

‘And then there were none...

*Niobe and her children*



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*The cover picture is an artistic representation of the chemical element Niobium with element symbol Nb and atomic number 41. The element Niobium is next to Tantalum on the periodic table because isolating the pure metal tantalized the chemists. In 1846 a similar element was found and the scientists metaphorically placed the daughter next to her father.*

*The title of the thesis is a loan from Agatha Christie's novel first published in the United Kingdom 1939 with the title 'Ten little niggers' and published in the USA under a different name due to reasons of political and ethnic sensitivity.*



## Abstract

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How can a myth for human arrogance and slaughter have a consolatory effect?

Niobe, a proud mother of six sons and an equal number of daughters, claimed superiority over Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis. As a consequence for this insolence, she was deprived from her motherhood; the divine archers slaughtered her children one by one.

In every handbook about ancient Greek mythology, this myth of Niobe is referred to as a typical example of hubris but a study in the ancient sources and archaeological material also points to different directions. This paper constitutes an attempt to deconstruct Niobe, perceive the myth in a way close to the one the ancient contemporaries did without the modern culturally determined preconceptions.

The research is text-based to its greater extent. Four carefully selected passages belonging to a variety of literary genres within the temporal limit of the Archaic and Classical Era are presented, reconstructed (when applicable) and commented. At a second stage, painted pottery is entered into the discussion. A set of eight vases, contemporary to the texts, is analyzed in terms of context, utility and choice of theme.

Through this procedure, an insight into the web of themes weaved around the core of the heroine's audacity is given and Niobe is illustrated not only as an insolent mortal, but also as a proud queen, a crestfallen mother, an archetype of grief and an example of courage.

Keywords: Greek mythology, Niobe, Niobids, hubris, deconstruction, mythological example, tragedy, Attic black-figure pottery, Attic red-figure pottery, Italian red-figure pottery

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### 1.1. Previous Research

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The red thread of any research regarding myth and imagery during classical antiquity has as starting point the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. In the case of the myth of Niobe the suggested bibliographical section reveals the lack of major works.<sup>1</sup> Up to date, there has only been one general work published in 1964 by R.M. Cook under the title *Niobe and her children*.

In his inaugural lecture, Cook examined the treatment of the myth of Niobe through classical antiquity by demonstrating a brief and solid overview of the relevant literary sources and artistic representations with main focus on sculpture. Despite the fact that he provided a most comprehensive guide of the distribution of the theme in ancient art, he had the tendency to draw conclusions on material whose interpretation was tangible and he has not avoid falling into generalizations.

The first stage of the discussion is text-based and it commences with the appearance of the myth of Niobe in the Homeric *Iliad*. No proper study of the epic poem can be conducted without consulting the monograph *Homeric Researches* published in 1949 by the foremost scholar Johannes Kakridis. Kakridis applied his own method of research and interpretation on the treatment of the myth. He scrutinized the contextual logic, the Homeric innovations, the contradictory patterns that appeared within the narration, as well as the function of myth as mythological example with consolatory essence.

Kakridis' observations introduced a new era in the study of Niobe with the brightest example of M.M. Willcock. Willcock published the paper *Mythological Paradeigma in the Iliad* in 1964 using the otherwise neglected myth of Niobe as one of the major key-studies in his inquiry of Homeric mythological examples. The same pattern was followed by R. Rebel in his paper *Apollo as a model of Achilles* in 1990 and C. Schmitz in *'Denn auch Niobe...Die Bedeutung der Niobe-Erzählung in Achills Rede (Ω 599-620)* in 2001 where the paradigmatic intent of Niobe was the core of the discussions. Finally, Wong, in

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<sup>1</sup> See *LIMC* Vol.6.1 1992, 909.

his article *Hubris & Nemesis: A Correlational Analysis* in 2012 examined the myth from a different perspective. He isolated the concept of hubris, described his so-called “hubris formula” and applied it on a variety of classical myths, including the account of Niobe.

Moving on to tragedy, the sources are significantly older and narrower. In the case of the Aeschylean *Niobe*, the research has been limited to the collection and translation of the fragments that can be attributed to the play. Such attempt was first made by Herbert Weir Smyth in *Aeschylus Vol.2* in 1924 with the presentation of the fragments as published in *Tragicorum Græcorum fragmenta* by A. Nauck in 1889. This presentation was accompanied by a short introductory note about the probable place, progress and ending of the play, the characters, as well as a brief description of the myth of Niobe and its variations.

Almost twenty years later, in 1940, Denys Lionel Page published the first edition of *Select Papyri* where he expressed in a detailed way his own views regarding the attribution of some very questionable lines to their speakers and also provided with some comprehensive comments and translation. Having this information available, A.D. Fitton Brown in his paper *Niobe* of 1954 combined the fragments with the aim of producing a reconstruction of the play. Despite the relative flow, some of the author’s positions cannot be supported by the actual text; the result has been empirical to a great extent. The most modern research on this tragedy has been made by Sommerstein in *Aeschylean Tragedy* in 1996, where he devoted a short but concise text regarding the content and the ideas of divine malevolence and human responsibility as illustrated in the passages.

Similar is the case with Sophoclean *Niobe*. The most extensive and detailed work should be attributed to R. Carden. In his book *Papyrus fragments of Sophocles*, published in 1974, Carden presented the fragments that could plausibly be ascribed to Sophocles’ lost play, explaining the reasons for such conclusions and providing a word-by-word analysis of each fragment with lexical and grammatical comments and all possible interpretations. Moreover, the author included a most useful appendix outlining the development of the legend within literature and the most common variations concerning the number of the children, the location of the slaughter and the existence or not of any survivors.

The treatment of the myth of Niobe in pottery occupies a small place in the greater research on iconography, especially in the case of the attic vase-painting. Any descriptions and observations have been included in general works regarding the classification, interpretation and style of Greek vases. The combination of the two major sources, *LIMC* and Beazley Archive, set the foundations for the generation of a substantial part of the second stage of the discussion.

In *LIMC* Vol.6.1 published in 1992, M. Schmidt and W. Geominy provided commentaries of the artistic handling of Niobe and the Niobids respectively, showing the gradual development of the theme from the Archaic Era until Roman times. The pictorial representations and choice of theme were outlined clearly but at a small scale. The Pottery Database of the Beazley Archive came to complement the list of the Greek vases by offering detailed, when possible, and unprejudiced descriptions of each separate instance, as well as photographic material.

As far as the red-figure pottery in South Italy is concerned, the situation is different. The sources are rich but, as tragedy had been used as a main thematic source for vase-painting, the relevant studies have been mostly focused on the possible connection of the representations to the Aeschylean *Niobe* than their actual essence.

Starting with A.D. Trendall in *Illustrations of Greek Drama* in 1971, he presented the connection of a Campanian hydria depicting the petrification of Niobe to the lost play. Nevertheless, in the complete registration of Niobe and Niobids instances in his handbook *Red figure vases of South Italy and Sicily* published in 1989, the vases have only been examined in terms of technique and style.

E. Keuls in *Painter and Poet in Ancient Greece* in 1997 studied this connection of Apulian vases and drama. She attempted to make a reconstruction of the Aeschylean play based on the illustrations of a set of five vases depicting Niobe and, although she stressed some very interesting points as far as the ending of the play is concerned, her position could be characterized as biased.

Moving forward to O. Taplin in *Pots and Plays* in 2007, the author dedicated an extended chapter to the history of the genre of tragedy and its spread to Sicily and the Greek West

along with its assessment to the vase painting. Three mythological pots of Niobe were presented as relevant examples. However, Taplin has been more resilient towards the connection to Aeschylean *Niobe*. Acknowledging the obvious deviations, he stressed the fact that a lost tragedy having its roots to the Aeschylean handling could be the source of inspiration.

Finally, H. Fracchia in *Changing Context and Intent: The mourning motive Motif from Lucania to Daunia* in 2012, studied the depictions of mourning Niobe from a different perspective, reflecting the modern methodological trends in the field of iconography. Niobe was not examined in correlation to tragedy this time but in terms of social and cultural processes. Depictions and archaeological contexts were intertwined, offering deep insight not only into the current system of values and expression, but also into the complexity of myth of Niobe itself.

## 1.2 Aim and Purpose

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How biased are we when we talk about Greek mythology? Do we perceive the myths in a way close to the one the ancient contemporaries did or do our own culturally determined preconceptions prevent us from perceiving their essence?

This paper aims to deal with those questions through the examination of the myth of Niobe as a key-study. Nowadays, there is a unanimity regarding the symbolism of the myth; Niobe's allusion is a typical myth of hubris, the human excess of limits and the consequent divine retribution.<sup>2</sup> Could, however, our interpretations be false or incomplete due to our subjectivity?

The myth is being treated as an organism; I follow its changeability covering a time span from the Archaic until Late Classical Era through ancient literature and imagery. In each version, whether textual or visual, the contextual logic, the emphasized elements as well as the treatment by modern scholarship are examined. How can a myth for human arrogance and slaughter have a consolatory effect? The only way to comprehend Niobe is by letting the sources speak for themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> See *LIMC* Vol 6. 1 1992, 908-914; Powell 2001, 205-206.

