

Infiltrating the Empire: The Cult of the Nymphs in the Roman World

Nymphs, nature deities found at groves, caves, mountains, and water sources, are prevalent in Greek art, literature, and cult. Maintaining a position between gods and men, the nymphs are easily accessible to and often benevolent towards mortals. Frequently, they assist heroes in their quests, mother the founders of cities, and guard maidens on their transition from maidens to wives. Although represented on coins and in literature as specific individuals with names, in actual cult practice, Greek nymphs are more often worshipped as a generic group of three. Their cult spaces are found at springs or caves and terracotta figurines, marble reliefs, or ceramics often serve as dedications.

While the cult of the nymphs has a robust history in the Greek world, less attention has been paid to its presence in the Roman world. The nymphs were not an unknown deity to the Romans: the notion of a water deity, a *lympa* is present early in Italy. Marked by a shrine, Juturna and her sacred spring had an honored position in the Roman Forum. The Camenae with the nymph Egeria are worshipped at a grove and spring near the Porta Capena and their water was drawn daily by the Vestal Virgins (Plut. *Num.* 13). Moreover, certain local water divinities with their shrines and votives in the provinces also indicate the presence of the cult of the nymphs. For example, Sulis in Britain who is later joined with Minerva is connected to the hot springs at Bath. In particular, the nymphs were quite popular in Roman Thrace (modern day Bulgaria) where they were often connected to the Graces (Charites).

However, the concept of the Roman nymph frequently seems to be overpowered by the Greek perception. Even the designation in Latin of *lympa* is overshadowed by the more common *nympha* which is closer to the Greek νύμφη. In fact, much of the evidence for the cult of the nymphs in the Roman world tends to appear in areas settled by the Greeks which were

subsequently conquered. Magna Graecia and Bulgaria, both crowded with Greek colonies, reveal evidence for the worship of the Nymphs. Starting from the archaic period, the former region has a long association with Nymphs as at Syracuse, while the latter has multiple sanctuaries such as the nymphaeon of Bourdapa (near ancient Philippopolis) which dates to the second and third centuries C.E. These two particular sites allow us to consider the role and worship of the nymphs in the Roman provinces. At Syracuse, the nymph Arethusa is honored with sacrifices whereas the nymphs in Bulgaria are worshipped as three-fold group and given stone reliefs carved with their image.

While the Greek cult of the nymphs is primarily located at caves, in the Roman world it is usually found in connection to water sources, particularly hot springs. Although a minor deity, the nymphs' connection to water, a vital human necessity, makes them an important and overlooked part of Roman daily and ritual life. Jennifer Larson in her book (2001), *Greek Nymphs*, has shown the importance of the nymphs in the Hellenic world but she only cursorily addresses their cult in the Roman period which leaves a serious disparity in our understanding. Using archaeological, iconographic, literary and epigraphic evidence, this paper will begin to bridge the gap in our knowledge by surveying the evidence for the worship of nymphs in Syracuse, Bourdapa, and Rome—three areas which have different origins of the cult—in order to determine how the character of the nymphs varies throughout the Empire. Moreover, this examination will attempt to ascertain what exactly makes a nymph Roman.