaves like mud: it is kept fluid only by animal heat and would quickly thicken if shed (*PA* 2. 651a 5-14). In Aristotelic classification, the bull is likely hotter than men: this is why its blood doesn't congeal in its veins but thickens in the human body.

⁴⁰ Aristot. *HA* 8. 594b 11-17 (bears); Ael. *NA* 5.19 (wolves).

⁴¹ Eur. *Hipp.* 1228-1229.

⁴² CAIRNS 2005.

⁴³ Aristot. *Phgn.* 811a 13 «Those whose necks are full and thick are of savage temper; witness savage-tempered bulls». 811b 34-35 «Those with an overhanging brow are overbold; witness the bull and the lion».

⁴⁴ Themistocles: Ar. *Eq.* 80-84; Plut. *Them.* 31; Cic. *Brut.* 31; Nep. *Them.* 10. 4; Diod.Sic. 11. 58; Psammetichus: Hdt. 3. 15; Smerdis: Hdt 3. 30; cf. KITCHELL - PARKER 1993, BERNDT 2019.

⁴⁵ Nic. *Al.* 312-318 «But if a man in his folly taste the fresh blood of a bull he falls heavily to the ground in distress, overmastered by pain, when, as it reaches the chest, the blood congeals easily, and, in the hollow of his stomach, clots; the passages are stopped, the breath is straitened within his clogged throat, while, often struggling in convulsions on the ground, he gasps bespattered with foam» (Transl. GOW - SHOLFIELD 1953). Cfr. Plin. *Nat.* 11. 222; 28. 147.

This brief survey leads us to some surprising conclusions: far from being a watery creature, the bull seems deeply connected to earth and heat.

2.2 ARES' WATER WARRIORS

The violent character of the bull is undoubtedly in line with the representations of the river gods, whose warrior nature is evident. The (few) tales about them are often centred on fights: Scamander and Achilles' fight on the one hand and Heracles and Achelous' battle on the other are undoubtedly the most famous examples, but a wide range of texts exploits the topos of the warrior river. In the Homeric poems, for instance, the raging of the warriors in their *aristía* is often accompanied by the image of the river dragging whatever it finds in its path. Like a river, for example, Diomedes breaks through the defences in the Trojan camp (*Il.* 5. 85-94), while elsewhere, the same warrior flees before the fury of the god Ares like a man before a violent flood (*Il.* 5. 596-600). Again, two armies clash as two raging torrents flow into each other, running down the mountain (*Il.* 4. 439-456). These comparisons emphasise the violence of rivers and their ability to drag with them land, banks, and everything in their path. It is also worth noting how these images match up well with the «earthy» nature of the bull, whose blood, as we have seen, is dense and full of fibre.

This representation of rivers as warriors places them in the sphere of action of the god Ares. In Plato's *Cratylus* (407d, 413e-414a), Socrates establishes a close relationship between the name of Ares, the term denoting courage (*andréia*), and the term denoting the male (*arrhén*): all these words would derive from *anō roé* «upward current». Moreover, as Gabriella Pironti has demonstrated, there is a close link between the boiling of the rivers in flood, the warrior impetus aroused by this god and the coming of age in young men⁴⁶. Ares presides over the heating and boiling of bodily fluids that cause physical maturity in young men, making them capable of begetting children and facing war, i.e., performing the two primary tasks of citizens.

The multiple associations between river gods, bulls and Ares show, if need be, that the representation of river water is heavily gendered: rivers have «masculine streams», as the river Acheron in a fragment of Sophocles (*fr.* 523 Radt *ársenas khoás*). The impetuous waters of the rivers, the tauromorphic traits of their representations, and the gendered perception of this specific type of water go hand in hand.

3. THERIOMORPHIC AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN FRESH WATER PANTHEON: NYMPHS AND BEES

⁴⁶ PIRONTI 2007, pp. 171-175.

