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The Antique Source of Raphael's "Triton and a Nereid" in the Villa Farnesina and Related Representations

The role of antique reliefs as sources of inspiration for Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea* has for a long time been perceived by many scholars. They usually emphasized the impact of Roman sarcophagus reliefs with the Sea-Thiasos scenes¹, sculptures whose importance as formal models for nude figures in the postantique art cannot be underestimated². Nevertheless, it would appear that no one has determined any definite antique compositional motif in Raphael's work, which is regarded as one of the most remarkable achievements in the Renaissance attempts to render the world of pagan mythology in the forms taken over from classical antiquity³. Hence, particular attention should, in the author's opinion, be paid to the likeness between the group of Triton and Nereid in the bottom left corner of the painting (fig. 15) and a similar group in the Roman relief to be seen in the drawing by Bernardino Ciferri in the Topham Collection at Eton College (sign. B.m.4,1)⁴. This drawing (fig. 16), as yet unpublished presents an antique relief showing two pairs of Triton with a Nereid, hitherto unknown and hence not mentioned in the monumental monograph by Andreas Rumpf. The compositional scheme of the pair on the left reveals a strong analogy with the aforementioned group in Raphael's fresco.

In both cases the muscular Triton, swimming leftwards and twisting his torso, reaches back to embrace with his outstretched right arm the nymph reposing on the lower part of his half-animal body. Among the hundreds of various compositional schemes of the figures of Triton and a Nereid as they appear on the more than three hundred preserved or known antique reliefs on the Sea-Thiasos theme, this one seems to be unique⁵.

The work presented in the Eton College drawing most probably no longer exists⁶, though its influence beyond Raphael's masterpiece is possible to trace. Thus when in the 17th century the damaged front of the Sea-Thiasos sarcophagus, dating from the 2nd century A.D. was being fixed in the northern wall of the courtyard of the Palazzo Giustiniani in Rome (fig. 17), the missing

left-hand fragment was replaced in accordance with the pattern provided most probably by the discussed antique relief. Reference here is to the figure of the young Triton embracing with his right arm a Nereid who, though facing him, is seated on the body of his companion on the right side⁷.

An even more distinct influence of the lost work can be seen in the well-known relief in the sepulchral chapel of King Sigismund I in the Cracow Cathedral on the Wawel Hill (figs. 18–19). To be found on the extreme right above the monarch's tomb between the arches of the pendentives, it has in the centre a representation of Triton and a Nereid. The antique sarcophagus provenance of the composition of the relief, similarly as of other mythological images under the pendentive arches of the remaining walls of the chapel, was perceived long ago, though no specific antique source has so far been discovered⁸. Only the figure of the kneeling Eros with a reversed bow in his hands has been identified by Lech Kalinowski as a contamination of antique motifs, that of Olympus and the Lysippos Amor⁹. However, since its discovery by Julian Pagaczewski in 1935, the dependence of the Cracow group of Triton and a Nereid on Raphael's work in the Villa Farnesina has been unquestioned¹⁰. Indeed, the almost complete twisting of Triton's torso, his lifted head, and stylized fins in the front part of the body, the motif of the close embrace of the Nereid with the right arm, the hand unseen, and also the pose of the nymph herself, leaning back and slightly raised, as if desiring to free herself from her companion's arms and, finally, the arrangement of the Nereid's hands holding the billowing draperies, would have been impossible without the model of the fresco of the master from Urbino. However, though his work was the main model, it was not the only one. In the author's opinion, a second source of inspiration was the lost antique relief. This would seem to be confirmed not only by the short-haired head of

Triton and serpentine tangles of his tail but, above all, by the arrangement of the nymph's legs with the left one characteristically bent, though in the Cracow work it is placed over and not under her right knee. The head in profile of a dolphin swimming along the right of the Cracow relief also has its counterpart in the similarly treated head in the centre of the antique work. It can thus be assumed that the composition of the Cracow relief is a contamination of two sources — a contemporary and an antique one, i.e. Raphael's fresco from the Villa Farnesina and the lost Roman relief, which is to a certain extent the prototype of one of its motifs.

From the moment of its creation in 1511–1512 Raphael's masterpiece was studied and imitated by artists, and a knowledge of its composition was spread by a contemporary engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi¹¹. Hence it is not surprising that it was also familiar to the Italian artists who created the Cracow relief, which, under the direction if not with the participation of Bartolomeo Berrecci da Pontasieve, was executed between the years 1520 and 1524¹².