### 1.3 Theoretical perspective

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A systematic discussion about a myth is a perplexing task. The researcher is dealing with a multidimensional cultural product, a shaped and continuously manipulated system of motives articulated both in narrative contexts and images.<sup>3</sup> The attempt to comprehend the core or to follow the “life” of a single character is often hindered by two main obstacles, the fragmental literary sources or insufficient archaeological evidence and the application of the proper theoretical perspective.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood in her book *“Reading” Greek Culture* notes that common sense empiricism has been the dominant approach of studying the ancient Greek world for a considerable period of time.<sup>4</sup> This empirical interpretive discourse has led to polarization and set assumptions and has intruded in modern research with questionable and ambiguous results. During the last twenty years theoretical and methodological questions have been raised over this matter and the conclusion has been that successful research can be only accomplished through neutrality and, subsequently, through interdisciplinarity and new critical intellectual movements.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the aforementioned conclusion, I have opted for a study of sources and material of notable heterogeneity within the field of Humanities, involving thorough text and artistic-representation analysis. I reckon that a separate, yet parallel examination of the myth from different perspectives will help any potential reader to create a holistic picture of its content, essence and symbolism.

The choice of theoretical approach has been a painstaking process since such research dictates the combination of a variety of theories. My discussion is inspired by the theory of deconstruction, a variant of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, whose life-span traces back in the 1960s but was academized only in the 1990s, could be shortly described as a skeptical approach towards culture, literature and art; the intended meanings of the artists or writers are multiple, contradictory and secondary to the ones we perceive.

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<sup>3</sup> Buxton 1994, 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 4-6.

Deconstruction was originally applied on literary criticism and it eschewed the deferral of the meaning in texts.<sup>6</sup> Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg in *Reflexive Methodology* have argued that the contradictory meanings depend on the moment of interaction between the actual signs and the signifiers. Behind each text, there is a subtext; behind the obvious meaning of a myth, there are other ideas underlying. The theory of deconstruction suggests the obliteration of the obvious dominating pictures in favour of the dominated, the juxtaposition of the contradictory ideas and finally the construction new meanings based on new foundations.<sup>7</sup>

The selection of this theoretical perspective has been imposed by the study of the material itself. At the beginning of my research, my ideas revolved around the concept of Hubris and Nemesis in Ancient Greek mythology and how they are reflected on the characteristic mythological example of Niobe.

The contemporary sources regarding the myth were unquestionably easy to find; the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* would suffice but it is always advisable to consult different compendia of Greek mythology, such as the ones written Barry Powell, Edith Hamilton and William Hansen, to name but a few.<sup>8</sup> All scholars support the same idea; when dealing with Niobe, we are dealing with a typical example of hubris, of a human who exceeded the mortal limits and provoked divine wrath.

Naturally, someone would expect that this deterministic view is supported by ancient narratives and cultural remains as well. Nevertheless, this is not the case. Primary sources point to a different direction; they reveal a beautiful melting pot of impiety of course, but also lamentation, injustice, grief and hope.

Thus, deconstruction seems to be the best path to follow; the modern interpretation of the myth is destroyed in favour of the ancient complexity. After analyzing the selection of my sources and material step by step, I draw my personal conclusions as to how the

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<sup>6</sup> Csapo 2005, 283-284.

<sup>7</sup> Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009, 184-186.

<sup>8</sup> See Hansen 2005, 118-119, Hamilton 1942, 239-240; *LIMC* Vol 6. 1 1992, 908-914; Powell 2001, 205-206.

ancient contemporaries made sense of the myth and define Niobe's essence as articulated in the text and images.

#### 1.4 Methodology

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The active interplay between myth and society can be approached through a vast variety of strategies which often constitute the apple of discourse among scholars regarding their suitability. Yet, there are two points the academic society agrees upon; the myths must be put in their own context and, most importantly, any variations of a myth must be highlighted and examined as an independent reading instead of being integrated in a common version of a myth.<sup>9</sup> Bearing those points in mind, I base my discussion on the separate study of ancient texts and pictorial representations in four stages.

The reader is introduced to the most common version of the myth as it has been established in what classical scholars call *popular tradition*.<sup>10</sup> The text has been retrieved by Apollodorus' *Library* and is followed by a brief demonstration of the characters, facts and variations (Chapter 2).

This introduction is followed by the literary analysis of four representative and most influential passages in ancient Greek literature (Chapter 3). Each text is quoted in English and is followed by a reconstruction- where applicable- and a detailed analysis in terms of the chosen version, the purpose and the "schema", the ideological pattern reflected.

At a third stage, the myth of Niobe is examined from the perspective of mythological iconography. The vessels belong to three categories, Attic black figure, Attic red-figure and South Italian red-figure vase painting. Each pictorial representation is separately analyzed in terms of context, when possible, utility and choice of theme (Chapter 4).

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<sup>9</sup> There has been an interesting discussion regarding the importance of the various aspects of a myth and their use in research. In the 1990s, the need for their separate analysis started to be pinpointed in the works of Sourvinou-Inwood and Buxton, while in more modern methodology sources as in Schaps it is taken for granted. Schaps 2011, 360.

<sup>10</sup> The term *popular tradition* has been used mostly by philologists who had accepted the most common version of the myth as the single one during the past decades as result of the empirical interpretative discourse. See for instance Kakridis 1949, 103.

The fourth and last stage is presented under the title *Reflections and conclusions*. In this chapter, the reader can find the outcomes of the research, as well as a self-critical reflection on the topic (Chapter 5).

### 1.5 Material Presentation

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The material has been carefully selected within the aforementioned temporal limits. As far as the literary sources are concerned, I have chosen to discuss the most demonstrative examples in chronological order commencing with the Homeric narration in the *Iliad* (24.599 – 24.620) dating back to the 8th century B.C.E. Moving on, two fragmentary tragedies, where the myth has been transformed into the main theme, are analyzed. The first tragedy belongs to Aeschylus (ca. 525-455 B.C.E.) and the second one has been attributed to Sophocles with great probability (ca. 497-406 B.C.E.). The final text belongs to Sophoclean *Antigone* (823-834). The limitations in each of the cases are extensively discussed in the relative subchapters.

The archaeological material used has been restricted to instances on pottery contemporary to the literary sources. Generally, the myth of Niobe is not a regular theme on vase painting and the relative depictions are considerably few compared to the ones of other myths of Greek mythology. This disadvantage has turned into an advantage; the examination of a set of eight representative vases of Attic black, as well as Attic and Italian red figure has proved to be sufficient enough in order to create a concise, yet holistic, overview of the plurality of issues concerning Niobe's myth and to add vital information as to how it was perceived in classical antiquity.

## Chapter 2 - Overture

### 2.1 The legend

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There is not a more proper way for the reader to be introduced to the myth of Niobe than the unvarnished version found in the *Library*, the most authoritative mythological compendium of the antiquity. It constitutes a comprehensive summary of the traditional Greek mythology with a timespan from the origins of the world until the end of the Trojan War.

The author had been identified as Apollodorus of Athens who flourished around 140 B.C.E. but references to the *Chronicle* of Castor of Rhodes, a much later roman historiographer, proves this argument wrong.<sup>11</sup> Thus the author of *Library* is conventionally called “Pseudo-Apollodorus” and his style of writing and vocabulary places him to the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.<sup>12</sup> According to Robin Hard in his introductory note in his translation of the *Library*, the information used by the author was derived from a wide variety of sources from early epic and tragedy to Hellenistic poets and although he recognizes its value, he also stresses the flaws.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of this fact though, *Library* still remains a discursive report clear from personal views and the exaggerations of poets and tragedians and a rather accurate record of the tradition as it had been formed during the author’s era. The myth of Niobe can be found in the third book of *Library* in the chapter of Cretan and Theban mythology and the passage, translated by Robin Hard, reads as follows.<sup>14</sup>

*Amphion married Niobe, daughter of Tantalus, who bore seven sons, Sipylus, Eupinytus, Ismenus, Damasichthon, Agenor, Phaedimus, Tantalus, and the same number of daughters, Ethodaia or, as some say, Neaera, Cleodoxa, Astyoche, Phthia, Pelopia, Astycratia, and Ogygia, But Hesiod says that they had ten sons and ten daughters; Herodorus that they had two male children and three female; and Homer that they had six sons and six daughters.*

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<sup>11</sup> Frazer introduction, ix.

<sup>12</sup> Frazer introduction, x.

<sup>13</sup> Hard 1997, 104-105.

<sup>14</sup> Hard 1997, 104-105.

*Being blessed with children, Niobe said that she was more blessed with children than Latona. Stung by the taunt, Latona incited Artemis and Apollo against them, and Artemis shot down the females in the house, and Apollo killed all the males together as they were hunting on Cithaeron. Of the males Amphion alone was saved, and of the females Chloris the elder, whom Neleus married. But according to Telesilla there were saved Amyclas and Meliboea, and Amphion also was shot by them. But Niobe herself quitted Thebes and went to her father Tantalus at Sipylus, and there, on praying to Zeus, she was transformed into a stone, and tears flow night and day from the stone.*

*Apollod. 3.5.6.*

## 2.2 Delving into the myth of Niobe

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Apollodorus' version is a mixture of the most common versions that survived throughout antiquity. The essential features are that Niobe had many kids, boasted her superiority over Leto and received her consequent punishment. Leto's children, Apollo and Artemis killed the Niobids with arrows and crestfallen Niobe turned into stone, a formation that can be seen on Mt. Sipylus in Lydia. There is a mutual agreement among poets, tragedians and mythographers as far as this outline is concerned and in the course of time, more important pieces of information were added: Niobe's origin, lineage, as well as marital and social status.