In the following paragraph, I shall suggest that the heavily gendered representation of rivers in Greek culture and their association with the bull enter decisively into shaping the relationships that river gods entertains with other divinities within the Greek fresh water pantheon: the nymphs, the goddesses related to water springs. These goddesses are usually represented in an anthropomorphic form, as a dancing chorus of beautiful young girls. They oversee the «good functioning» of natural elements and wild spaces, such as mountains, caves, meadows, and trees. With the name Nāiades (derived from *náein* «to flow»), they are primarily connected to freshwater springs. The nymphs share with the river gods the role of local divinities, often eponymous of cities, involved in foundation myths and rites of the coming of the age⁴⁷. River gods and the nymphs have relationships of complementarity and opposition within the «pantheon of freshwaters», especially concerning three different points: the different levels of purity of the water to which they preside; their gendered perception; their theriomorphic associations.

I shall start with the first point. While rivers, because of their violence, carry with them debris and soil, for ancient Greeks, springs represent pure water par excellence. Their water contains no impurities as they gush forth directly from rocks or ground. This high level of purity makes this water the most suitable not only for human consumption but also for ritual uses⁴⁸. In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, the libations to the *Semnái Theái*, required to be extraordinarily pure, are drawn from a nearby inviolate spring that does not mix with any other water (471 *kheûm'akératon* 690 *akératōi sùn ómbrōi*). Names such as Hagne («the Holy» CGRN 222, ll. 83-84) and Katharé («the Pure» AP 9. 257) are also attested as names of springs, alluding to the clearness of their flow and their ritual importance.

Several inscriptions found near springs summon to keep the purity of the water. For example, a late fifth-century inscription in Delphi prohibits stepping into a fountain⁴⁹. About the same period, an inscription from Delos (LSS 50) forbids washing and bathing or throwing anything in the Minoe fountain, where a cult of nymphs is also attested. Moreover, the purity of the springs within the sanctuaries is protected by special cultic norms: in the island of Kos (CGRN 140), around 300 BC, for example, it is recommended not to throw offerings to the nymphs into the water, but to burn

⁴⁷ LARSON 2001.

⁴⁸ See, e.g. Eur. *Tr.* 675-676 (*akératon ... partheneîon ... lékhos*), E. *Or.* 575 (*akératon lékhos*). It is also remarkable that Hippolytus' offerings to Artemis come from an unviolated meadow (Eur. *Hipp.* 73 *ex akératou leimônos*).

⁴⁹ AMANDRY 1940 and 1942.

them on the altars⁵⁰. A purity regulation from Eresos (II-I c. BC.) also prohibits watering cattle in the fountain of an unknown sanctuary, undoubtedly to preserve its clearness (CGRN 181).

This need to keep spring water pure leads us to our second point, the gendered perception of spring water and its association with nymphs. One could wonder if this need for purity is one of the elements that cause spring water to be perceived as associated with the sphere of the feminine represented by nymphs⁵¹. The conceptualisation of the pure spring water as a young woman occasionally emerges in poetic language: in Aeschylus' *Persae*, for example, Atossa accompanies funeral offerings for her husband Darius with lustral water from a «virgin spring» (v. 613, *parthénou pegês*). Like a young maiden or a bride, spring water must be carefully watched to avoid contamination. It is hardly necessary to remember that the need to guard women is a recurring topos in Greek culture. In the *Memorabilia*, for example, Xenophon identifies education as a process exclusively reserved for sons, while the appropriate action toward female daughters is precisely their custody (*diaphulássein*)⁵². The difficulty of supervising women is also a commonplace found countless times in the Attic theatre scene, especially in Euripides (*fr.* 320 Kannicht): «There is no wall, no wealth, nothing else so difficult to guard (*disphúlakton*) as a woman» affirms a character (possibly Acrisios) in the play *Danae*⁵³.

The gendered perception of spring water is most evident in its connection with the nymphs. Indeed, these deities are first and foremost called upon to protect its purity. An epigram by Antiphilus of Byzantium (AP 9, 277, I c. AD) insists, for example, on the opposition between a river swollen by rains and the purity of water springs where nymphs live:

Why, torrent, in your furious march, do you lift yourself up so high and shut off the progress of travellers on foot? Are you drunk with the rain, and no more content with a stream the nymphs make transparent (*diaugês nâma*)? Have you borrowed water from the turbid clouds? One day I shall see you burnt up by the sun, who knows how to test the water of rivers, distinguishing the true (*gónimos*) from the bastard (*nóthos*).

