

OLD NISA AND GREEK ART IN TRANSITION

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Summary. This paper deals with the 48 ivory rhytons found at Old Nisa, in the Square House. Questions concerning rhytons involve with several domains and raise different problems: which was the centre of production, how and why the rhytons were carried to Old Nisa, when and for which purchaser they were produced and, finally, what their function was. In this work, attention will be paid to the stylistic analysis, by considering style as a conscious form of communication and self-representation, as well as iconography. The detailed analysis, along with the direct examination of the material, allowed several groups (named “style-groups”) to be determined on a stylistic and generally formal basis. On the basis of these principles every figure in each rhyton has been analyzed. In order to carry out an adequate and clear research, it was chosen to adopt a very simple but effective pattern of analysis, recently suggested for the study of 1 st millennium Near Eastern ivories. In a heterogeneous cultural system, such as the after-Alexander Orient, characterized by extreme political and economic variability, the creation of a generally understandable communication code became essential. The above analysis shows that more than one generation of craftsmen worked on ivory rhytons. The subsequent ones assimilated what had already been experimented by the previous ones, and adapted it to new formal conceptions of representation for which, evidently, the Hellenistic schemes were, in the end, no longer useful.

Key words: rhytons, Nisa, style, art.

Резюме. В статье речь идет о 48 ритонах из слоновой кости, найденных на Старой Нисе, в так называемом Квадратном доме. Вопросы, касающиеся ритонов, затрагивают несколько сфер и ставят разные проблемы: где находился центр их производства, как и почему ритоны были перенесены в Старую Нису, когда и для какого заказчика они были изготовлены и, наконец, какова была их функция. В данной статье внимание уделено стилистическому анализу, рассматриваются стиль как сознательная форма общения и саморепрезентации, а также иконография. Детальный анализ наряду с непосредственным рассмотрением материала позволил выделить несколько групп (названных «стилевыми группами») на стилистической и в целом формальной основе. На основе этих принципов проанализирована каждая фигура в каждом ритоне. Для проведения адекватного и ясного исследования было выбрано очень простое, но эффективное направление анализа, недавно предложенное для изучения ближневосточной слоновой кости первого тысячелетия. В гетерогенной культурной системе, такой как послеалександровский Восток, характеризующийся крайней политической и экономической изменчивостью, стало необходимым создание общепонятного коммуникативного кода. Нижеприведенный анализ показывает, что над ритонами из слоновой кости работало не одно поколение мастеров. Последующие ассимилировали то, что уже было опробовано предыдущими, и приспособили это к новым формальным концепциям представления, для которых, очевидно, эллинистические схемы в конце концов уже не годились.

Ключевые слова: ритоны, Ниса, стиль, искусство.

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During the excavations carried out by the YuTAKE expedition at Old Nisa in 1948 (Masson, 1950. P. 547; 1953. P. 149-157; 1955; 1974; 1978; Masson, Pugachenkova, 1982; Pilipko, 2001), 48 ivory rhytons were found on the bench of room XI of the Square House (Pilipko, 1996; 2008), along with fragmentary pieces of ivory furniture elements (Pappalardo, 2010).

As it's well-known, the study of these rhytons raised several questions concerning different archaeological aspects: what was the centre of production, how and why were the rhytons taken (if they were taken) to Old Nisa, when and for which purchaser were they produced and, finally, what was their function (Bernard, 1985; 1991; Invernizzi, 1999; 2001; 2007; 2009; Manassero, 2007; 2008). In this paper, I would like to summarize main questions concerning some artistic aspect, useful in order to clarify chronological and cultural issues. The strong Hellenistic features of some Nisa rhytons have often given rise to a tendency to place this material, together with other famous pieces of art deriving from several Asian sites, among the examples of the pure Hellenized Asian production, linking them to more or less Hellenizing contexts (Bernard, 1985; 1991). They, in fact, have until now been considered as a non-distinguished and homogeneous corpus of material that was dated and stylistically classified uniformly.

From the research carried out (Pappalardo, 2010), an evident heterogeneity inside the corpus has emerged: each specimen is in fact characterized by formal and stylistic peculiarities which make each rhyton an almost unique work of art.

Methodological Issues

It can happen, studying ancient cultures, that we are naturally brought to apply modern interpretative categories to all the objects carrying aesthetic value, looking at the past through modern lenses. Often it isn't kept in mind that what we in present days define "art" was differently conceived by those producing it in the past. On this respect it would be fundamental the distinction between art and artistic industry, the last expression indicating a serial production of objects characterized by figurative properties (Winter, 1995). In the different conception of art in the past lay several difficulties in carrying out analysis concerning meaning and impact of discreet images.