The main variations concern the number of the children and survivors, as well as the fate of Niobe. In Homer, Niobe has six boys and six girls, the tragedians and Apollodorus mention seven, Hesiod mentions ten and ten, while Herodorus two male and three female. In the texts earlier than Sophocles there are no survivors, Sophocles probably spared the life of one girls and Apollodorus agrees with this version while he also mentions the case of Telesilla who supported the survival of one girl and one boy, Amyclas and Meliboea.

## Chapter 3 – Literary Sources

In this chapter the reader is taken back in antiquity, where the roots of the myth can be traced. The selected sources are presented and analyzed in such way in order to comprehend the context in each version in correlation to the illustration of the character of Niobe, and the essence of the myth.

### 3.1 Homer

#### 3.1.1 The Homeric mythological example

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A most complete version of Niobe's allusion can be found at the end of the twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad*. The story is placed in Achilles' mouth when Priam arrives to him as a suppliant, claiming Hector's body for a proper funeral. The body is prepared by slave women and it is placed on a bier by Achilles himself. Achilles returns to his hut where Priam awaits for him and the speech begins:

- Ω 599 *Thy son, old sire, is given back according to  
thy wish and lieth upon a bier; and at break of day thou shalt thyself behold him,  
as thou bearest him hence; but for this present let us bethink us of supper.  
For even the fair-haired Niobe bethought her of meat,  
albeit twelve children perished in her halls,  
six daughters and six lusty sons.*
- 605 *The sons Apollo slew with shafts from his silver bow,  
being wroth against Niobe, and the daughters the archer Artemis,  
for that Niobe had matched her with fair-cheeked Leto,  
saying that the goddess had borne but twain, while herself was mother to many;  
wherefore they, for all they were but twain, destroyed them all.*
- 610 *For nine days' space they lay in their blood,  
nor was there any to bury them, for the son of Cronos turned the folk to stones;  
howbeit on the tenth day the gods of heaven buried them;*

*and Niobe bethought her of meat, for she was wearied with the shedding of tears*  
*[And now somewhere amid the rocks, on the lonely mountains,*  
615 *on Sipylus, where, men say, are the couching-places of goddesses,*  
*even of the nymphs that range swiftly in the dance about Achelous,*  
*there, albeit a stone, she broodeth over her woes sent by the gods.]*  
*But come, let us twain likewise, noble old sire, bethink us of meat;*  
*and thereafter shalt thou make lament over thy dear son,*  
620 *when thou hast borne him into Ilios; mourned shall he be of thee many tears.*

Hom. *Il.* 24.599-620.

### 3.1.2 Commentary

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The passage is narrated in an emotionally charged atmosphere and has an exemplary intent. In literary studies, this form of speech is known as a *mythological paradeigma* which, according to Willcock, is a myth introduced for exhortation given in ring composition; one character wishes to influence the actions of another by describing an analogous situation.<sup>15</sup>

The choice of Niobe's myth in this secret meeting between Achilles and Priam has been careful and the description is short but tactful. Niobe, the proud queen of Thebes, makes the fatal error of overestimating her own parentage.<sup>16</sup> Such action of mortal insolence cannot be left unpunished; Apollo and Artemis, the two archers, take their bloody revenge by depriving Niobe's from her precious motherhood.

The myth is not yet over. Not only do the innocent children die, but they are also left unburied for nine days, as Zeus has turned all people into stone. During the tenth day, the gods bury the Niobids with their own hands and Niobe, despite her grief, stops lamenting and finds the courage to eat. As mentioned in the passage, soon afterwards she is turned into stone on Mt Sipylus.

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<sup>15</sup> Willcock 1964, 147; Pearce 2008, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Rabel 1990, 437.

The core concept of this narration is Niobe's eating. However, as this version cannot be found in later sources, it could be considered as Homer's invention.<sup>17</sup> In this passage this is a common phenomenon; in fact, all the details apart from Niobe's hubristic behavior and her consequent punishment and grief have been invented by Homer in an attempt to enhance the persuasive power of his speech.<sup>18</sup> Adherence to tradition is of minor importance at this point.<sup>19</sup>

The reader is soon faced with a paradox. In the lines that follow her eating, Niobe's petrification is described, a version that actually does belong to the *popular tradition* and is mentioned later in Apollodorus (*The Library* 3.5.6), as presented in the previous chapter. There is a combination of two contradictory versions, one of Niobe eating because she found the strength to overcome her pain and a second version of Niobe who has turned into a stone. Scholars have highlighted the lack of logic and some of them attempted to exclude this second version although there is a grammatical coherence in the ancient passage.<sup>20</sup>

It is not my purpose to commence a philological discussion or take a certain position in that matter. Besides, the essence of this paper is exactly this, to be permissive towards the possibility of complexity. Nevertheless, for the sake of the contextual analysis, the reader should keep in mind that the prevailing opinion regarding this petrification is that it has been added by ancient readers or commentators who might have considered the myth to be incomplete.<sup>21</sup> It is believed that this transformation was not proper to be mentioned due to the essence of the example. For this reason, it would be rather irrational to support

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<sup>17</sup> Willcock mentions that the incident is mentioned by the late author Lucian (*De Luctu* 24) who, however is quoting Homer. It is not referred to any other source. Willcock 1964, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Kakridis 1949, 99; Pearce 2008, 15-24.

<sup>19</sup> The Niobids' burial is also a controversial topic and it has been generally accepted that it is also a Homeric addition, as it does not appear in any other sources either. It cannot be said that the gods buried the children because of guilt as this is not compatible to the morals of this era. Kakridis and Willcock claim, that the petrification motive is moved from Niobe where serves no purpose and is transferred to the people in order to make the example valid. It gives a perfect justification for people's ten-day inactivity. This delay is also analogous to the one before Hector's burial mentioned in a following subparagraph. For the relevant analysis see Kakridis 1949, 100-101; Willcock 1964, 141.

<sup>20</sup> For the detailed discussion see Pearce 2008, 13-25.

<sup>21</sup> Pearce 2008, 24-25.

that he would add elements of two contradictory versions of the myth. This is not a new phenomenon, especially during an era of rather fluid mythological tradition. It was common for poets to alter or create new details depending on the significance they wanted to give to their work and the messages they wanted to convey.

To return back to Niobe's eating, Kakridis in *Homeric Researches* characteristically states: *Niobe in 24 eats because Priam must eat* and the reason why Priam must eat is to be traced back to Homeric tradition.<sup>22</sup> Food consumption had special value. In the epic poems, the sharing of food symbolizes the reconciliation with a certain situation or person, as the satisfaction of the physical necessity of eating offers emotional release.<sup>23</sup> It is at the beginning of this book when Achilles, devastated from Patroclus' death, refuses to eat being unable to moderate his grief. Thetis, his mother, urges him to quit his incessant weeping and fasting as his death is near.<sup>24</sup>

Achilles has indeed a meal but it is only after taking revenge by killing Hector and abusing his dead body for twelve days blinded by indomitable anger. The moment when the meal is over, is the moment when Priam enters Achilles hut. Schmitz explains that this is an intentionally selected moment as Achilles has finally reached the psychological stage to offer hospitality. It is time for both of them to reconcile with the death of their beloved people; *Er spricht zu Priamos, aber auch zu sich selbst. Wie Priamos hat auch er den geliebtesten Menschen verloren.*<sup>25</sup>

Thus, a meal together would signify an acceptance of the current situation. The eternal suffering cannot be ended but soothed by mutual deference. In order to enhance this argument, a mythological example is needed and no mythological figure would be more suitable than a mother who ate despite the loss of all her children; an example Priam could identify himself with.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Niobe becomes not only personification of maternal grief due to her fatal mistake but also an example of a woman of tenacity and endurance

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<sup>22</sup> Kakridis 1949, 96-98.

<sup>23</sup> Kakridis 1949, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Hom, *Il.* 24.128-130.

<sup>25</sup> Schmitz 2001, 149 f.

<sup>26</sup> Schmitz 2001, 145.

who acknowledges the arbitrariness of human pain. According to Rinon, grief can merely be mourned,<sup>27</sup> while the human flesh demands satisfaction.

### 3.1.3 Conclusions

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So far, we have encountered a myth with a consoling effect but it is most important to notice that it also constitutes a delicate reminder of Niobe's and Priam's presumptuous behavior which caused their suffering. In the question however, if the focal point here is the corrosive hubris, I reckon that the answer should be negative.

Before justifying this position, it is necessary to stress the fact that the existence of hubris is beyond dispute. Wong, in his article *Hubris & Nemesis: A Correlational Analysis*, describes the so-called 'hubris formula' and applies it on the account of Niobe. According to this formula, at a first stage impudent mortals suffer from excessive self-importance regarding their achievements, appearance or skills. At a second stage, they compare themselves to a God by questioning their superiority and capabilities and, finally, at a third stage the God seeks retribution for the offence.<sup>28</sup>

Niobe, despite her good relationship with the Olympians,<sup>29</sup> boasts her fecundity against Leto, insults the respected mother-Goddess of the divine twins and, as a result, she receives her punishment; the Niobids are slain in order for Niobe to be reminded of the appropriate behavior of someone belonging to her cosmic category.