⁵⁰ «Philistos, son of Aischines, said: whoever sacrifices in the sanctuary of Asklepios to the Nymphs, let him sacrifice on the altars, but nobody has to throw either a cake or anything else into the springs of the sanctuary. If anyone throws something in, he must purify the sanctuary of the Nymphs as it is customary» (transl. CGRN).

⁵¹ COLE 2004, pp. 158-171 has shown that spring water provided a model for moisture circulation within the female body.

⁵² Xen. *Mem.* 1.5.2 «if at the end of our life, we should wish to entrust someone with educating (*paidéuein*) our boys or protecting (*diaphulássein*) our girls or safeguarding our property, would we consider the man lacking self-control trustworthy for these matters?».

⁵³ On the necessity of watching over women, see also Eur. *fr.* 1061 Kannicht: «We waste our effort keeping guard on the female sex: when a woman is herself not naturally law-abiding, what use is there in guarding her, and compounding our error?» (transl. COLLARD - CROPP 2008b). See also ANDÒ 2005, pp. 144-145.

(transl. PATON 1917, slightly modified).

This text explores the contrast between the purity (and scarcity) of the waters over which the nymphs preside and the uncleanliness of the river currents, swollen by rain. This opposition is reflected in the contrast between birth purity (we are tempted to say a legitimate child from a well-guarded woman) and adulterous illegitimacy (a dishonest mixture).

Significantly, other sources describe the water of the nymphs, linked to a pure and feminine world, as incompatible with the sphere of the god Ares to which river gods belong. Several epigrams in the *Greek anthology* explore this opposition: in another epigram by Antiphanes (AP 9. 258), for example, a source declares that the nymphs abandoned her because the blood of a murder contaminated her: «The nymphs unite (*meígnumi*) only with Bacchus, not with Ares». A poem by Apollonides (AP 9. 257), dated to the same period, also tells how a fountain called «the Pure» (Katharà) has stopped flowing because a murderer has contaminated its water.

Having clarified the opposition between rivers and sources existing in Greek thought, both from the point of view of physical and religious representations, it is time to move on to our third point, closely related to the previous two, namely the association of nymphs and water springs with bees. Before dealing with this subject, it is maybe useful to specify that, concerning nymphs, we don't deal with theriomorphic iconographic representations *stricto sensu* as in the case of river gods, but with a wide and consistent net of cultural and religious associations.

The relationship between nymphs and bees is widely attested: in the famous cave of the nymphs at Ithaca (*Od.* 13. 105-106), for example, bees fill stone craters and amphorae near a perennial spring with honey; Larson has convincingly identified the prophetic bee-maidens of the Homeric hymn to Hermes with the Korician nymphs⁵⁴; in the Cretan cave on Ida, Zeus was hidden and nurtured by nymphs with honey or by bees (*Diod. Sic.* 5. 70. 5; *Ant. Lib.* 19)⁵⁵.

To clarify the threefold relationship between springs, nymphs and bees, I shall consider the well-known closing of Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* (107-112), where the nymphs are only apparently

⁵⁴ LARSON 1995.

⁵⁵ *Diod. Sic.* 5. 70. 2-3 «And the Nymphs nurtured the child on a mixture of honey and milk and gave him upbringing at the udder of the goat named Amaltheia». *Diod. Sic.* 5. 70. 5-6 «But the most astonishing of all that the myth relates has to do with the bees, and we should not omit to mention it. The god, they say, wishing to preserve an immortal memorial of his close association with the bees, changed their colour, making it like copper with the gleam of gold. Since the region lay at a great altitude, where fierce winds blew about it, and heavy snows fell, he made the bees insensible to such things and unaffected by them, since they must range over the iciest stretches» (transl. OLDFATHER 1939, slightly modified). On the importance of honey as divine food, especially suitable for exceptional children, like Plato, Hesiod, Pindar, see BORGEAUD 2004.