In comparison with Eastern art, the Greek world was critically viewed already in the past (Pappalardo, 2018): technical details, use of colours, proportions, facial expressions, movement, were from time to time critically appreciated and the authors of precise works of art were celebrated in particular when their creations seemed to reproduce the reality (Winter, 2002). There are, then, examples in ancient Greece of the reasoned interpretation of the artworks both from philological-stylistic and moral points of view, possibly connected with judgment of authenticity: some sort of consciousness of the making art. In general, art production is strongly linked with categories as technical and aesthetic competences and preferences as well as by the opportunities afforded by the social context.

The exigency of terminological clarifications rises prominently in order to define several levels of style. The distinction between those formal traits ascribed to individual artists (or craftsman), those ascribed to cultural regions and those ascribed to socio-political sectors that are within or stretched across cultural regions. The term *style* rises issues of meanings and attribution: today we speak about *Italian style* or *individual style* making no terminological distinction. The study of ancient arts, nevertheless, imposes to clarify at what level features shared (or not) by different artistic productions must be considered as a result of a more or less conscious will (Winter, 1998; Pappalardo, 2018).

In general, the trend of researching the *unconscious signature* of the artist through the analysis of those features not conditioned by external influences, representing nothing but the natural way of doing of an individual, characterized an important period of Western art history. The most famous example of this approach was given by Giovanni Morelli who carried out the analysis of micro-details in works-of art with the aim to find those features that were prerogative of just one "person" (Morelli, 1892). The same approach is almost common in the study of Greek art history. John Beazley (Beazley, 1951) adopted an almost similar model in studying Attic pottery, by analysing the single variations or repetitions detectable in the figures represented on vases.

Detailed analysis of the rhytons, directly carried out at the State Museum of Turkmenistan, Hermitage Museum, Pushkin Museum and Oriental Cultures Museum, allowed the distinction of several stylistic and iconographic groups.

In order to make an accurate stylistic study, it was chosen to adopt a very simple but effective pattern of analysis, recently suggested for the study of 1st millennium Near Eastern ivories. It was substantially founded on the necessity to clarify some terminological issues, essential for the process of classification of the material (Winter, 2005):

The first phase of research consisted in isolating meaningful units, consistent with the characteristics of the material at issue: Old Nisa ivory rhytons: 1. Hand, 2. Workshop, 3. Centre, 4. Region (area culturally coherent and defined on an ethnic and/or linguistic base), 5. Period. The second phase consisted in articulating the investigation from more specific to more general characteristics:

1. Indicative of the hand:

a) individual facial features; b) proportion of facial features; c) proportions of bodies; d) details of dresses or body treatment; e) "additive elements" (equivalent to "signature elements", of limited distribution, co-varying with stylistic evidence for a single hand); f) relation with the edges and the spatial field; g) composition; h) degrees of overlap of elements/figures; i) positive-negative space proportions; j) carving techniques; k) overall judgments of quality.

2. Indicative of the "style-group":

a) commonality of theme despite recognition of hands;

b) "conscious signature elements" which could transcend hand; c) general compositional principles; d) additive elements (mostly decorative); e) similarity in some facial and bodily features, difference in others; f) range of carving techniques; g) mounting techniques;

h) judgment of quality (with a broader range of performance than that of individuals).

Point 2 of the model schematically here exposed, as it can be seen, is adapted in order to define "style-groups".

The definition of "style-group" could be "the amount of several artefacts which, although not sharing all the characterizing features defined unconscious signatures (hand), are joined by elements of a more generic nature, these latter not detectable among other artefacts belonging to the corpus and, then, ascribed to other groups". So, it is obvious that specimens produced by the same hand must be placed into the same group, while objects belonging to one group were not necessarily produced by the same hand. Furthermore, the order and the sequence of the groups are not casual. They are based on the similarity criteria of different elements constituting the groups themselves.

On the base of the aforementioned model of analysis, the interpretation of the rhytons as objects "generically" linked with the Hellenistic influences on Asian production of the 2nd century B.C. has turned out to be inconsistent: a large amount of hands worked on the rhytons, and an internal line of development has been traced, carrying important chronological implications (Pappalardo, 2010).

Furthermore, the adoption of a precise "way of doing" things can involve important cultural-ideological issues, sometimes better detectable than in the study of the iconography (Winter, 1998, P. 55; 2005. P. 23; Pappalardo, 2019; 2020). The style often reflects a more or less conscious choice of sharing a precise language. This kind of choice should originate from particular needs, at the base of which there are ideological assumptions of the group commissioning the works of art. Not only the iconography, then, but the style is also a fundamental indicator of the image that the purchaser wanted to present for himself. On the basis of these principles every figure in each rhyton has been analyzed.

