

Nicander's Ioniad Nymphs and the Corycian *senex* in Vergil's *Georgics*

In this paper I argue that Vergil's *Georgics* 4.116-148 alludes to the *Georgika* of the Hellenistic poet Nicander of Colophon, based on intertextual evidence from fragment 74 (Gow & Scholfield). Vergil evokes Nicander and his poetry with subtle mythological and horticultural allusions, and portrays him as an immigrant from Greece to Tarentum, representing the transfer of Greek botanical and poetic expertise to Italian soil.

It is probable that Vergil drew on Nicander's works: in addition to the similar titles and subject matter of their respective *Georgics*, the description of the snake at *Georgics* 3.414ff is likely derived from Nicander's *Theriaka* (Thomas 1988), and Quintilian attests that Vergil imitated Nicander (*Inst.* 10.1.56). It is difficult to trace a conclusive link between Nicander's *Georgika* and Vergil's *Georgics* based on the text, since the former is fragmentary. Fragment 74, the most substantial at seventy-three lines, provides the most promising evidence. Harrison suggests that the mysterious *Corycius senex*, the gardener in *Georgics* 4.116-148, represents Nicander himself. He bases this theory on evidence including the horticultural similarities between *Georgika* fr. 74 and *Georgics* 4.116-148, and biographical information about Nicander: his home, Claros (a shrine to Apollo south of Colophon), is relatively near Mt. Corycus (Harrison 2004).

Though I also argue that the *senex* in this passage represents Nicander, I interpret the mention of Corycus primarily as a reference to the Corycidae, the nymphs most famously of Parnassos, but according to Parthenius, located in the Corycian Cave, a Cilician *locus amoenus* famous for its lush garden and saffron (Leigh 1994). I argue that the nymphs, the cave's location, and the garden allude to a myth related by Nicander in fragment 74, which precedes his discussion of the cultivation of flowers for use in garlands. Nicander introduces this section with

the tale of the Ioniad Nymphs, who offered a garland of flowers to Ion, the mythological founder of Ionia, after he hunted a boar. According to Nicander, the Ionian flower can be found in two colors: either yellow-gold, or the color of the flower the nymphs gave Ion-- presumably purple, since *ion* is the Greek word for violet (74.1-9).

It does not seem coincidental that Vergil may refer to the Corycian Cave, which was inhabited by nymphs, located in Ionia, and famous for its gardens of saffron flowers. Rather than an obvious allusion to Nicander's Ioniad Nymphs, who were situated at Elis (in the northern Peloponnese), Vergil plays on the double location of Ionia and refers to the Corycidae, in eastern Ionia, relatively near Claros and Colophon. Since saffron is golden in color, but the crocus flower which produces it is purple, the Corycidae and the Corycian saffron garden may well have been associated with both gold and purple, like Nicander's Ionian flowers. This subtle allusion would be lost unless one was familiar with the mythology of Ion and possessed knowledge of floriculture.

What of the *senex*'s garden? Harrison convincingly demonstrates the similarity of the plants in both passages. Furthermore, flowers were a common metaphor for poetry during the Hellenistic period and beyond: a famous example is the *Garland*, an anthology of poems arranged by the epigrammatist Meleager. In light of this, there may be metapoetic significance to be found in Nicander's advice on the cultivation of garland-flowers (74.1-72) and the old man's flower garden in *Georgics* 4.116-148. Vergil's *senex Corycius*, then, represents Nicander, Vergil's predecessor, conveying poetic and horticultural knowledge to Italy.

Bibliography

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