

Nympholepsy: the role of water in frenzy and other alterate states. Nymphaea in Hispania: from Greece caves to Moroccan ribats.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the role of water in rites and processes of alteration of consciousness, related to two types of monuments of the Spanish patrimonial landscape: Roman nymphaea and Andalusian marabouts. The essence around which both sorts of architectures was developed is divine inspiration. And both show the same structural features: a place for recollection with facilities for other purposes added later on; and closeness to water or even a conscious use of its qualities. We shall see the relationship between water in movement, naturally or artificially, and divine intoxication, fundamental characteristics shared by the cults we intend to research: Greek nympholepts and Muslim eremites. In order to do so, we shall summarize the most interesting sites: ancient shrines to the nymphs in karstic grottos; Roman fairy-tale-like fountains and gardens; hydraulic buildings in Roman Hispania; Christian assimilation of such activities and powerful places in monasteries and chapels; and Moroccan marabouts, of which there is a spectacular example in Granada.

Keywords: Water; Divine, Intoxication, Nympholepsy, Marabouts.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are places which invite to recollection. Here in Granada, in spite of all the urban and turistic hustle, we find them abundantly. In the Alhambra, already in the Court of the Myrtles, leaning on the wall of the old mosque, one can sense the *numen* which accompanies us all the way through the Patio of the Lions up to the exit, in the Generalife gardens. It is the water, beautifully and symbolically channelled, its sound, the freshness of the air and the sumptuous images shining on the water, reflecting architecture and decorations which seem to be out of this world.

A clacissist cannot help think of nymphs and *nymphaea*, with their forests, fountains and caves. Divine intoxication is a distinct feature in both the cults of these Graeco-Roman divinities and Islamic mysticism. And both revere and use water in their buildings. Let us track these places dedicated to recollection, from ancient sanctuaries, in order to see how water has been used due to its effects on people's emotional state and awareness.

2. WATER AND DIVINE INTOXICATION: CAVES, INSPIRATION AND NYMPHOLEPSY

There is a mythological archetype for this: the nymphs, guardians of spring water and other aspects of the natural world. They are wild and dwell in the fringe, represented by caves and deep forests where senses can not be trusted. They belong to the cult of the gods of art inspiration, drunkenness and divination: Pan, Apollo and Bacchus. Shapeshifting is the most famous characteristic in their mythology, as a mean for camouflage, in stories of unwanted seductions or compensations due to adversities. They preside the imagery of the subversive feminine, related to the great goddesses, such as Demeter, Aphrodite and Artemis.

The most ancient shrines dedicated to them were great karstic grottos, characterized by three elements: a sacred tree or garden at the entrance, a source of water, whether natural, artificial or thermal, and darkness. Such rural temples were soon monumentalized due to the great popularity of their divinities, and began to evolve towards urban architectural types by the end of Classical Antiquity.

In sacred caves, thus, devotees practised rituals for prophecy and possession and there was one especially rare but popular: panolepsy and nympholepsy, an epiphany or a possession by a *numen*, usually a nymph or by Pan himself. Such experience was powerful enough to turn the devotees towards reclusion in the cave, for the rest of their lives or a long period, and dedicated themselves to embellish the place for the divinity. An example is the cave of Vari in Attica, very well preserved, where the nympholept Argeramus of Thera made a garden, built a sanctuary to the nymphs and Apollo Herseus and inscribed in its walls, little songs of praise in hexameter rhythm.

For the understanding of such spiritual expressions, we have used the latest studies in cognitive science of religion and the work of Y. Ustinova in alteration of consciousness in Ancient Greece. For her, mania, 'frenzy or madness', is the Greek term for any alternative state of being and it may well describe the religious expression which we intend to review here, such as Islamic hermits or epiphanic representation of the Virgin Mary and the experience of certain Christian saints. Already in Antiquity, poetic inspiration, divination and states of panic fear or war frenzy were related to madness because they deviate from common sense or perception. They imply hallucinations, dissociation, euphoria and distortion of the personality, self-perception or time. And they can be induced by three basic methods: over-stimulation, sensory deprivation and suggestion such as hypnosis. Let us see how it works in the case of caves:

- firstly, darkness and isolation, favours detachment and forgetfulness of the information which comes from the senses. The way of recollection starts and daily life vanishes along with the mandates of the ego and the personality.
- Secondly, water in movement brings well-being: its sound also induces quietness of the senses and negative ionization purifies the air, breath gets deeper naturally and attention goes towards the diaphragm, the dwelling place of the spirit, already for the Greeks.
- The rituals related to these cults also promote breathing rhythm (processional dances and recitation of hexametrical hymns).
- Soft light confuses the senses even more, creating hallucinations or dream-like states, helped by breath regularization which creates alpha waves in the brain and the heart, fundamental for meditation and dream.
- The space is ready for the mythological symbols to act.
- Along with the architectural embellishment, the combination of colours, aromas of the flowers and plants of the garden, towards a state of aesthetic sublimation equal to love. The brain is intoxicated with natural opiates such as oxycodone and serotonin.

3. NYMPHAEUM: FROM ROME TO HISPANIA, AND ITS CHRISTIAN INHERITANCE

The success of such ritual constructions is demonstrated by its wide use and the spreading of the popularity of the cult of Pan and the nymphs, which remains the same during Hellenism and is inherited with no great modifications by Roman culture. In fact, it is here where the *nymphaeum* is properly born: an architectural stylization of the Greek grotto dedicated to the nymphs as the model for the sacred space dedicated to something very important in Roman times – water.