Matters of style in the Nisa Rhytons

I'll begin by briefly describing those artistic aspects already known, including a particular group of rhytons in which the influence of Hellenistic art is evident in both iconographic and stylistic choices. Here also, however, it would be appropriate to specify which of the Hellenistic models inspired the production of Nisa.

A large group of friezes is decorated with figures that seem to calque the models typical of early Hellenism (or, better, late Classicism), that period in which the experience of Lysippus and his school left an indelible mark on formal schemes¹.

The artist of rhyton n. 22, for example, pays attention to detail and sense of movement. Particular care is taken in rendering proportion and equilibrium, as well as the natural location in space (Fig. 1).

To cite a few features, we can look at the figure of Hermes, which is very naturalistic and dynamic. The formal scheme, particularly in the groin area, recalls a grave stone from Ai Khanum (Bernard, 1974. P. 125, n. 35; 1972. P. 623-625, fig. 13), in which a young man

with petasus is depicted, perhaps alluding to Hermes himself, in his role as *Psychopompos* (Fig. 2)².

The figure of Aphrodite is also calqued from Greek models: the goddess is depicted with the same iconography on 15 rhytons.

The prototype from which the model was taken, probably lies in the tradition of the "Venus Pudica" (Agen Aphrodite) (Reinach, 1897-1930. P. 369), which inspired a large range of terracottas in the Mediterranean basin³. The face of the goddess and the heaviness of some anatomical details reveal without a doubt the production in an Asian context.

Worthy of note is the representation of Apollo on rhyton n. 22, which is unfortunately damaged, for which an iconographic model different from that adopted on the other friezes is used.

The position of the arms and legs follows the classical models, and once again recalls the manner of Lysippus, visible, for example, on the *Tespies Eros* (Figs. 3-4)⁴.

Among those ivory friezes in which the figures are calqued from Hellenistic iconographic prototypes, there is a clear difference in the style in which analogous subjects are rendered.

I cite the case of the representation of Demeter. On rhyton n. 22, the figure abandons the "relief-like" construction through some sort of spiral movement, obtained by changing the position of the head and of the right arm, which is bent across the torso (Pappalardo, 2010. P. 147). On the other friezes, instead, Demeter presents a formal and iconographic scheme in which the body is shown in an almost frontal view.

A slight change in the position of the head and the bent right arm clearly links the Demeter of rhyton n. 30 to the Cybele depicted on the well-known plaque from Ai-Khanum (Figs. 5-6). The iconographic model coincides exactly, both in the rendering of the dress and in the shape of the kalathos on the head. What changes, however, is the sense of movement that the figure of the frieze communicates through her protruding left hip. The models shown on another group of rhytons belong to a different phase of Hellenistic art. I refer to that mature period in which famous sculptures such as those decorating the altar of Pergamon were produced.

An example is the representation of Poseidon and Zeus on rhytons n. 52 and 65 (Fig. 7). With regard to Poseidon, the adherence to the model of Poseidon of Melos⁵, which was widespread in the eastern Mediterranean, is evident. As for style, however, note the particular projection of the right hip, resulting in an S-shaped curve, from the side to the torso.

² In the case of the Hermes' figure consistent comparisons can be made with works as the small bronze of Anticitera (Lippold, 1950. P. 274; Bieber, 1961. P. 12, Giuliano, 1987. P. 701-702; Stewart, 1990. P. 185).

³ Examples of the type are known from Syria and Palestine (Jentel, 1997. P. 156, cat. n. 31-33).

⁴ The model, which had very fortune, can be dated between 338 and 335 BC. The figure of rhyton 22 shares with the original of Lysippus the evident protruding hip, as it is visible in the torso of Musei Capitolini in Rome (Mustilli, 1939. P. 83-85, num. 4, plt. L, 201; Moreno, 1988. P. 471, fig. 9)

⁵ See the statue of the Athens National Museum (Bieber, 1961. Fig. 684).

¹ Rhytons n. 22, 23, 27, 28, 29, 77 belong to this group.



Fig. 1. Rhyton 22
Ритон 22



Fig. 2. Relief from Ai Khanum
Рельеф из Ай Ханум



Fig. 3. Rhyton 22
Ритон 22



Fig. 4. Torso of the Musei Capitolini
Тор из Музея Капитолини



Fig. 5. Rhyton 30
Ритон 30



Fig. 6. Plaque
from Ai Khanum
Плакетка из Ай Ханум



Fig. 7. Rhyton 65
Ритон 65



Fig. 8. Tetradrachm of Antimachus I
Тетрадрахма Антимаха



Fig. 9. Fragment of cornice (Rhyton 22?)
Фрагмент карниза (Ритон 22?)

