

A New Proposal About the Homeric Expression νύμφη νῆις

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Short Communication

The expression νύμφη νῆις, attested in the Iliad [1], is traditionally understood as «Naiad nymph». However, by examining the contexts in which it appears, it is always referred to normal women, mothers of soldiers fallen in battle. It is advisable, therefore, to carefully analyze this matter, starting from one of the passages, very similar to each other, which contain this expression. For example, in the course of the battle under the Achaean wall [2], «Aias, son of Oileus [3]/ leaped upon Satnius and wound him with a thrust of his sharp spear, / the son of Enops, whom a peerless Naiad nymph conceived/ to Enops, as he tended his herds by the banks of Satnioeis» [4].

However, both in Greek and in the Homeric poems the word νύμφη often does not mean «nymph», but rather «bride», «wife», «lady»: in the Odyssey Penelope is called this way [5] and also in the Iliad νύμφη normally has this meaning [6], sometimes appearing in the masculine [7]; incidentally, also the Latin words nubere and nuptiae, «to marry» and «wedding» respectively, can be traced back to the same root [8]. The most famous passage that describes the figure is that of the Odyssey about the enigmatic “cave of the nymphs”, a place of Ithaca located next to the bay where the Phaeacians landed and left Ulysses. It was «a pleasant, shadowy/ cave sacred to the nymphs that are called Naiads. /Therein are mixing bowls and jars of stone/ and there too the bees store honey. / And in the cave are long looms of stone, at which the nymphs/ weave webs of purple dye, a wonder to behold» [9]. Scholars have tried to understand the true meaning of these verses since ancient times. The most striking example is that of Porphyry, a Neoplatonic philosopher of the 3rd century AD, who even went so far as to write an entire work, *The Cave of the Nymphs*, in which he tried to interpret this passage by an esoteric key (the «cave» would be the cosmos, «nymphs» and «bees» are the souls, the «webs of purple dye» represent the flesh that is forming around the bones)[10].

Now we can try to propose a new interpretation. The term νυμφάων can refer directly to the cave and not to ἱρόν («sacred» or «eminent») [11]. Such an expression could therefore be interpreted as «the lovable, dark, sacred cave of the brides (νυμφάων), whose name is Naiads (Νηϊάδες) » [12]. We could relate this term to a hill of Ithaca called Νήϊον, whose root can be connected with νηϋς («ship») [13]. Those «Naiad nymphs» were, therefore, the «women of Νήϊον », that is the women of Ithaca, i.e., the wives of the local sailors, who in their cave, that is in their atelier near the landing of the ships, awaited the arrival of their men and in the meantime on the «looms of stone» [14] wove webs of purple dye, which correspond to the purple cloak worn by Ulysses in Crete [15] as well as in Ithaca [16] before the war. In short, on the island of Ithaca there was probably a local production of “articles of clothing”, as we would say today, managed by the local ladies, who used that closed place as a working and meeting point. This interpretation is certainly in line with the style of the poet of the Odyssey, who just in the parts set on the island is very attentive to the details and to the little things of daily life [17].

References

1. Il. VI, 21-22; XIV, 444; XX, 384.
2. The Achaean wall curiously appears in the VII book of Iliad and disappears in the XII one. While the Alexandrians accepted the construction of the wall as Homeric, modern critics prefer to consider it as an interpolation. Cf. J.A. Davison, *Thucydides, Homer and the Achaean Wall*, «Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies», 6, 1965, pp. 5-28; M.L. West, *The Achaean Wall*, «Classical Review», 19, 1969, pp. 256-260; O. Tsagarakis, *The Achaean Wall and the Homeric Question*, «Hermes», 97, 1969, pp. 129-135; J. Porter, *Making and Unmaking: the Achaean Wall and the Limits of Fictionality in Homeric Criticism*, «Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association», 141, 2011, pp. 1-36. According to K. Bassi, *Homer's Achaean Wall and the Hypothetical Past*, in V. Wohl (ed.), *Probabilities, Hypotheticals, and Counterfactuals in Ancient Greek Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 122-141, the fate of the wall and the hero's fame are linked to the ethical dimension of the poem.