Scholarship agrees that in the Iliad there is an implied parallelism between the cases of Priam and Niobe.<sup>30</sup> Priam had been hubristic against Zeus, Niobe against Leto. Achilles killed Hector as *a mortal instrument of retributive justice*<sup>31</sup>, whereas the divine archers killed Niobe's offspring. Hector's body had been abused for twelve days until Achilles' subsistence of wrath; the children are left unburied for ten days, due to the petrification of

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<sup>27</sup> Rinon 2008, 88.

<sup>28</sup> Wong 2012, 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> Sappho wrote *Now Leto and Niobē were very dear companions*. Powell 2007, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Kakridis 1949, 102.

<sup>31</sup> Kakridis 1949, 102-103.

the people until the gods eventually relent. Yet, regarding the use of Niobe's allusion with a focus on hubris in our case, there are two elements that point deviating from this direction; the length of the Homeric example and the invented details discussed in the previous subchapter.

As stressed by John Alvis in *Divine Purpose and Heroic Response in Homer and Virgil*, Niobe's hubris could have been much richer and given with blunter colours.<sup>32</sup> Instead, this twenty-line monologue shows a reduced importance in hubris. If this was in fact the focal point, Niobe's boasting would have been given in detail in order to outline its catastrophic repercussions and to fulfill the didactic role of the myth. Moreover, Niobe's eating or the burial of the Niobids need not have been invented and added in the narration. Such incidents are not consistent to the essence of hubris and nemesis; the punishment is harsh, relentless and eternal and in no other myth of divine retribution is the human pain soothed in any way, especially by the gods themselves.

Niobe's allusion is a myth of hubris but is not used as such; the relevant details of her actions and behaviour towards Leto seem to be pertinent to the narration.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, it is the necessary stepping stone towards fulfillment of the purpose of the myth. Niobe lost her motherhood by exceeding her limits. Yet, she accepted silently the woes from the gods and reconciled with her pain. The poetic interventions are adapted perfectly to the needs of Priam's situation, who is asked to act accordingly. Without affecting the *popular tradition*, the mythological paradigm is complete, valid and successful.

## 3.2 Aeschylus

### 3.2.1 The tears of Niobe; discussions and limitations

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*Niobe* of Aeschylus is a fragmentary play. It had been represented by only eight manuscript fragments of twenty-three lines until 1933, when new evidence came to light through the work of Vitelli and Norsa with the publication of a mutilated papyrus.<sup>34</sup> This

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<sup>32</sup> Alvis 1995, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Alvis 1995, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Fitton Brown 1954, 177.

papyrus contained the remains of twenty-one lines, all damaged, some being attributed to the beginning of the play but most of them to the end. Their analysis has been a challenging task, characterized by Denys Lionel Page in *Select Papyri* as *desperately difficult*.<sup>35</sup> The more they are being examined, the more questions arise.

One of the main problems is to define to which character the first lines of the papyrus (here lines 1-9) should be ascribed. Page in his translation gives the lines to Niobe, claiming that the passage is part of her greater speech when she breaks her silence in a dramatic outburst.

Although this position is well-argued<sup>36</sup>, the opposite side offers an equally plausible explanation against it. Keuls, in *Painter and Poet in Ancient Greece*, agrees with Fitton Brown who attributes the lines to other speakers. Niobe's absolute silence is suggested for the biggest part of the play by the commentaries of the ancient contemporaries and if these lines belonged to her, major conflicts would arise.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, what is important in the first place is the general understanding of the reconstruction of the plot. The aforementioned problem can be overlooked as, despite the attribution of the lines to a character, the logic of the passage can be followed with reasonable confidence.

The English translation of the fragments is a combination of the works of Herbert Weir Smyth and Denys Lionel Page.<sup>38</sup> The pattern of the reconstruction follows the one published by Fitton Brown in *CQ NS* while the numbering of the fragments is based on *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta* by Augustus Nauck.<sup>39</sup>

One final remark has to be made. Fitton Brown recognizes the tentativeness of his work.<sup>40</sup> Details mentioned here are not found in other reconstructions and vice versa. At some points I deviate from it when I feel that his version is not in accordance with more

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<sup>35</sup> Page 1970, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Page 1970, 3-7. Page gives an extensive analysis in order to support his argument.

<sup>37</sup> Keuls 1997, 170.

<sup>38</sup> Full translation of the texts can be found in Smyth 1924, 430-435; Page 1970, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Nauck 1889, 50-54.

<sup>40</sup> Fitton Brown 1954, 180.

modern research. Every aspect of the synopsis is open to debate and the reader should always keep in mind the case of error. The choice of one reconstruction does not diminish the value of others. A complete translation of all the surviving fragments can be found in the Appendix on page 70.

### 3.2.2 Text and synopsis of the plot

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*Niobe* begins after the slaughter of the Niobids, who, in this case, are fourteen instead of Homer's twelve. There is an indication that the scene of action is the royal palace in Thebes, where Niobe moved after her marriage with king Amphion.<sup>41</sup>

As far as the characters apart from Niobe are concerned, there is a unanimous agreement on the presence of her father, Tantalus. There is also one more interlocutor, most probably a woman who is well disposed at Niobe and of the same status, as the tone and the content of the lines suggest.<sup>42</sup> Most scholars agree on the presence of Antiope, Niobe's mother-in-law. Fitton Brown also supports the existence of Amphion without any evidence. Keuls in her reconstruction disagrees with him and justifies this absence with Amphion being dead prior to the beginning of the play, although the passage does not explicitly say so.<sup>43</sup>

We know from the satirical comments of Aristophanes in *Frogs* that Aeschylus opened the play with the silent apparition of veiled and mourning Niobe and that it had been much in progress until she uttered some words. This theatrical device was condemned by Aristophanes' character *Euripides* as a *cheap trick*.<sup>44</sup>

The chorus of Lydian Maidens is coming to Thebes as a retinue of Tantalus and they sing the entrance march. The episode (lines 1-21) commences with a monologue addressing

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<sup>41</sup> The relative fragment reads as follows: *And to ashes I will burn the house of Amphion by my fire-bearing eagles* (T.G.F 160). I believe that the speaker uses the word house in order to signify lineage and wants to show the level of god's relentlessness.

<sup>42</sup> Taplin 2007, 14-15.

<sup>43</sup> Keuls 1997, 180-181.

<sup>44</sup> Aristoph. *Frogs* 927.

them.<sup>45</sup> The speaker has been much disputed (lines 1-9). Fitton Brown attributes the lines to Antiope while Denys Lionel Page has translated them in first person singular, giving them to Niobe.

The English personal pronouns and possessive adjectives, corresponding to the endings of the ancient Greek participles, are corrupt. For the sake of the flow of the tragedy though, I chose to present Page's version which is the most reliable translation to be found and the easiest to follow:<sup>46</sup>

*Now I only mourn my father, strong Tantalus,* 1  
*who begot me and gave me forth in marriage;*  
*to such a life without a haven has he been driven aground by Phoebus;*  
*the high winds of calamity assault our house.*  
*Your own eyes behold my wedding's end:* 5  
*three days already sitting here upon the tomb,*  
*moaning above my children dead,*  
*I mourn the misfortune of their beauty.*  
*Man brought to misery is a shadow, nothing else.*

The chorus' curiosity is satisfied from this explanatory monologue. It includes all the necessary information regarding the reasons for Niobe's lamenting. She is not only mourning for her lost children but also for her father, Tantalus, who once stood strong but he will be shattered when he becomes aware of the end of his lineage from Niobe's side and grief that has spread upon his family.

Supposing that Antiope is the speaker, she does not receive a response from Niobe. The monologue is followed by a choral ode (lines 10-13):

*Strong Tantalus will presently come hither...* 10

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<sup>45</sup> There is a fragment (T.G.F.155) which reads as follows: *Maidens such as these Ister and pure Phasis claim to breed...* The reference to Ister (Danube) and river Phasis (in Colchis) has been perceived by some (including Fitton Brown) as reference to the chorus, indicating their exotic origin. This argument has not been satisfactorily established. The fragment cannot be given to any speaker thus I did not include it in the main text. See Keuls 1997, 182.

<sup>46</sup> Page 1924, 9.

*So, the anger of Phoebus against Amphion,  
With an intent to destroy his house with outrage, root and branch.*

The words of the chorus are preparing the audience for the arrival of Tantalus. In the meantime, they make a reference to Apollo's wrath against Amphion and the utter destruction of the roots of his house, his children.