absent. In this famous (and much-debated) passage, the poet expresses his aversion to the overabundant epic production of his time and instead exalts an ideal new poetry that is more careful in style and restrained in measure. Two conflicting images precisely express this contrast: the Assyrian river, with its muddy stream, and the small spring of pure water approached by bees carrying water to Deo (that is, Demeter):

Apollo struck Envy with his foot and said: «Great is the flood of the Assyrian river, but it hauls much refuse from the land and garbage in its water. Bees carry water to Deo not from every source, but pure and immaculate it flows from a holy spring, a tiny trickle, the topmost flower»⁵⁶

Considering what we said before about the gendered representation of water, it becomes clear that this passage exploits an already existing opposition in Greek culture between the river and the spring. While the spring, flowing directly from the ground, guarantees purity, the river has its water soiled by mixing with other water or with the earth. Critics usually identify «the great Assyrian river» as the prototype of the poems criticised by Callimachus, e.g., the *Lyde* of Antimachus of Colophon. On the other hand, the small and pure spring refers to Callimachus' ideal of short and refined poetry. This is likely to be identified with Phileta's *Demeter*, which Callimachus certainly admired, or possibly the Callimachean poetry itself.

For our purpose, it is essential to dwell also on the association between the pure source and the bees, which parallels the association between rivers and bulls. As an overabundant bibliography on this topic has often underlined, the Greeks attributed to bees an unconditional love for all that is pure, especially pure water, dew, and honey⁵⁷. This tendency also reflects on the gendered perception of this animal. At least since Semonides (*fr.* 7 West²), bees have become a model of feminine conduct⁵⁸. Bees are chaste, obedient to their king and efficient in organising the domestic economy, as good wives should be.

This gendered perception of bees also explains the proximity between bees and Demeter in Callimachus' passage. A scholium to Pindar informs us that the priestesses of Demeter were called «bees» precisely because of the chaste life they were required to lead: «Bees are priestesses, properly of Demeter; but the term is misapplied to all priestesses because of their pure life»⁵⁹. Other

⁵⁶ transl. CLAYMAN 2022

⁵⁷ WASZINK 1974, pp. 6-7; DETIENNE 1981; BETTINI 1986, pp. 205-255.

⁵⁸ ANDÒ 2005, pp. 154-160. A radically different representation is attested in the archaic age, especially in Hesiod, see ROSCALLA 1988.

⁵⁹ Schol. vet. Pind. P. 4. 106a (= Drachmann 2. 112-113). PETROVIC 2011, p. 275.

sources, e.g. Apollodorus of Athens, identify married women who celebrated Thesmophoria in honour of Demeter as *melíssai*⁶⁰. Detienne has extensively emphasised that Athenian citizens' wives adopt pure and chaste conduct during the Thesmophoria, as they are separated from their husbands⁶¹.

Although the attention of modern interpreters has mainly focused on the bees as the appellation of Demeter's priestesses or as a metaphorical image to denote poets, it must nevertheless be remembered that also nymphs, as water divinities, can be tightly related to Demeter and at the same time to bees. A fragment of the antiquarian Mnaseas (*fr.* 25 Cappelletto), who probably lived at the end of the 3rd c. BC, explains why nymphs are tightly related to Demeter's cult. According to this fragment, nymphs called «bees» were the first to turn men away from the feral life, distracting them from feeding on their kind and teaching them to gather the fruits of the trees that are spontaneously present in nature:

Without nymphs, there is no honouring of Demeter, for they first showed men the use of produce (*karpós*), how to avoid cannibalism (*allēlophagía*), and how to contrive coverings for themselves from the woods for the sake of modesty (*aidôs*)⁶². Nor is any marriage celebrated without them, but we honour them first as a recognition because they were the originators (*archēgói*) of piety (*eusébeia*) and observance of divine law (*hosiótēs*)⁶³.

This text suggests that the nymphs called *melíssai* are attributed a civilising virtue that anticipates the institutions Demeter will later found: agriculture and marriage. Weaving also likely alludes to female the *aidôs* that prefigures married life.