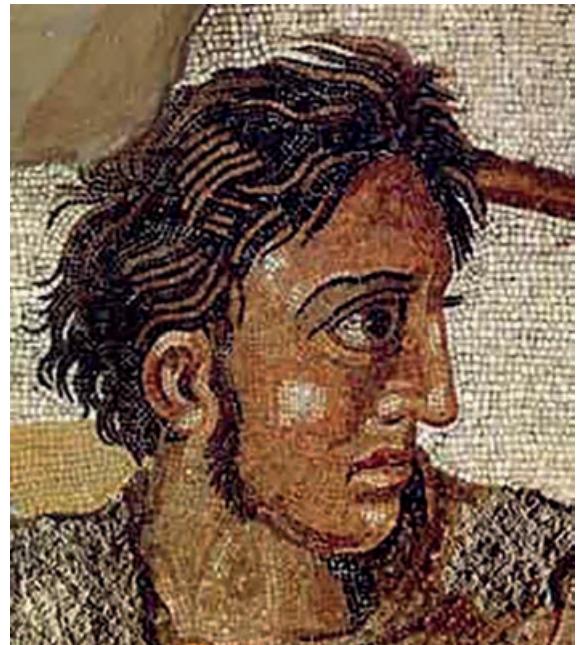


Fig. 10. Alexander the Great (Mosaic of Pompeii)
Александр Великий (Мозаика из Помпеи)

This pronounced sinuosity furthermore contrasts with the rigidity of the right leg that carries the weight of the body.

The same iconographic outcome can be observed on Poseidon, depicted on a tetradrachm of Antimachus the first (fig. 8)⁶. An identical model was used by the artisan

⁶ The coin can be dated in the 185-170 BC and carries the inscription "Antimachus the divine king" (Crossroads, 1992. P. 85, no. 85).

of rhyton n. 65 in order to represent Zeus, by replacing the trident with a scepter and adding the thunderbolt in his left hand.

Some of the male faces, in which special attention is paid to the eyebrow area, also seem to refer to middle Hellenism. The eyebrows are very thick and prominent. A fold in the center, at the nasal root, gives a particular expression, emphasized by the strong chiaroscuro inside the orbit.

The Hellenistic taste inspiring the production of the Nisa rhytons is evident.

Study of the corpus, figure by figure and, mostly, fragment by fragment, revealed how astonishing can be in some cases the links between these objects, namely those produced to the East of the Caspian Sea, and the western prototypes. I cite just one of the fragments studied in Ashgabat, which surely originally belonged to the cornice of rhyton n. 22 (Fig. 9). The head is quite certainly the product of the same hand of the aforementioned rhyton, and is the expression of the passage between the late Classicism and the Hellenistic period. Influences of Skopas' style are evident, in particular in the rendering of wide and deep eyes and long hair. The expression of the faces, along with the general structure of the head, very recall the figure of Alexander the Great (Fig. 10) as was depicted in the famous mosaic at Pompei, to be probably connected with an original painting of Philoxenos of Eretria (*Bianchi Bandinelli*, 1977. P. 471-477; *Hoesh*, 1996. P. 456-457; *Moreno*, 2000).

Few of the Nisa friezes seem to reflect a more Italic taste, particularly in the rendering of the faces. Rhyton n. 18 (Fig. 11) is one of the more beautiful pieces of the corpus in terms of finesse of carving. Originally interpreted as "sacrifice of the horse", the scene on its frieze most probably depicts a very common theme in the Italic context of late Hellenism: the farewell of the dead before undertaking the last trip, to the afterlife (*Pappalardo*, 2010. P. 212). The canonical subjects, frequent on the Etruscan Sarcophagi are represented (*Brunn*, 1916; *Pfuhl, Möbius*, 1979. P. 340, 361). In particular, the two principal figures of the theme, a man and a woman hand in hand, communicate a slight sense of nostalgia. The presence of a caparisoned horse shows us that the travel of this individual will be the travel of a hero.

I will not dwell on the importance of the meaning of this frieze, and on its ideological implications in the general context of the Old Nisa rhytons. But I would like to stress how many routes some Greek models traveled across, and what can be intriguing when trying to trace them. On the frieze, a female figure viewed from the back is depicted (Fig. 12). The anatomical details are soft and full. The dress clings to the upper part of her body and unfolds softly between her legs. The composition of the figure reveals a genuine tendency to illusionism. The girl moves freely toward the back of the frieze, according to a scheme well-known in Greek art and adopted in order to produce several iconographic models. An example of the adoption of this scheme comes from Begram (*Hackin*, 1954. No. 128, figs. 293, 389). It is visible on one of the plaster casts from the treasury, in which a naked man is depicted with his right arm extended forward (Fig. 13). So, in Begram and at Nisa, the same compositional scheme is used in order to render different subjects. And we cannot exclude that the female figure, unfortunately scraped off, was originally represented with her right arm also extended forward.