The sculptor must also have known the lost relief presented in the drawing from Eton College. He probably came across it in Italy during his studies in the workshop of Benedetto da Rovezzano. That this workshop was the source of training of the artists is indicated by several factors¹³, among them also the striking similarity in the plastic treatment of the waves and the characteristic triple feathery ends of the tails of the sea creatures (tritons, dolphins) in the Cracow reliefs and in the beautiful one decorating the basemento of the Casa Santa in Loreto (fig. 20), executed between the years 1515 and 1518 probably by Benedetto da Rovezzano¹⁴. The Cracow work, being an early example of the adoption of Raphael's motifs by artists active north of the Alps, at the same time constitutes an additional proof of the existence of the antique Roman relief now known only from a late drawing at Eton College.

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¹ E.g. F. Hermanin, *La Farnesina*, Bergamo 1927, p. 49; — A. von Salis, *Antike und Renaissance. Über Nachleben und Weiterwirken der Alten in der neueren Kunst*, Erlenbach-Zürich 1847, pp. 210–216; — B. Becatti, *Raffaello e l'antico*, in: *Raffaello, L'opera, le fonti, la fortuna*. Ed. M. Salmi, Novara 1968, p. 531; — J. H. Beck, *Raphael*, New York 1976, p. 136.

² Cf. K. Clark, *Transformations of Nereids in the Renaissance*, "The Burlington Magazine", 97, 1955, pp. 214–217; — R. and T. Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton 1956, p. 278; — L. Kalinowski, *Tręści artystyczne i ideowe kaplicy Zygmuntowskiej, Studia do dziejów Wawelu*, 2, 1961, pp. 104–105; — P. P. Bober, *An Antique Sea-Thiasos in the Renaissance*, in: *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehman*. Ed. L. F. Sandler, New York 1964, p. 46; — J. Białostocki, *Nereidy w kaplicy Zygmuntowskiej*, in: ditto, *Symbole i obrazy w świecie sztuki*, Warsaw 1982, pp. 187–191.

³ E.g. A. von Salis, op. cit., p. 215; — B. Becatti, op. cit., p. 531; — J. Białostocki, in: *Die Kunst des 16. Jahrhunderts*. Ed. G. Kauffmann (*Propyläen Kunstgeschichte*, 7), Berlin 1970, p. 62.

⁴ J. Sampson, *Drawings and Engravings in the Topham Collection at Eton College*. Catalogue (The Warburg Theses), August 1974 (typescript in the Warburg Institute in London) without pagination. I am thankful to the Eton College Librarian Mr P. R. Quarrie for giving me the kind permission to publish the drawing.

⁵ Cf. A. Rumpf, *Die Meerwesen auf den antiken Sarkophagreliefs (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs)*. Ed. E. Rodenwaldt, vol. 5–1), Berlin 1939, passim.

⁶ The note accompanying the photograph of the drawing in the Warburg Institute in London and attempting an identification of the relief with the one presenting a Sea-Thiasos originally in the Osteria del Falcone in front of the Porta Angelica in Rome and in 1874 transferred to the Palazzo Strozzi, from where it shortly disappeared, does not seem justified, since the only known description of the latter relief (F. Matz and F. von Duhn, *Antike Bildwerke in Rom*, 2, Leipzig 1881, no 3168, p. 371; — cf. also A. Rumpf, op. cit., no 139, p. 61) mentions representations (das Seestier, das Seeross) that cannot be found in the drawing.

⁷ F. Matz, F. von Duhn, op. cit., no 3165, pp. 369–

370; — A. Rumpf, op. cit., no 126, p. 53, fig. 80 and pl. 44.

⁸ See: L. Kalinowski, op. cit., p. 104; — J. Białostocki, *Sea-Thiasos in Renaissance Sepulchral Art*, in: *Studies in French and Italian Art of the Renaissance and Baroque. Essays in Honour of Sir Anthony Blunt*, London 1967, pp. 69–74; — L. Kalinowski, *Motywy antyczne w dekoracji kaplicy Zygmuntowskiej*, *Folia historiae artium*, 12, 1976, p. 68; — J. Białostocki, *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe*, London 1976, p. 42, figs. 104, 114; — S. Mossakowski, *La decorazione mitologica della cappella del re Sigismondo I*, in: *Italia Venezia e Polonia tra Medio Evo e età moderna*. Ed. V. Branca and S. Graciotti, Florence 1980, p. 274, fig. 17.