The conclusion of Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* simultaneously proves the opposition between two kinds of water (rivers and springs) and the association of bees with pure spring water. The nymphs, while not explicitly named, can nevertheless be seen behind the image of the bees engaged in the ritual of the hydrophoria for Demeter, sharing the same pure and chaste conduct with the brides of the Thesmophoriae.

⁶⁰ Apollodorus *FGrHist* 244 F89 «Melissai: the priestesses of Demeter». Otherwise, Apollodorus himself (suggests) in Book One (of *On the Gods?*): «when bringing to the Nymphs the basket together with the loom and the works of Persephone, (Demeter) first went to Paros, and having been entertained in the palace of the king Melissa, she granted to his sixty daughters the loom of Persephone and delivered first to them her sufferings and mysteries; whence the women who take part in the Thesmophoria were thereafter called Melissai» (Transl. SCHIRONI 2009, p. 58).

⁶¹ DETIENNE 1994, pp. 79-80.

⁶² I accept the reading αἰδοῦς (mss.; Müller, *FGH* 3. 150; Drachmann 2. 112). CAPPELLETTO 2003 prints εἰδοῦς without any further comments.

⁶³ Mnaseas *fr.* 25 Cappelletto = Schol. vet. Pind. P. 4. 106a (Drachmann 2. 112-113). Transl. LARSON 2001, p. 86.

In conclusion, river gods and nymphs are associated with two different kinds of freshwater and with two different animals (bulls and bees). The characteristics attributed to these animals reflect the opposition between the perception of rivers and water springs in ancient Greek culture (violence vs. docility, impurity vs. purity, virility vs. femininity). At the same time, these animal associations draw and reinforce the boundaries between the sphere of influence of two different groups of divinities in watery landscapes, such as river gods and nymphs. Even more important, animal associations also play a role in drawing a relationship between water gods and other divinities that are not immediately related to water, such as Ares and Demeter.

4. SPRINGS AND HORSES

It is possible to confirm the conclusions drawn from the case study on nymphs by examining another relationship involving three elements: the god Poseidon, the water spring, and another animal closely related to water, namely the horse, which is tightly associated with Poseidon⁶⁴. While Poseidon can occasionally be linked to the bull⁶⁵, as river gods are, this god is better known for its association with the horse, which is demonstrated by his title of *híppios* «of the horses»⁶⁶. While according to Vernant and Detienne, Poseidon *híppios* manifests himself in the strength and unpredictable nature of the horse, De Polignac has recently suggested that this god may have a specific power in protecting the yoke that holds the quadriga together⁶⁷. Indeed, Poseidon appears in many traditions as the inventor of equestrian art and the bite (*Il.* 23. 307; *Hymn.Hom.Pos.* 4; *Soph. OC* 714-715)⁶⁸. He is also one of the very few deities who receive horses adorned with their harnesses (e.g. at the Dine source in Argolis, *Paus.* 8. 7.2) and entire chariots (*Hymn.Hom.Ap.* 229-238) as offerings. Moreover, the god often takes the appearance of a horse, especially in the Arcadian traditions, according to which he mates in this form with the goddess Erinys or Demeter and generates with her the swiftest horse of all, the immortal Arion (*Paus.* 8. 25. 4)⁶⁹.

⁶⁴ FARNELL 1907, pp. 14-23; SCHACHERMEYR 1950, pp. 15-27, 50-60, 65-108; DETIENNE - VERNANT 1991, pp. 187-213.

⁶⁵ Poseidon is called *táureos* when he is invoked to defend Thebes (*Hes. Scut.* 103-104), but he also often receives bull sacrifices (*Od.* 3, 5-6; *Pl. Criti.* 119 d-f). In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, he sends a sea-born bull to kill the son of Theseus (*Eur. Hipp.* 1168-1250). See also *Plut. fr.* 106 Sandbach.

⁶⁶ E.g. in Arcadia at Mantinea (*Polyb.* 9. 8, 11. 14.; *Paus.* 8. 5. 5, 8. 10. 2), Pheneios (8. 14. 5) (BALERIAUX 2009).