Hellenistic models and formal schemes inspired the figures briefly described above, and many others, to varying degrees. The same subject recurs on the Nisa friezes, several times with various changes. Different hands can be discerned.

For each group of subjects, or even of complex scenes, it is possible to reconstruct the original model. This is then locally adapted on the base of the contingent needs and of the individual competences.

Sometimes, however, the same model, based on a well-defined iconography, appears to reflect different artistic traditions. In these cases, the style provides more information about the cultural identities than iconography.

The figure of Zeus on rhyton n. 30 (Fig. 14), for example, wears the same clothes and has the same attribute displayed on other friezes. However, it is clearly carved according to different formal principles.

The chin is slightly raised, giving a different inclination to the head. If compared to the other examples, the Zeus on frieze n. 30 show a three-quarters view of his torso, with a slightly protruding swollen belly. The movement of the left leg, bent and moved forward, and the bent left arm, respond properly to this composition of the figure.

Although the iconography is not the same, the formal scheme seems very similar to that which inspired the figure of Vajrapani on a Gandharian relief housed at the Musée Guimet (*Bussagli*, 1984. P. 144; *Crossroads*, 1992. P. 125, num. 128 (I-II sec. AD) (Fig. 15).

Similar remarks could be made about a particular iconographic model, adopted at Old Nisa to render different subjects, depending on the represented theme.

The figure of a bearded man resting on a long *pedum* is, for example, represented on friezes depicting the cycle of "dodekatheoi" in order to represent Hephaestus (*Pappalardo*, 2010. P. 132-134)⁷. By closely observing the different representations of Hephaestus, it is evident that they were carved by *different hands*, but with the aim of representing the same subject, the Greek god.

The same model is also depicted on rhyton n. 47 (Fig. 16), in a completely different iconographic context, which aims to celebrate literature and philosophy. Just in this case, one among 15, the subject shares with the original Western model, not only the iconography, but also the meaning.

An accurate analysis, dedicated entirely to the exegesis of the rhyton 47 was carried out by Paul Bernard (*Bernard*, 1985). The focus of the interpretation is the figure of an old man resting on a long *pedum*, interpreted by the first publishers such as Hephaestus (*Masson, Pugachenkova*, 1982. P. 95), based on the analogy of the general scheme with the god of the forges depicted on the friezes of the twelve gods. Upon identification with Hephaestus, Bernard replaces that with Hesiod, native of Boeotia, who, as well known, received the poetic vocation at the feet of the Helicon directly from the Muses (*Hesiod. Theog.*, 22-24; *Callim. Aitia*, frgm. X).

Already in Hellenistic western art, in fact, the old man covered only by a himation resting on a *pedum*, is one of the most recurrent models used in the representation of scenes of literary taste, which celebrate the "toil of thinking" (Fig. 17) (*Zanker*, 2006. P. 65).

⁷ There are several objects in which Hephaestus is depicted at work, just as an example, remember the famous Nola amphora of the Boston Museum, in which the god is in the presence of Thetis, while working tools and finished objects hang in the background (*Brommer*, 1978. P. 207, B3, fig. 9). See also *Mendel*, 1908. P. 509; *Brommer*, 1978. P. 216, I, plt. 30, 3.



Fig. 11. Rhyton 18
Ритон 18



Fig. 12. Rhyton 18
Ритон 18



Fig. 13. Plaster cast from Begram
Гипсовый отпечаток из Бергама



Fig. 14. Rhyton 30
Ритон 30

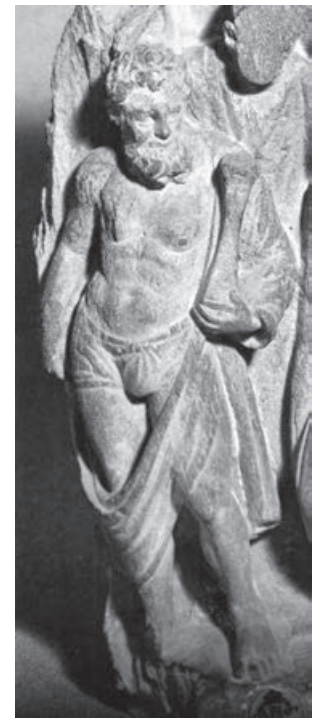


Fig. 15. Vajrapani
on a Gandharian relief
of the Musée Guimet
Вайрапани на гандхарском
рельефе из Музея Гиме

From a stylistic point of view, however, the figure of the frieze on n. 47 introduces new elements in comparison to other friezes. The technique used to depict the curls of the hair and beard seems to be far from the classical Greek one. The same can be said about the faces of the girls depicted in the frieze, who read volumina and write on tablets.