⁹ L. Kalinowski, *Motywy antyczne...*, pp. 87–88, figs. 26–30. Antique provenance of a number of motives in mythological representations of the Chapel decoration is discussed elsewhere: S. Mossakowski, *Il concetto etnogenetico particolare riflesso nella decorazione della cappella del re Sigismondo I*, in: *Cultura e nazione in Italia e Polonia dal Rinascimento all'Illuminismo*, Ed. V. Branca and S. Graciotti, Florence 1986, pp. 253–262.

¹⁰ J. Pagaczewski, *Jan Michałowicz z Urzędowa*, „Rocznik Krakowski”, 28, 1937, p. 66.

¹¹ M. Meiss, *Raphael's Mechanized Seashell* (in his book) *The Painter's Choice. Problems in the Interpretation of Renaissance Art*, New York 1976, p. 207, fig. 198. — For the date of Raphael's fresco see: L. Dussler, *Raphael. A Critical Catalogue of his Pictures, Wall-Paintings and Tapestries*, London–New York 1971, pp. 99–100.

¹² The problem of dating the Chapel decoration will constitute the subject of a separate work.

¹³ See: S. Mossakowski, *Il concetto etnogenetico*, op. cit.

¹⁴ K. Weil-Garris, *The Santa Casa di Loreto. Problems in Cinquecento Sculpture*, New York–London 1977, pp. 280–282, fig. 99. Unnoticed to the authoress remained the evident relation between the lower part of the Loreto relief and the two panels with the sea creatures, which decorate the side walls of the Moses-niche in the tomb of Julius II by Michelangelo (after 1513). Cf. Ch. de Tolnay, *Michelangelo IV. The Tomb of Julius II*, Princeton 1954, figs. 81–82.

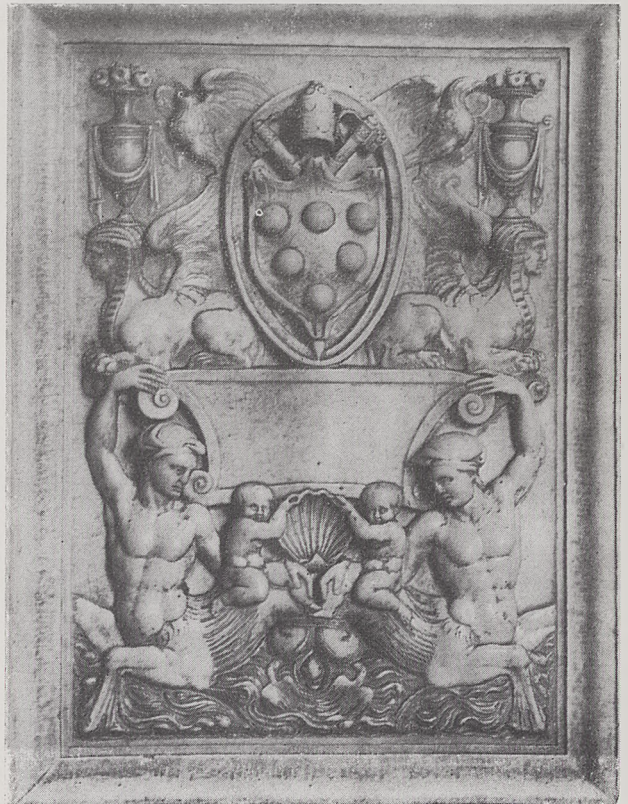


15. Raphael, *The Triumph of Galatea* (detail). Rome, Villa Farnesina

16. The Roman relief with the Sea-Thiasos, drawing by B. Ciferri in the Topham Collection at Eaton College

17. The Sea-Thiasos sarcophagus in the Palazzo Giustiniani in Rome





18. Detail from the marine panel in the Chapel of King Sigismund I in the Cracow Cathedral on the Wawel Hill

19. The marine panel in the Chapel of King Sigismund I in the Cracow Cathedral on the Wawel Hill

20. The marine panel of the Santa Casa in Loreto