Antiope, in turn, responds to the maidens in lines 14-21 by acknowledging the gods' envy of human contentment, especially when it is bragged about. Yet, she does not forget to stress Niobe's share of responsibility for her ominous situation. This passage is critical for this research and will be evaluated in the commentary:

*I will expound to you—you are not enemies.  
God first creates a fault in man, 15  
when He is minded utterly to ruin his estate.  
Man must attend meantime to the good fortune that God gives him,  
and guard his lips from insolence.  
They whose turn it is to prosper never think  
that they shall stumble and spill forth the (welfare) of to-day. 20  
For see, I too, exultant in the beauty . . .*

The fragments that follow are undoubtedly given to Tantalus at the beginning of a new episode (T.G.F. 158-159):

*I sow a field twelve days' journey wide, even the Berecynthian land, where Adrastea's sea and Ida  
resound with lowing oxen and bleating sheep, and the whole plain roars.*

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*My soul, which was up above in heaven, has fallen to earth and says to me: "Learn not to honour  
too much the things of mortal life"*

Tantalus enters the scene with pompous behavior, uninformed about the situation. The reason for his visit is not yet clear. It is evident from the context that he becomes aware

of the facts upon arrival, after encountering the silent and veiled figure of Niobe. Stricken by the news he recognizes that prosperity does not guarantee lasting happiness.<sup>47</sup>

Niobe finally unveils and breaks her silence in a short speech of great psychological depth (T.G.F. 162). The tension of her monologue has been ridiculed in *Frogs*: “and the play was already half over, he'd (the actor) speak a dozen bullish words; with eyebrows, crests, some awful witch-faced things, unknown to the audience.”<sup>48</sup>

*The kindred of the gods, relative to Zeus, whose is the altar of Zeus, their father, high in clear air on Ida's hill, in heaven and not yet is their heroes' blood extinct...*

The kindred of the gods is a reference to Niobe's husband Amphion and his brother Zethos, sons of Zeus, whose piety was shown by the building of a temple on the mountain of Ida in honour of their father prior to the death of the children. Keuls, in her article *Niobe's and Tantalus associates*, is interested in the line regarding their unimpaired status which implies a preceding punishment.<sup>49</sup> In Hyginus' version of the myth in *Fabulae* (1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.), Amphion rushed after the slaughter of his offspring into Apollo's temple in order to destroy it and, as punishment for his hubris, he was killed in the exact way as the Niobids and maybe both authors have used the same tradition as reference.<sup>50</sup> Despite their piety, Amphion and Zethos were still recipients of unfair treatment.

As far as the ending of the play is concerned, there is no reliable guide to Aeschylus' treatment of the subject.<sup>51</sup> Fitton Brown is quite certain about the return of Niobe to Lydia and Gantz suggests her petrification at the closing of the play.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Keuls 1997, 185.

<sup>48</sup> Aristoph. *Frogs* 927-930.

<sup>49</sup> Keuls 1980, 43.

<sup>50</sup> *Amphion, however, tried to storm the temple of Apollo, and was slain by the arrows of Apollo.* Hyginus *Fabulae* 9.

<sup>51</sup> Fitton Brown quotes another fragment after Niobe's monologue but there is no evidence regarding the speaker or any satisfactory comments as far as the content is concerned. See T.G.F. 162 in the Appendix.

<sup>52</sup> Gantz 1981,30.

### 3.2.3 Commentary and Conclusions

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Though fragmentary and incomplete, the passages raise intense emotions and show the deep insight and concern of the tragedian about the issue of the human-divine relationship, the mutual expectations and responsibilities.<sup>53</sup> Hubris, lamentation, anger and unfairness are the four elements of the play in a peculiar combination.

The character of Niobe is illustrated brooding silently in a state of despair. Her offence is known to the audience; one reckless moment of inappropriateness and the gods deprived her from her precious motherhood. In the first line of the papyrus though, the speaker mourns not for the children but for Tantalus. Aeschylus does not focus only on what can be seen but on what is hidden behind the facts. Here it is clear that hubris is shared among the members of the family and has its roots in the past.

The once powerful Tantalus had repeatedly exceeded the limits of the gods' lenience but was not punished until afterlife.<sup>54</sup> Adkins notes that if the wrongdoer escapes punishment, *the disaster can be left hanging over the descendants who are sure to suffer*.<sup>55</sup> Could Niobe's fate be justified by the fact that she was simply her father's child? I reckon that the answer should be positive. Tantalus punishment was executed through the destruction of his house from his daughter's side.

The harsh divine retribution is put in action when mentally blinded and foolishly boastful Niobe errs. One by one, all the boys and the unmarried girls are slain and supposing that Aeschylus included the version of Amphion's attack to Apollo's temple, the severity of the punishment is threefold; Niobe is left crushed, empty and surrounded by death while Tantalus is finally punished for his own sins.

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<sup>53</sup> Gantz 1981,18.

<sup>54</sup>Among other crimes, Tantalus murdered his son Pelopas and he offered him to the Olympians as a meal. The only goddess who did not realize that she was eating human meat was Demeter, devastated by Persephone's missing. Zeus assembled the young man's body and gave him life while he punished Tantalus in eternal thirst and famine in the Tartars.

<sup>55</sup> Adkins 1960, 66.

Antiope, addressing the chorus, examines Niobe's loss from a more critical perspective. She remarks: *The deity plants a cause in mortals when he decides to ruin a house utterly*, a statement that has its roots back to the old doctrine of the eternal happiness of the gods at the expense of human sorrow.<sup>56</sup> It was believed that the reason why humans act irrationally was because the gods plan the causes in order for them to do so.<sup>57</sup>

The deity urged Tantalus and then Niobe in the dangerous path of hubris because of a simple resentment of their cornucopia of happiness so to speak.<sup>58</sup> The planted causes were prosperity, beauty and prestige but the blessings soon turned into a curse. Who is to blame? Is it envious Leto or the weak Niobe?

The tragedian gives an answer in the lines 16-20 that follow: *Man must attend meantime to the good fortune that God gives him, and guard his lips from insolence. They whose turn it is to prosper never think that they shall stumble and spill forth the (welfare) of today.* Niobe might evoke the sympathy of the characters of the play and the audience. Her punishment is rather disproportionate to her action and, to make things worse, she is also being punished as part of Tantalus' chain of impiety. Nevertheless, people are not the puppets of the gods and she has her own share of responsibility. The deity may have planted a cause but she should be responsible enough to acknowledge her good fortune and show prudence towards the divinity in order to protect herself and her family from insolence. Temptation can and should be avoided.<sup>59</sup> Humans must not act as silent viewers of their fate. Niobe's audacious comparison with a goddess is comprehensible but inexcusable.

When Tantalus arrives and realizes what has happened, he acknowledges the same pattern in his and his daughter's life as well as his responsibility in the scheme of things.

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<sup>56</sup> In *Hom.II.* 24.526-24.530, a little before the narration of Niobe's allusion, Achilles pronounces the same moral: "*For on this wise have the gods spun the thread for wretched mortals, that they should live in pain; and themselves are sorrowless.*" He continues with the description of the two urns, the one of ills, the other of blessings, from which Zeus bestows his gifts and determines people's fate. See Dodds 1951, 30.

<sup>57</sup> This passage aroused Plato's ire. He felt strongly about the degradation of the gods' morality. Gantz 1981, 19. See also Sommerstein 1996, 374-375.

<sup>58</sup> Sommerstein 1996, 375.

<sup>59</sup> Sommerstein 1996, 376.

The view of veiled and shuttered Niobe reveals the trivialness of human prosperity (T.G.F 158-159): *Learn not to honour too much the things of mortal life.*

Despite its importance though, the references on hubris can be seen as a parenthesis in a continuously escalating dramatic situation. Niobe's silence is much louder than any word and her tragic veiled figure evokes feelings of sympathy rather than contentment for the attribution of justice. Besides, is not everyone in the audience in danger of succumbing to temptation at some point of their lives? The human nature cannot be escaped.

This silent lamentation ends with a dramatic moment. Niobe unveils and speaks but the meaning of her words is not clear. She remembers her husband and his brother who built a temple for Zeus as an example of piety. Although they were sons of Zeus and respected the gods, they were not spared when they responded to a very questionable and shameful divine act of retribution.

On the other hand, Amphion was freed from the pain for his lost children. There is no reference in the text to base a relevant argument but maybe Niobe is seeking solace from her mourning as well. Maybe her monologue is a plea for an ending that would enable her to reunite in the afterlife with her beloved children who died due to her own folly but nothing can be told for certain.

To conclude, *Niobe* of Aeschylus and the relative narration in Homer deal with the same myth but not in a similar way. This is normal; the transformation of a mythological paradigm into a theme of tragedy dictates a different handling. They do have, however, something in common: neither of the narrations is focused on *hubris* itself but they are both overcast by its heavy shadow; the transgression and punishment are not even described in the tragedy.

Her hubris, though planted, does not exonerate her; Antiope's words are sharp. Niobe is equally responsible for the consequences. But Aeschylus is aiming at presenting Niobe as an example of the inequality of the human-divine relationship and a victim of her ancestry and personal contentment. Her silent and veiled figure makes her lamenting so powerful that it is impossible not to dominate the scene.

### 3.3 Entering the world of Sophocles; two examples

This subchapter follows the same structure as the previous ones with a minor difference. Instead of one play, I decided to present an extended analysis of the fragmentary tragedy of *Niobe* which is the sole example of dramatized massacre, as well as an essential reference to Niobe found in *Antigone*.

#### 3.3.1 *Niobe*

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*Niobe* of Sophocles was probably written before *Antigone*. Like Aeschylus' tragedy, it is fragmentary and the texts are so badly preserved that in some parts there is no indication of the content.