If, indeed, the girls represented on the frieze are inspired by Greek iconographic models (Fig. 18), the ones

usually adopted for the representation of the Muses, there is something in the composition of the drapery, in the soft and full anatomical details, and in the well-defined curls that seems to look to the East. The eyes of the figures carved on rhyton 57 have a shape similar to the ones of the n. 47, being the only difference the pupil, rendered through a small hole. Of a great interest is the absolute identity between the faces of the girls of the rhyton 47 and the projecting heads of the n. 57, closely

remembering the head of Bodhisattva in Bruxelles (*Bus-sagli*, 1984. P. 229)⁸.

A similar phenomenon also concerns the beautiful rhyton n. 76. The frieze depicts a scene of ritual capture. From an iconographic point of view, it could be linked with the Dionysian imagery.

The central figure, seated on a rock, is rendered in archaizing style, and is characterized by fleshy and feminine forms (*Pappalardo*, 2010. P. 217-222). The Greek inscription "ESTIAS" engraved on the horn has, for obvious reasons influenced the interpretation of the subject. I would not exclude, however, that the central figure depicts Dionysus himself, according to the tradition that describes him as *muriòmorfos*, and that often attributes a feminine appearance to him. If this were the case, the ivory figure should have the same meaning as the one depicted with a kantharos in her hand on the golden belt from Tillia Tepe (*Schiltz*, 2007. N. 107.)⁹. The scheme used for the rendering of the crossed legs of the Nisa figure, furthermore, does not seem very different from the one adopted on a Gandharan cosmetic tray in which a girl seated on a sea monster is depicted (*Piacentini, Lippolis*, 2007. N. 228; *Oxus*, 1993. P. 15).

The unusual lumps visible on the heads of some of the huntresses are probably a reference to the Dionysian sphere too. These are small bosses on which a rosette pattern is engraved. In an Asian context, this attribute appears on the Falera found at Dushanbe (*Treuer*, 1958. P. 24-29; 1961. P. 98-109), on the head of a figure commonly interpreted as Dionysus¹⁰. In the Mediterranean context, they adorn the hairstyles of Ariadne and the other members of the cortege of Dionysus. From a stylistic point of view, the formal features inherited from Hellenistic art are revisited according to a new taste.

Once again, the rendering of the hair reflects a non-Greek tradition (Figs. 19-20): the wavy locks frame the face and fall on the shoulders, according to a scheme similar to that observed on the heads of Buddha from Taxila and Lahore (*Ingholt*, 1957. Figs. 499, 544).

The frieze provides, furthermore, interesting comparisons with works from Surkh Kotal.

I refer in particular to the characteristic rendering of the drapery of the huntresses, with wide folds that are flat, slightly hollow in the middle, and end in thick edges. These seem to be completely identical to some fragments of clay sculptures from Surkh Kotal (*Schlumberger*, 1970. Fig. 9).

The frieze of rhyton n. 78, in which the figures are characterized by an evident heaviness, is far from the Hellenistic style. The Greek hairstyles with upper krobylos were replaced by flowing hair already in the previous frieze (*Pappalardo*, 2010. P. 160-165). In this case

a new element appears, a sort of twisted rim adorning the forehead. The hair is long since it ends in soft curls above her shoulders. The face of the young girl who leads an animal to sacrifice is wide and slightly flattened. Her forehead is low, and her eyes are almond-shaped. Her head is set on a massive and wide neck, bordered below by the semicircular neckline of her dress. The compositional scheme does not seem to be very different from the one of the two figures (Dionysus and Ariadne) depicted in the golden clasp from Tillia Tepe (*Schiltz*, 2007. P. 176-177)¹¹.

Figures rendered in frontal view appear on this frieze. They are certainly different from those represented according to the classical composition of the body, based on the scheme of "contrapposto". The frieze on n. 8 provides an example of this compositional scheme: the bearded men near the altar, in a Dionysian scene depicting a sacrifice (Fig. 21). In this case, a large flared dress substitutes nebris and hymation, reserving only a small portion of the cloth for any reference to movement. This last is almost completely lost in the representation of the double flute player on rhyton n. 78 (*Pappalardo*, 2010. P. 173). Only a distant echo of pure Asiatic Hellenism remains on the frieze n. 81.

The Aphrodite inspired by the model of the "Venus Pudica" is replaced by a rather flat and almost two-dimensional female figure. She rests her left arm on a low pillar, according to an iconographic scheme that is not very different from the origin of the two figures known as the "Aphrodite of Bactria" and "Aphrodite Kushana" (*Marshal*, 1951. Plt. 191, nos. 96-97)¹². This latter, in particular, has in common with the ivory figure an arched engraving at the pubis, left uncovered by the himation.