The term originally had religious connotations but it soon started being used for all kind of hydraulic monuments, in a movement of spreading as follows: from being an extramural phenomenon, related to nature, the bizarre and subversive, it becomes familiar and communal. From public fountains with *exedrae* and shrines to aqueducts and public roads were dedicated to the nymphs. And every luxurious villa had the most beautiful gardens, furnished by artificial grottos, sources of water, pavilions, waterfalls and streams, full of sculptures of satyrs, shells, animals and divinities such as Bacchus or Fortuna.

Such buildings were so powerful and beautiful that persevered during Medieval times and are still in use, in public fountains of *exedra*, *façade* or *niche*. And the famous *nymphaeum* chamber was reborn in Renaissance in examples like Zisa castle, in Palermo, inspired by Moorish architecture, decorated with a garden, rounded archways and vaulted niches.

The reason why these structures were so successful in Roman times is due to Etruscan inheritance, which had a great culture of water: drainage systems of lands, water supply to cities and spas for therapy. A step further allows the birth of hydrotherapy and the development of the Roman baths. The Greeks already had gyms which included pools and steam baths, by the 5th century; however it was the Romans who improved them as places for relaxation, including healing practices and massages.

Hispania was particularly sensitive to all this. The knowledge and use of thermal waters was common from ancient times, especially in the north. There are testimonies of at least twenty six Roman thermal baths, where the nymphs are abundantly mentioned along with autochthonous divinities such as Bormanicus (*bher-, indoeuropean for boiling), Coventina (a Celtic goddess), Edovio (meaning 'he who warms up') or Band (an aquatic Iberian goddess)

Thus, there are all kinds of Roman *nymphaea* in our country: monumental fountains in watermills and aqueducts, shrines to the nymphs in fountains or baths, beautiful chambers and gardens dedicated to them in villas, grottos and oracles. The most interesting example being the Monastery of Saint Eulalia in Lugo (Galicia), an old nymphaeum-oracle dedicated to Cybele, where the chapel was the ancient taurobolium and we still can see the wall painting of the sybils in the shape of birds and Attis represented as a peacock. The nymphaeum, thus, was adopted by Christianity for the imagery and cult of the Virgin and female-saints.

Al-Andalus' legacy: marabouts and Hermitage of Saint Sebastian.

In Andalusia, especially in Granada, we have testimonies of another phenomenon that reminds us of *nymphaea* and *nympholeps*: marabouts, where water also plays an important role in relationship to rapture. It is better known by the nowadays still active web in Morocco called *khaloa*, but it was particularly important in Al-Andalus. The *marabut* was a saint or hermit who secluded himself at a spiritual call; but also the place where that happened and where, after his death, devotees honour him. The importance falls in the fact that it was a specific natural space what triggered his devotion and that the marabout is forced to stay and protect that place as a guardian for the rest of his life. Very often it was due to a military mandate (*ribat*). The spread of Islam between the 8th and the 10th centuries allowed the construction of *ribats* all over the Mediterranean.

However, in our country most of them were turned into churches, mausoleums, reused as barnyards or simply destroyed, even though the devotion was not as easily erasable. *Musein*, *tariqas* and other festivities such as *Asir*, still pervive as 'romerías' (harvest time pilgrimages) and 'cofradías' (brotherhoods).

We are lucky to have in Granada the only marabout preserved in all Spain, the Hermitage of Saint Sebastian, an almohad building from the 13th century which seems to have had political functionalities. It is told that here Boabdil officially surrendered Granada by handing over the keys of the city to Ferdinand and Isabella, under the ancient tree that guarded its entrance.

In spite of the building and its surroundings have been modified over time, its original effect remains. It is still by the Genil river side, which immediately provides negative ionization, a well known feature by Arab architects, along with the little garden which surrounds it. The hustle of the city dims away by the walls which have been built to protect it from the channel and by the Paseo del Salón, a neighboring urban garden. Thus, recollection when entering is guarded, the feeling of going into a sacred grotto. Passing the horseshoe arch, the octagonal chamber is presided by an apollonian Saint Sebastian and a Mary Immaculate. In Andalusia, the majority of temples dedicated to Saint Sebastian were antique Muslim buildings and his iconography induce to think of prior origins. Indeed he is called the "Christian Apollo" for a reason: represented dotted or by grasping darts. And the resemblance of the Virgin Mary to a nymph or Selene, surrounded by cherubines, standing over a crescent moon, brings about the story of Daphne and Apollo, whose love provoked the first inspirational song of the god. Therefore, we find here a summary of the same architectural resources and mythological symbols for recollection and the success in inducing specific cognitive procedures which inspire the same numinous states, after two thousand years.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Somehow, our culture has forgotten the intimacy with the mysterious, the perception of the *numen*. However, it is something which has been cultivated since the very beginnings of our civilization.

We have seen the mythic archetype of such cognitive process in Greek legends and how it has been assimilated by Christian sainthood narrative; or how the Romans extracted the aesthetic sublimity of the cult, for their own decorative purposes. They also exploited the well-being properties of water, which was easily adopted by natives in Hispania, thanks to our own ancient cult of water, especially in the North. At the other side of the Mediterranean, the Muslims, as preservers of Ancient Greece wisdom, developed strong ascetic manifestations and shared with the Roman world a taste for the sophistication which the manipulation of water brings to a society, either for aesthetic, well-being or spiritual purposes.

Therefore, it is in the roots of our perception of reality, guided by the present of water and preserved and hidden for us in the aesthetic experiences which all the monuments discussed present.

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