Not much has been written about this play. As my main and only sources I have used the *Papyrus Fragments of Sophocles* by Richard Carden with the collaboration of W.S.Barrett and the translation of Hugh Lloyd-Jones in *Sophocles Fragments*. In R. Carden's edition of 1974, two papyri are ascribed to Sophocles' *Niobe*. The first papyrus is dated back in the second century C.E. and it is a single fragment from Oxyrhynchos published by Lobel in 1971 as *P.Oxy 2805*. The second papyrus consists of five fragments. The first four were published by Grenfell and Hunt in 1897 and the fifth one nine years later, in 1906.<sup>60</sup>

Lloyd's edition is considerably more recent than the one of Carden and it contains parts of a third papyrus which mention the *hypotheses* (plots) of two tragedies of Sophocles written on the back of a document, *Nauplios Katapleon* and *Niobe*.<sup>61</sup> This papyrus has been dated back to the middle of the second century C.E. and it was edited and published by H. M. Cockle in 1984 with the code *P.Oxy 3653*.

Two points have to be explained to the reader beforehand, the reasons for the connection of these papyri to the play of *Niobe* and the matter of authorship. As far as the fragments published prior to 1984 are concerned, the ascription of the papyri to a *Niobe* has its roots

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<sup>60</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 171-172.

<sup>61</sup> Rossum-Steenbeek 1998, 21.

on the content of the texts. There is complete lack of references to the names of Niobe or the Niobids but there is a remarkable thematic cohesion.<sup>62</sup>

Both papyri provide us with evidence such as a shooting in progress, a comment probably made by the chorus about the killing of the girls and the boys in a family, the prayer of a girl imploring a goddess to spare her life. I can do nothing but agree with Carden that these indications are enough in order to believe that we are dealing with a case of *Niobe*.

As far as *P.Oxy 3653* is concerned, the description of the plot as well as the two-line heading of *Niobe*, outline the play as described in the first two papyri.<sup>63</sup> This plot has been used in this paper as an introductory note in paragraph 3.3.3 before the commentary of the fragments of the tragedy.

As for the authorship, Carden presented four options: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides and the possibility of a minor poet. As seen in the previous subchapter, Niobe of Aeschylus was set after the death of the children, so the scene of the killing must exclude this option. Moreover, there is no source that indicates that Euripides wrote a relevant play, neither is a definite indication that a minor poet did so.<sup>64</sup>

It is known that Sophocles wrote a *Niobe*. Among other minor references, Plutarch in *Moralia*, written in the first century C.E., mentions: *In Sophocles when the sons of Niobe are being shot and killed, one of them calls no other to come to his rescue and fight for him but his male lover.*<sup>65</sup> In Plutarch's legacy, the massacre of the Niobids and Sophocles are connected and the play could most probably belong to him. Carden opts for this solution based, as he says, on *general probabilities*, and his estimation seems to be acceptable.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 172-173.

<sup>63</sup> Rossum-Steenbeek 1998, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2003, 226-228.

<sup>65</sup> *Plut.Mor.* 760d.

<sup>66</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 174.

### 3.3.2 Summation of the fragments

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- *P.Oxy 2805*

The single fragment from Oxyrhynchos can be read as follows. Both Carden and Lloyd-Jones have attributed the lines 4-7 to Apollo and 8-11 to the chorus. The translation has been retrieved from the book *The fragments of Sophocles*.<sup>67</sup>

Apollo: *Do you see the frightened one inside,  
trying to hide in the tun-store and by the bins, 5  
the one who is cowering alone? Will you not aim a swift arrow at her  
before she can hide out of sight?*

Chorus: *Woe ah ah!  
By only a short space of time will the family's  
death be different for the unmarried girls than it was for the boys! 10  
This calamity is swelling to great magnitude!*

In lines 4-7 Apollo is exhorting someone to shoot with an arrow so we must deduce naturally that he is addressing his sister Artemis. The deities are in the process of slaying the girls. Apollo's words indicate that the terrified girl is aware of the massacre and the fact that she is the next target of Artemis' swift arrows. The words *tin store* and *bins* are used to domestic activity; the girls are possible being killed in their home.<sup>68</sup>

The lyric comment in lines 8-11 is a deep cry by the chorus. The exact reason cannot be told; it could be sympathy for the little girl or for the ill-fate of the family. The chorus' words are a clear indicator of the theme of the play; Niobe is being punished by having her family executed. Based on line 10 we can assume that the killing of the boys was prior to the one of the girls.

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<sup>67</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2003, 231-233.

<sup>68</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 176.

- Grenfell & Hunt; fragments 1-4

Here, I present the fragments 1-4 as published in the papyrus published by Grenfell and Hunt. Fragment 5 is incomprehensible. The translation of fragments 1, 2 and 4 is based on the commentary of Richard Carden while the translation of fragment 3 is once again retrieved from *The fragments of Sophocles*.<sup>69</sup>

The remains of the first fragment consist of twelve lines but there are only a few words where the content is clear: *horses* (line 2), *shields* (line 7), *your son* (line 8), *raise the sword to my aid* (lines 9-10), *the hide of an animal* (line 12).<sup>70</sup>

Carden gives a narrative tone to this passage, which concerns the boys who, according to the aforementioned lyric part, were killed before the girls.<sup>71</sup> However, this particular scene does not include the violent elements of a killing; the vocabulary used indicates an account of hunting where the speaker might have been present. This messenger addresses to a son's parent, so we should assume that this is Niobe. Only the existence of one Niobid is reported, so maybe this fragment is an introduction to the slaughter by Apollo or the description of the death of this particular son.<sup>72</sup>

Apollodorus in the *Library* mentions that Apollo killed the boys as they were hunting outdoors on Cithaeron.<sup>73</sup> This is also confirmed by the *hypothesis* in *P.Oxy 3653*. Supposing that this incident belongs to an earlier tradition Sophocles was aware of, it could explain the scene of hunting. Maybe this part of the messenger's account is description of an event prior to the death of one or more male Niobids.

The remains of the second fragment consist of nine lines and just like in the case of fragment one, only a few phrases are comprehensible. It begins with an anguished cry (line 2) but it cannot be defined who the speaker is. This cry is followed by a line ascribed to Apollo that reads as *I can see more girls here in the house* or *I can see here in*

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<sup>69</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2003, 233.

<sup>70</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 188.

<sup>71</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 187-188.

<sup>72</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 188-192.

<sup>73</sup> *Apollod.* 3.5.6.

a plurality of females, a quarry for your third shooting and it continues in line 4, *the one....and the other one...*, where he might be describing their domestic activities, the exact locations or the sequence they should be killed.<sup>74</sup> In line 5 it seems that he uses the word *prey* in order to describe their victims along with another one that can be translated as *unmask*; Apollo is once again giving instructions to his sister in pursuance for the objects of retribution.<sup>75</sup>

The remains of the third fragment have been preserved as follows and illustrate a most intense moment:

Chorus:.....*madness...*

Niobe: *I am undone by the anger of Phoebus and his sister!*  
*Why are you driving me from the palace? Why*  
*do you not aim your cruel arrow at my side?* 5

Chorus: ...*her of many sorrows.*  
*Am I to slip inside and waft her steps this way?*

Niobe: *The children who were my pride are gone to the caverns of*  
*Tartarus! Where shall I cower?*

Daughter:...*I beg you queen! ...* 10  
*Do not shoot an arrow and kill me!*

Chorus: ...*unhappy girl...*

The passages presented so far are, in their majority, controversial. Nevertheless, this fragment is the most powerful and solid evidence that this papyrus belongs to a *Niobe*. The wrath of Apollo and Artemis in line 4, the mothers' anxious plead to be primarily

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<sup>74</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 194-195.

<sup>75</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 197.

killed by an arrow and her agony when realizing that her children are going to the realm of the dead, confirm the identity of the play. Niobe is the tragic speaker and her wondering why Artemis is taking her away from the palace shows that the killing is still in progress in the house.<sup>76</sup> The chorus in lines 6-7 seems to be at a loss in front of the anguished mother; they do not know how to act towards her and if they should or should not help her intervene.

Niobe is bewailing for the fate of her innocent offspring that are doomed to be trapped forever in dark Tartarus. Her cry is followed by lines 10-11, a desperate prayer of one of Niobe's daughters to Artemis. Carden mentions that this prayer could be completed with some offerings in an attempt to save her life, while the chorus shows their sympathetic attitude towards her.<sup>77</sup>

As far as the fourth fragment is concerned, Carden gives it to the chorus who is speaking of either Niobe or one of the girls:

Chorus: *A joy beyond our hopes,  
here comes rushing out of our house* 5  
*like a filly released from the yoke,  
she for whom and for her sisters, we were grieving a moment since.  
What new thing are you afraid of now?*<sup>78</sup>

In an unexpected turn of events, the chorus sees a girl emerging on the stage. There is no indication that the gods are present; moreover, none of the killings had been visible to the audience so it is highly improbable that it is happening now. Carden cites Pearson's dispute regarding the survival of one of the girls.<sup>79</sup> However, the text itself leans towards this direction and it is not safe to draw conclusions about the way Sophocles has handled

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<sup>76</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 203.

<sup>77</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 210.

<sup>78</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2003, 233.

<sup>79</sup> Carden & Barrett 1974, 215-222.

his characters based on his known tragedies. No matter how unexpected, it is still probable that Sophocles allowed the last girl to live.