3. Mentioned at Od. IV, 499-511, because his νόστος is a quick inversion of Odysseus' painful experience (so V. Castellani, Little Ajax, Odysseus, and Divine "Wraths", «The Classical Bulletin», 81, 2015, pp. 107-130).
4. Ὀϊλῆος ταχὺς Αἴας/ Σάτνιον οὐτάσε δουρὶ μετάλμενος ὄξυόεντι/ Ἦνοπίδην, ὃν ἄρα νύμφη τέκε νηῖς ἀμύμων/ Ἦνοπι βουκολέοντι παρ' ὄχθας Σατνιόεντος (Il. XIV, 442-445). The noun Σατνιοίεις should be connected with the root *σατνιο-, also found in σατάνειος (one of the three plants of the genus of the μεσπίλη, together with the ἀνθηδών and the ἀνθηδοσειδής; Theophr., Hist. Plant. III, 12, 5), which would make it go back to the time prior to the Aeolian colonization. Cf. G. Neumann, Zwei altgriechische Flussnamen in der Troas, «Historische Sprachforschung», 112, 1999, pp. 273-278.
5. Od. IV, 743.
6. Il. III, 130; IX, 560; XVIII, 492.
7. Νύμφιος is the «bridegroom» (Il. XXIII, 223; Od. VII, 65).
8. In modern Greek the bride/wife is called νύφη, received from the Byzantine term νύφη, that is to say «the girl on her wedding day»: it clearly derives from the ancient Greek νύμφη. The same root was very important also in the Latin language: for example the pro-nub-a joined the right hands of the spouses (dextrarum iunctio): see N. Boëls-Janssen, La vie religieuse des matrones dans la Rome archaïque, Rome, École Française de Rome, 1993, pp. 85-95. F.R. Nocchi, Roma antica/1. Abiti nuziali, Roma, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, p. 78, n. 184.
9. Ἀγγόθι δ' αὐτῆς ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἠεροειδέες, / ἱρόν νυμφῶν αἱ Νηιάδες καλέονται. / Ἐν δὲ κρητῆρες τε καὶ ἀμφιφορῆες ἕασιν/ λάϊνοι· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτα τιθαβώσσοισι μέλισσαι. / Ἐν δ' ἱστοὶ λίθιοι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε νύμφαι/ φάρε' ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι (Od. XIII, 103-108).
10. In recent times the text has received particular attention: cf. K. Nilüfer Akçay, Porphyry's on the Cave of the Nymphs in Its Intellectual Context, Brill, Leiden-Boston (Mass.), 2019; T. Dorandi (ed.), Porphyre. L'antre des nymphes dans l'Odyssée, Vrin, Paris, 2019. The report is detailed (Od. XIII, 187-371), so we can believe that over time the image has become a sort of "literary paradigm", indicating also centuries-old deposits destined to be recovered even after a considerable distance of time. See for example H. Geisslinger, Odysseus in der Höhle der Najaden: Opfer oder Schatzversteck?, «Das Altertum», 47, 2002, pp. 221-238.
11. However, an exception is Od. VI, 321 s. (ἄλσος.../ ἱρόν). Analysis of the occurrences of the term in M. Doria, Testimonianze di ἱρός (= ἱερός) in miceneo, «Kadmos», 19, 1980, pp. 29-37.
12. Od. I, 186; III, 81.
13. Already a Pylian inscription shows the term na-wi-jo, a perfect cast of νῆϊος («naval»). See G. Mariotta, PY Jn 829, KTU 4.390 e l'emergenza a Pilo alla fine del XIII secolo, «Studi Classici e Orientali», 46, 1998, pp. 999-1012.
14. Od. XIII, 107.
15. Ib., 225.
16. Ib., 250.
17. We owe a wide-ranging investigation to V. Bérard, Les navigations d'Ulysse, I (Ithaque et la Grèce des Achéens), Paris, Colin, 1971. Cf. also E. Suárez de la Torre, Ítaca y Ulises, «Estudios Clásicos», 17, 1973, pp. 221-239.



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