⁶⁷ DETIENNE - VERNANT 1991, pp. 187-213; DE POLIGNAC 2017.

⁶⁸ VILLARI 2001, pp. 35-50.

⁶⁹ Arion is «of divine birth» already in *Il.* 23. 346-347. The scholia vet. ad *Il.* 23.347 and *Eust. Comm. ad Il.* 23. 347 (IV, p. 744 van der Valk) the two sources provide the Boeotian version of the birth of Arion, who would have been generated by Poseidon and Erinys or Harpie.

The relationship of Poseidon with the horse is especially interesting to us because this animal is seldom connected with river gods⁷⁰. This means that while river gods and Poseidon may share the association with the bull, the connection with the horse is exclusive to Poseidon within the fresh-water pantheon. Therefore, we must ask ourselves whether the association of the horse with Poseidon expresses a specific relationship of this god to water, distinct from that the river gods entertain to this element. An answer comes from considering mythical accounts in which the springing of water is associated with the presence of horses.

From this perspective, the traditions associating water sources with horses are particularly significant. Some springs, for example, bear names related to this animal: in Argos, there was a fountain called Hippe (Call. *fr.* 66. 8 Pfeiffer), while in Boeotia on mount Helicon, there was an Aganippe spring, probably the source of the Permessos river named by Hesiod (Hes. *Th.* 5; Call. *fr.* 696 Pfeiffer). The most famous among them is the fountain called Hippocrene («the fountain of the horse») on mount Helicon in Boeotia (Hes. *Th.* 6-7), created by the winged horse Pegasus. The name of Pegasus itself recalls the Greek word for «spring» (*pegē*), which points to the tight relationship of this mythical winged horse with water. According to Hesiod, the source of water to which the name of Pegasus alludes is that of the Ocean, where he was born together with Chrysaor from the blood of Medusa, whom Perseus beheaded (Hes. *Th.* 280-286). Since in the verses immediately preceding this episode, Hesiod refers to Medusa's union with Poseidon (Hes. *Th.* 276-279), many ancient authors attribute the paternity of Medusa's two sons to the god (Apollod. 2. 32 and 42; Ov. *Met.* 6. 119-120; Nonn. *D.* 11, 144-146). In any case, Pegasus is a property of Poseidon: according to Hesiod, the god gave Pelops the horse (Hes. *fr.* 43a. 81-85 Merkelbach-West), while in the Pindaric version, Pelops must sacrifice to the god to tame the winged horse with the bite given to him by Athena (Pind. *O.* 1. 63-70). This suggests that the power of Pegasus to make water gush from the soil is likely derived from the god.

In all the extant accounts, the source of the Helicon is called Hippocrene, «the spring of the horse», because it was formed when Pegasus struck his hoof into the ground (Paus. 2. 31. 3). A spring in Troizen was also told to have the same name and origin (Paus. 2. 31. 9). According to Nicander (Ant. Lib. 9), the winged horse struck the summit of Helicon to prevent it from rising to the sky.

The violent action of Pegasus, who fissures the earth with his hoof, causing (fresh or salt) water to gush from it, seems to replicate a gesture often made by Poseidon: in Argolis, for example, he created a source in the marsh of Lerna, which was later named after Amymone (Luc. *DMar* 8 (6), Eur. *Phoen.* 186-189; Nonn. *D.* 8. 240-242). In Athens, he made the famous salt well on the Acropolis,

⁷⁰ River gods may occasionally be represented in the form of centaurs. See above, n. 27.

known as the «sea of Erechtheus», flow by striking the earth with his trident (Paus. 1. 26. 5; Apollod. 3. 14. 1). In Arcadia, Poseidon makes the water disappear near Mantinea and then he makes it reappear in the sea, along the coast of Genethlium in Argolis. Here, Poseidon is honoured with sacrifices of horses thrown into the water (Paus. 8. 7. 2). Other sources report that Poseidon generated the first horse, whose name was Skyphios (or Sisyphos), by hitting a rock with his trident (Schol. Pind. *P.* 4. 246; Schol. Lycophr. 766; Etym. Magnum s.v. Ἴππιος)⁷¹.

