A SHORT HISTORY OF PYGMIES IN GREECE AND ITALY

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I am that pygmy of the dances of god,
who diverts the god in front of his great throne!
(The Pyramid Texts)

A war-cry, a shriek of dying!
A rolling flap of agonizing wings!
(W. Goethe, Faust)

The imagery of Pygmies may give a good insight into Greek and non-Greek perception of ethnical and cultural identity, since Pygmies are surely a non-Greek anthropological phenomenon, just at the bounds or out of bounds of human nature (according to what the Greeks meant by human nature). On the other hand—we will discuss that—this same imagery could be assimilated also by non-Greek cultures and in particular by the Etruscans, with a range of new functions, which we should assume different from its original ones.

Since I first became interested in this topic (especially in the Etruscan aspect) and mentioned it to Sir John Boardman ten years ago, on the occasion of my visit to the Beazley Archive, meantime, the publication of some excellent papers by Véronique Dasen¹ and one of the last contributions by the late Professor Cristofani, prior to his untimely death,² opened up new routes of interpretation, within a wide and nearly complete catalogue of images. My attempt at saying something new about this very old story is today dedicated to

Prof. Brian B. Shefton, who has so often and so subtly investigated the processes of the iconographical transmission and the stylistic imitation or reinterpretation from Greece to Etruria.

The Pygmies I would like to deal with in this session are not the more recent and diffuse we usually find in Nilotic and grotesque imagery of the Hellenistic and Roman age; but the exotic, fierce protagonists of the Geranomachy, their mythical war against the cranes, who in Greek iconography—except for some asserted but maybe opinable anticipations—are documented since the first decades of the 6th century B.C., and in Etruria chiefly in the 4th and 3rd century B.C. These are the Pygmies who personify, in a very transparent way, a status of irreducible geographic, cultural, racial and anatomic alienism.

I emphasize that I entirely share the conclusion persuasively drawn by Pietro Janni, looking at the seasonal war of these small warriors—mentioned by sources which go from Homer and Hesiod to Strabo and Pliny and others—as a myth common to many far off cultures, to be taken out of that exclusively African environment, which our experience of modern geographical explorations anachronistically believed obvious and implicit also in the testimony of ancient writers. On the other hand, I can not follow Alain Ballabriga, in his attempt at again bringing geranomachy to ‘matière d’Éthiopie’, for all the famous dwarfs of the countries of Yam and Punt, quoted in a letter by Pharaoh Pepy II—who were not necessarily Pygmies—, and those of the much later Nilotic landscapes—according to Janni, a ‘trasposizione caricaturale degli autentici cacciatori’ of crocodiles. There is no sure proof, I think, that the Pygmies of the Greek legend correspond with any ethnographical reality, although misunderstood or deformed by epic poetry: as the hominids of prehistoric anthropology, they signified—but in a fabulous dimension—a status of an extreme chronological and geographical distance, a sort of prehistoric premise to the human condition.

According to Hesiod they are issue of both Gaea (the Earth) and Poseid on (the Sea), therefore elementary and primary creatures—in

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5 Merkelbach-West, fr. 150, 9–12, 18–19.