### 3.3.3 Commentary and conclusions on *Niobe*

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*P. Oxy 3653* constitutes an incomplete but informative synopsis of the plot.<sup>80</sup>

*Niobe, which began with this line:*

*The most...son of Zeus. The plot is as follows:*

*Niobe had an excessive love for her children*

*and often said that her own progeny was better than that of Leto.*

10

*While sending the boys off to hunt*

*with some friends she boasted of them again,*

*saying that she was the mother of the best of the children...*

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*When he heard of this, Amphion*

*reproached the god and challenged him to combat,*

*but when the god came he took up his arms*

*and was shot dead. And Apollo sent Artemis and....she shot the girls in the palace*

25

*so as to show the superiority belonged to the gods.*

*And Zethos appeared...and Niobe...*

From this *hypothesis*, three very important clues can be drawn. The play begins with the description of Niobe's act of hubris. Proud of the abilities and traits of her children, she claims that her children are better than the ones of Leto.

She sends her sons hunting. There are seven lines missing between the fragments so presumably they describe the killing of the boys. It is clear now that Amphion takes an active part of Sophocles version of *Niobe*.<sup>81</sup> After hearing the news, he challenged the god in combat, a different alternative than the one given by Hyginus in *Fabulae*.

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<sup>80</sup> The text is retrieved from *Sophocles Fragments*. See Lloyd-Jones 2003, 229-231.

<sup>81</sup> Sutton 1985, 15.

However, provoking a god in a competition is also an act of hubris, just like in the myth of Marsyas who challenged Apollo in a music contest and was brutally punished. Amphion dies and then the two archers, Apollo and Artemis approach the palace in order to continue with the slaughter of the girls. The writer of the plot mentions the presence of Zethos, brother of Amphion at the end but there are no more details given.

In this commentary I do not follow the sequence of the presentation of the passages in the previous subchapter, as some minor changes seem to be more logical. Since we know that the slaughter of the boys preceded the one of the girls, fragment number one from the Grenfell & Hunt papyrus should be in the first place. A messenger is narrating to Niobe the scene of hunting where he and one of her sons were present. The content and the tone make the passage unfitting among the others where the killing of the girls is described.

Based on the hypothesis, Amphion's death intervenes between this fragment and the next in line. I reckon that this episode is followed by the second fragment. The gods are looking for their prey, a rather diminishing characterization for Niobe's children that also illustrates how it is easy to be found as the girls are unaware of the presence and purpose of the two gods. Apollo is describing to his sister the girls' location and maybe their activities.

This scene must be followed by *P.Oxy 2805*. The series of killings is in progress and the unlucky girls have probably seen their sisters' dead by the swift arrows of Artemis. Apollo points at a terrified girl who is unsuccessfully trying to hide behind some bins but she is still in the gods' field of vision and she is shot. Her death is followed by a choral part, where they exclaim the escalation of Niobe's misfortune.

This moment seems to be an appropriate for the third fragment of the Grenfell & Hunt papyrus. Niobe has been told the news about the death of her sons and has also witnessed the killing of all her daughters except one; in a dramatic outburst, she asked to be killed first instead. She is lead outside the house for unknown reasons; maybe she is hindering the goddess' work by trying to protect her child in vain. The chorus sympathizes with Niobe but they are uncertain as to how to act.

In the fourth and final fragment, an unexpected and blissful incident is announced by the chorus. One girl comes outside the palace, maybe the one Niobe tried to save. There is the probability that the divine intervention stopped at this point and the gods, as an act of pity, did not deprive Niobe from her motherhood completely. In several versions one of Niobe's daughters survives. This is Chloris, later wife of Neleus, son of Poseidon and mother of wise Nestor, known from the *Iliad*. Niobe's ending is not known. Maybe the presence of Zethos is connected with her transfer to Lydia but nothing can be said for certain.

Sophocles' *Niobe* is diametrically different to all the cases that have been examined so far. There is no consolation or mourning, just the harsh punishment of the gods and the complete destruction a human can experience in one single moment. One by one, her boys, her husband and finally her girls are dead and the most dramatic moment is when she witnesses the merciless gods but she is unable to intervene. Realizing her real potential, maybe for the first time, she futilely implores to abandon life on account of the magnitude of her misfortune.

#### 3.3.4 In *Antigone*

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*Antigone* begins soon after Oedipus' downfall and the subsequent quarrel between his two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices over who should rule Thebes. They led two opposite sides in civil war and they killed each other in battle. Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, ordered for Eteocles to be buried with all the appropriate honours, while Polyneices should be left unburied as pray for the vultures, opposed to the laws of the gods. Antigone acted rebelliously and buried her brother despite Creon's proclamation that was against her ethics.

As a consequence for her defiance, she was sentenced to be buried alive in a cave. On the way to her living tomb, showing no remorse for her actions but deep sorrow for her end, she compared herself to Niobe while conversing with the chorus. The passage has been retrieved from the fourth episode of *Antigone* 823-833:

Antigone:

*How often I have heard the story of our Phrygian guest,  
Tantalos' wretched daughter,  
perished* 825  
*in so much suffering on steep Sipylus  
how, like clinging ivy, the sprouting stone subdued her.  
And the rains, as men tell,  
do not leave her melting form,  
nor does the snow,* 830  
*but beneath her weeping lids she dampens her collar  
Most like hers is the god-sent fate  
that leads me to my rest.*

Chorus:

*Yet she was a goddess, as you know,  
and the offspring of gods,* 835  
*while we are mortals and mortal-born.  
Still it is a great thing for a woman who has died to have it said of her  
that she shared the lot of the godlike in her life, and afterwards, in death.*

Soph. *Ant.* 833-838.

### 3.3.5 Commentary and conclusions on *Antigone*

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In Homer, we saw the utility of the myth of Niobe as *paradeigma* in order to console Priam for the loss of his son. Sophocles' character of *Antigone* uses it again but here the *paradeigma* has the form of comparison. Antigone is in need for consolation while being led alive to her sepulcher carved in the rocks.<sup>82</sup> This way of dying evokes the case of Niobe and her imminent fate.

In 823-831, Antigone outlines the end of Niobe without giving more information about the legend itself. She mentions the frequency of the narration of the myth, so it is safe to

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<sup>82</sup> Kamerbeek 1978, 150.

claim that the details regarding the return of Niobe to Lydia and her petrification had been well known to the audience.

The two tragic figures have a lot in common; they both suffer in Thebes having lost their beloved family in a violent way but, most importantly, their ending is similar and repulsive. Antigone is on her way to her stony chamber just like Niobe is entrapped in Mt. Sipylus.<sup>83</sup> This common ground leads her to utter the two last lines, 832-833 and to compare her fate to the one of Niobe, where in Sophocles fate would mean the will of the gods.<sup>84</sup>

The response of the chorus is not the one expected. Garner in his book *From Homer to Tragedy; the art of Allusion in Greek poetry*, explains that the chorus objects to this parallel, illustrating Niobe's divine ancestry.<sup>85</sup> Kamerbeek characterizes this a moment of exaggeration as she was only a granddaughter to Zeus.<sup>86</sup> Kerényi however, attributes these higher honours to Niobe to an ancient and original divine rank based on the existence of the weeping stone in Sipylus. In *Goddesses of Sun and Moon*, he gives Niobe a divine essence and a relevant chapter is dedicated to this argument.<sup>87</sup>

He explains that she stood close to the Great Mother Goddess of Asia Minor who was connected to the mountains and he also mentions the existence of report showing that the Cicilians of Asia Minor worshipped Niobe as goddess as well. It is not the first time Sophocles gives us a relative hint. Also in *Electra* is Niobe put in a divine cosmic status.<sup>88</sup>

Antigone is comparing her fate to the one of the legendary queen of Thebes on the grounds of loss and unfair ending. The chorus bitterly rejects the mythological paradeigma by pointing out the differences in the two cases. Antigone is mortal so she does not have the right to make such comparisons while Niobe is presented as a divine

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<sup>83</sup> Kamerbeek 1978, 150-151.

<sup>84</sup> Webster 1936, 24.

<sup>85</sup> Garner 1990, 85.

<sup>86</sup> Kamerbeek 1978, 150.

<sup>87</sup> Kerényi & Stein 1979, 64-66.

<sup>88</sup> *And Niobe, that suffered all, you, too, I count God who weeps perpetually in her rock grave.* Soph. *El.* 150-154.

ideal of endurance. This is an honour no mortal can enjoy. The gravity of Niobe's example is minimized and no comfort for Antigone can be extracted from it.<sup>89</sup>

In subchapter 3.1 the reader was acquainted with the utility of the mythological example. I shall remind that it is a myth used for exhortation and consolation, told by somebody of stronger position in order to soothe the pain of the listener. Achilles' mythological example of Niobe in the *Iliad* was successful since it fulfilled its goal, Priam's end of fasting. In the attic tragedy though, Antigone is attempting to use it in the sense of self-consolation instead of the familiar manner of receiving it from a third party.

As Malcolm Davies states, *this example was raised only to be rejected*.<sup>90</sup> Sophocles wants crestfallen Antigone on the stage. Her position becomes even more dramatic when she presents a mythological example in order to receive compassion and a sympathetic response from the chorus. It is not a pathetic act; it is an act driven by absolute loneliness and isolation. Still, a hero is not supposed to console himself; this is a result of positive interaction. Thus, the chorus rejects her beseech for solace raising deep feelings of compassion to the audience.