As Sonia Darthou has convincingly demonstrated, these tales show that Poseidon acts in a vertical dimension, opening both the soil and the rock to allow water and plants to spring from it⁷². Moreover, these skills are closely associated with the power to cause earthquakes, a phenomenon that, for the ancients, could itself cause water sources to spring up (Sen. *Nat.* 6. 6. 2).

The association of the horse with water springs in the sign of Poseidon highlights a specific aspect of this type of water: its vertical dimension, which connects high and low.⁷³ The horse seems to perfectly reproduce the spatial orientation of spring water and its gushing movement with its tendency to bolt and rear. From this point of view, Poseidon's horse contrasts with the bull associated with the river gods: this animal, charging headlong and frontally, seems to draw the same movement as river water, horizontally dragging with it everything in its path.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted thus far allows us to conclude both on the theriomorphic traits in the representations of the river gods and on the role these traits play in the freshwater pantheon.

About the first point, it can be seen that the theriomorphic traits of the river gods, especially in iconographic sources, are anything but stable: it seems more cautious to consider these traits not as «real» elements of the divine body, thus classifying them as a «different» category of gods, but as preferential metamorphoses and epiphanies, as particularly appropriate ways in which the river gods manifest themselves in the eyes of men. From this point of view, it can be argued that there is no difference between the so-called theriomorphic traits and the connection that other allegedly «Olympian» deities show with certain specific animals, such as Athena with the owl or Poseidon with the horse. These findings suggest that the very category of «theriomorphic» deities is of doubtful use in the analysis of the river gods and their cults, if not in general, because it creates a separate category of deities whose actual existence in the eyes of the Greeks is, however, not

⁷¹ FARNELL 1907, p. 14; BALÉRIAUX 2019.

⁷² DARTHO 2009, pp. 62-64, 73-74.

⁷³ See also FARNELL 1907, p. 21.

proven by other elements. Indeed, it is possible, if not preferable, to eliminate the category of theriomorphism and consider theriomorphic features within a continuum of epiphanic manifestations in which theriomorphic traits range from linguistic epithets to animal epiphanies.

Regarding the second point, it is clear that, at least within the group of deities presiding over fresh waters, the associations between gods and animals constitute a classification system that helps to differentiate the different types of water and their cultural representations through a gendered perception. As we have seen, the bull allows us to conceptualise not only the fertility brought by rivers to the land but also the violence of the river, which places it in the sphere of Ares, the «terrestrial» nature of its water, and its horizontal course. On the other hand, the nymphs protect spring water, which ranks at the top of the Greek classification of waters in terms of purity and potability. These divine 'jeunes filles en fleur' are associated with a gendered vision of spring water, which has to be guarded with care like a woman to preserve it from undue mixing. Closely related to them are the bees, lovers of purity and especially of pure water, inhabitants of a wealthy and well-organised *oikos*, creators (or rather gatherers) of an exceptional food such as honey, which is at the opposite pole of what is putrid and rotten. Significantly, bees and bulls are associated with traditions on bougonia, according to which the swarm of bees is born from the corpse of a bull (or ox) whose orifices have been carefully sealed⁷⁴.

Finally, the horse expresses the Poseidonian dimension of water, perceived as an element that acts in a vertical spatial dimension. By emerging violently from the soil, the springs highlight their link with the depths of the earth, over which Poseidon reigns, protecting or destroying the fundamentals of things, may they be buildings, plants or others.

Based on this analysis, it seems reasonable to suggest that animal associations are not only capable of creating relationships of complementarity and oppositions within the pantheon, according to Vernant and Detienne, but rather serve as a means to support cultural classifications, such as the existence of different kinds of water in Greek thought. This no way means that there are easy and stable one-to-one equations between gods and animals but that animals, just as gods, can be used very fluidly to codify the difference between different kinds of waters, which are perceived and therefore used in different ways by Ancients.

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⁷⁴ BETTINI 1986, pp. 215-223.

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