The face is small, the forehead framed by curls with a middle parting, on his head raises a high krobylos. Deep grooves separate the mouth from the cheeks. The general scheme recalls the one of a female figure depicted on the golden reliquary in the British Museum (*Cribb*, 1985. P. 83; *Harle*, 1986. P. 25, plt. 9; *Tissot*, 1985. Fig. 33)¹³. On the same frieze another girl in frontal view is depicted with both arms bent. She wears a chiton and hymation.

The frontal view makes the figure very expressive, while the general composition recalls that of the stat-

⁸ Furthermore, the drapery rendering system is one of the most interesting tools for the investigation of artistic production techniques in Asia in this period (*Schlumberger*, 1960. P. 158-160).

⁹ The figure of the belt, in his hands holds a kantharos. The clothing is that of the Hope type Dionysus, with a short tunic. The *nebris* is missing. The hair is curled up in krobylos on the head. What is striking about the representation of the god on the golden belt is precisely the strongly feminine characterization, evident as well as in clothing, in the body's treatment.

¹⁰ Abdullaev points out that comparisons can be found for these only later, for example in Sogdiana on an applique from Erkourgan dating back to the 5th century. AD (*Abdullaev*, 2005. P. 230-231).

¹¹ Another singular feature which associates the female figure on the rhyton 78 with the Bactrian production of the early years of the vulgar era, is given by the rendering of the rounded, almost spherical, and swollen breasts. This type of expedient leads to a milieu not far from the one which inspired Begram's production, although stylistically completely different.

¹² Of the so called Aphrodite Kushana, actually better interpreted as Psyche, several examples come from the nearby Golden Hill (Tillia Tepe), from the Indo-Parthian levels of Taxila. The state of conservation of the ivory figure, unfortunately scraped off along the torso, doesn't allow a detailed analysis of the upper portion of the body. Therefore, it is not possible to ascertain the modeling of the breast which, in my opinion, could have provided interesting information about possible links with the Afghan production of the early centuries of the modern Era.

¹³ In particular, the female figures on the gold artefact, in addition to re-proposing the krobylos hairstyle which, given the frontal representation, is placed right above the head, are characterized by the peculiar relationship between the narrow and slightly rounded forehead and the small and strongly shaded eyes which give to the gaze a certain fixity.

uette of Hariti, from Herat (Figs. 22-23) (Crossroads, 1992. P. 108-109, nos. 111)¹⁴.

The last female figure of the frieze is a very enigmatic subject. A woman entirely wrapped in a heavy mantle, holding a large torch. Her dress is rendered through a cascade of subsequent concentric arched folds that entirely cover her right side (Fig. 24).

The conception of the dress is new. Its peculiarity consists in the clearly non-Greek taste for rendering the folds. Rather than resembling Greek drapery, they in fact recall once again the clay sculpture of Surkh Khotal and, more distantly, some productions such as the relief depicting the death of the Buddha of Peshavar (*Ingholt*, 1957. Fig. 137), or the famous statue of Karachi (*Ingholt*, 1957. Fig. 356).

Conclusions

The fast conquest and the short-lived Macedonian empire in the Orient were followed by a slow but inexorable cultural and social transformation that, to a greater or lesser extent, involved regions as far as India, Iran and Turkmenistan.

Such a process of transformation was accomplished together with one of codification of a new figurative language, exceptional for its uniqueness. This was adapted from time to time to the communication needs of those peoples whose cultural roots were sunk in substrates as diverse as were the cultural and the geographical realities they belonged to. The formal elements of the Hellenic matrix flourished in these regions in parallel with the Greek language, providing new means of expression. These were formed over centuries in the Mediterranean basin, the result of a process of human maturation and philosophical, as well as artistic endeavours that since the end of the Bronze Age had led to an awareness of the inseparability of art from the human experience. The adoption of Hellenistic representative models becomes a clear message of identity, mostly when applied to the figurative language of the court.

In the mean time, nevertheless, it has provided a substantial contribution to the formation of local artistic productions, both those related to political propaganda, and those in the service of a spiritual-religious message. It is in this complex cultural context, that of a deep historical change, that the production of the Nisa rhytons must be considered. So, if their meaning is closely related to the role of Hellenism in the creation of an art form for the court, it is essential to keep in mind the diversity of their value, and the ethnic variety of the neighboring populations, from Gandhara to Bactria.

The brief excursus we made through just few Nisa rhytons, showed as the presence of Hellenistic features on them is just one among numerous aspects. As style can be used as an active form of communication, it could be manipulated, like the iconography, in order to convey information according to a precise will of self-representation. On this respect, the concept of different levels of style rises more prominently (style can be, in fact,

manipulated up to a certain degree, that is until it is the result of a conscious choice in "doing things") (*Winter*, 2005. P. 23).

In this case style assumes an explicit role, as iconography does, that of conveying messages about identity. Issues concerning cultural identity and intercultural exchange rose in the public agenda of the twenty-first century, due to some critical processes of growing political and economic integration and/or conflict. As stated by Chr. Uehlinger and C. Suter, "migration research and diaspora studies have contributed to making social and cultural identity one of the most investigated subjects of contemporary social-scientific research" (*Suter, Uehlinger*, 2005. Pl. XVII).

We know that cultural groups, at several levels, adopt codes of self-identification through the adoption of precise visual codes and schemes. The bulk of visual information provided by people belonging to different cultural domains can concur to define and, to a certain extent, distinguish centres and peripheries, us vs others. Then, both in modern and ancient times as well, the distinction between East and West, in terms of culture, beliefs, behaviour and images, led to different approaches to cultural studies.

This approach considers "Images as Media", and provides the fundamental base for the study of ancient societies in general, of cultural interconnection in particular. Without any doubt, images can some time constitute a valid historical source, being part of a complex communication process within and between ancient societies.

What is fundamental to consider, nevertheless, is the process of evaluation of the objects *per se*, as items carrying precise function in precise contexts. In the meantime, as an object's meaning can reasonably change on the base of the respective context of use or interpretation, also the value of a precise iconography can be imagined as differently viewed in several circumstances.

As I recently stated (*Pappalardo*, 2018), figured objects of art can be discussed in their triple function as artefacts (that is to say, products of craftsmen who relied on raw material, practiced their skills, followed models of style and defined repertoires), as visual media (i.e. in terms of communication), and as reflections of social and cultural identities, inter-cultural contact and artistic emulation. Otherwise, when style coincides with hand, then principles of unconsciousness come into play.

If, on the one hand, the evident change in the formal schemes, style and iconography, detected in the Nisa corpus, can be explained through the different cultural matrixes involved in the production of the rhytons, on the other, it could also reflect a more substantial process of transformation, involving at the base the concept of art and its meaning. A mutation, then, in the function of the images and in their value, whose origin could lie in the change of the exigencies of representation themselves, linked with phenomena of local re-elaboration and the experimentation which generated a change in shape and meaning. In any case, the ivory rhytons from Old Nisa completely reflect the phenomenon of exchanges and interconnections that occurs in this complex period, taking part in a coherent system involving different cultural areas.

¹⁴ In addition to the iconographic similarities, in particular recognizable in the neckline of the dress, in the belt under the chest, in the position of the himation on the hips and in the hairstyle, the shape and features of the face and hair must be noted.



Fig. 16. Rhyton 47
Ритон 47



Fig. 17. Pompei Fresco
Фреска из Помпеи

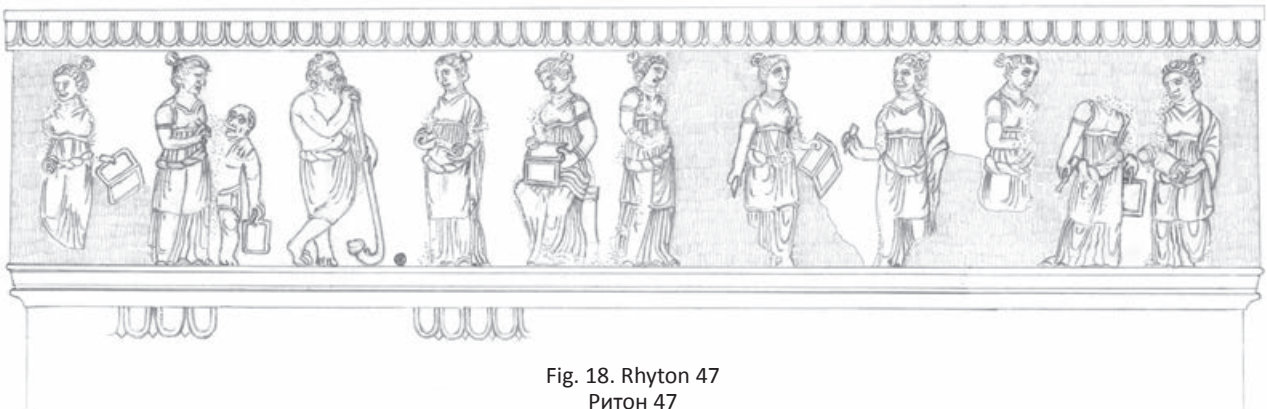


Fig. 18. Rhyton 47
Ритон 47

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Fig. 19. Rhyton 76
Ритон 76



Fig. 20. Buddha head from Taxila
Голова Будды из Таксилы



Fig. 21. Rhyton 8
Ритон 8



Fig. 22. Rhyton 81
Ритон 81



Fig. 23. Statuette of Hariti,
from Herat
Статуэтка Харити из Герата



Fig. 24. Rhyton 81
Ритон 81

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