### 3.3.6 Women's suffering

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Sophocles' vocabulary when referring to Niobe is haunting: *wretched daughter, perished, suffering*. His correlation of the fate of two female figures has a solid base and it would not be unsafe to say that they are both victims of divine injustice.

The illustration of Niobe's status is indicative of her relationship with the gods. But gods can be unjust to everyone, even to those of higher status and Niobe is not an exception. The death of her children at such young age meant the end of her lineage. An utter destruction of her house for an unfortunate moment is disproportioned to a reckless comment but this is the gods' will. Antigone on the other hand, was not disrespectful towards the gods. In fact, she acted in favour of her family according to her ethics and the divine law. Her fate, however, was determined and despite her piety, she was not

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<sup>89</sup> Davies 1985, 248-249.

<sup>90</sup> Davies 1985, 248.

protected from Creon's irrational commands. Like Aeschylus, Sophocles raises the topic of divine unfairness and human suffering.

## Chapter 4 - Picturing Niobe

In the previous chapter I demonstrated the polydimensional character of the myth of Niobe as expressed in Greek literary sources. In this chapter, painted pottery is entered into the discussion. A set of eight vases within a time span from the Archaic to Late Classical Era is presented and analyzed in terms of context when possible, utility and choice of theme in each representation. The aim is to examine a relative existence of plurality of themes in the imagery connected to the myth and the ideas illustrated in each occasion.

### 4.1 Introduction

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The myth of Niobe had its basic core formed by the time of Homer and it had been much popular even before it flourished in the genre of tragedy during the Classical Era. The artistic handling and distribution of the myth however, is a very interesting issue. In pottery, our main source of mythological imagery of Greek antiquity, the relevant depictions referring to the myth were remarkably rare.<sup>91</sup>

The earliest representations can be found on the Athenian black figure amphorae of 600-550 B.C.E. belonging to the Tyrrhenian group according to Beazley. In *LIMC* there are two amphorae featuring the myth but only one of them is complete and can be described with certainty as seen in 4.2.1.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Neils 2008, 41.

<sup>92</sup> The other example is a fragment that belongs to an amphora of the Tyrrhenian group where Apollo and Artemis are depicted to chase the fleeing Niobids. This piece can be found in Antikenmuseum der Universität in Leipzig. However, there is still a debate as to this depiction is in fact the myth of Niobe or the myth of Tityos. A reference to this particular piece can be found in *LIMC* Vol 6.1 1992, 916 under the name *Apollon 1078*.

Almost one century later, when red-figure had taken precedent over black-figure and had become the predominant technique of pottery decoration in Athens, did the myth of Niobe reappear on a variety of vessels from amphorae to kylikes but still in a number that remains remarkably low. Cook counts only six or seven instances showing the myth of Niobe.<sup>93</sup>

These vases were found in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and the records with details about provenance are insufficient or lost; little or no information can be extracted from their archaeological excavation contexts. Nevertheless, what can be said is that their production point was Athens but their finding points were in their plurality in the Etruscan core land. In the three attic red-figure examples presented below, the calyx krater by the Niobid Painter was found in Orvieto while the Athenian red-figure amphora by the Niobid Painter, as well as the Athenian red-figure cup by the Phiale Painter, were found in Vulci, Etruria, where prominent cemeteries have been excavated. These vases could most plausibly constitute grave goods reflecting the wealth and sophistication of their owners.

The instances on both attic black and red figure pottery belong to the theme of violence and divine wrath and punishment; the representations concern only the most intense moment of the myth, the Massacre of the Niobids. In all representations the gods are attacking the children and their position inspires awe and fear. The Niobids are not only innocent and helpless but also vulnerable and exposed to this aggression in an outdoor environment where there is no refuge or chance of salvation.

This rarity of the depiction of myth on pottery during that era is a matter that has distressed scholarship. Cook in his inaugural lecture on Niobe, attributes this phenomenon to the lack of the appropriate artistic skills and conventions which could allow a proper representation of the number of the children, the different stages of their death, the level where the gods are standing and all the details that would allow the depiction of the myth in its full extent with the bright exception of the Niobid painter.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Keuls 1997, 173.

<sup>94</sup> Cook 1964, 14-15.

The prevalence of the ceramic industry in Athens began to fade after the Peloponnesian war and coincided with the continuously increasing production of Italiot vases for local consumption in the Greek West.<sup>95</sup> This phenomenon was also accompanied with a thematic change. So far, we have encountered only the massacre of the Niobids but not any depiction of Niobe, although the foundation of the myth is her hubris and insolence. In South Italian red-figure vase painting though, the situation is diametrically opposite; the dominating figure is always mourning Niobe and there is no or exceptionally rare depiction of her children as seen in four characteristic examples in subchapters 4.2.5-4.2.7.

Based on contextual information, it has been established that the theme was exclusively used to decorate pieces made for female graves and the reasons behind the choice of illustration can be attributed to different cultural perceptions. The brutal images such as a massacre would not be longer appropriate but the character of the woman Niobe would enclose all the values of perseverance, royal ancestry and lineage, maternal love and femininity as well as pride and would serve the purpose right.

As seen in 1.1 in *Previous research*, scholarship has had the tendency to treat iconography as complementary to tragedy, a fact that has influenced their work and conclusions. Although there is evidence in favour of the connection between those vases and the fragmentary tragedies of *Niobe*, there are some considerable deviations. The correspondence of an image and a plot does not necessarily imply that the viewer is prompted to a tragedy but it does not exclude this possibility.<sup>96</sup>

It is not the purpose of this Thesis to make this sort of connections; on the contrary, my purpose is to remain neutral to such preconceptions as much as possible. However, it should be mentioned that both literature and art were means of thought-provocation and particularly in the cases of tragedy and South Italian red-figure painting, the goal was to offer comfort and solace through the ordeal of disorder pain and disappointment.

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<sup>95</sup> Taplin 2007, 15.

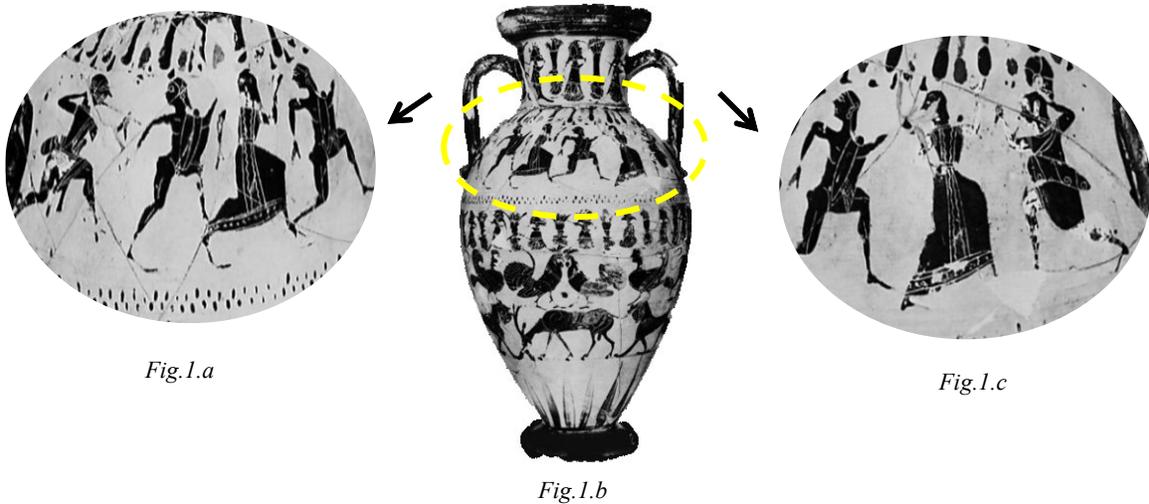
<sup>96</sup> Taplin 2007, 36.

## 4.2 Material Analysis

### 4.2.1 Tyrrhenian Amphora by Castellani Painter

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Painted by Castellani painter, this neck amphora has been dated between 600-550 B.C.E. and has been attributed to the Tyrrhenian Group by Beazley. There is no information regarding the provenance it was found. It is currently housed at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg.



*Figure 1. Tyrrhenian Amphora. In the center (b) the front side of the vase. On the left (a), a detail of Apollo ready to shoot the two male and one female Niobid. On the right (c), the last female Niobid being threatened by Artemis.*

The amphorae were means of transfer not only of luxurious products such as Attic oil and wine but of cultural elements as well. The Tyrrhenian group was unique and limited; about two hundred of these vases have been recorded. They featured the most prestigious and glorious myths of the Archaic Era, the legends of the Hercules and the Trojan War cycle but also the best examples of the most vivid and stimulating myths from the Greek oral tradition.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Mehren 2002, 33.

On A side of the shoulder of this 41.6cm-high amphora, the depictions show Heracles and Nessus, as well as Deianeira between women while on B side the painter chose to depict the massacre of the Niobids (Fig.1.b).

The details on the amphora match completely the ones known from the myth; Apollo and Artemis are killing the Niobids with arrows. The gods are depicted entrapping four of the Niobids, two boys and two girls. As seen in Fig.1.a, Apollo is wearing a short chiton and boots and he is holding a bow and an arrow aiming at the boys. In Fig.1.c, his sister, Artemis, is also wearing a short chiton as well as a helmet, which is unusual.

In this scene of chase and violence, the terrified Niobids are trapped and unsuccessfully trying to escape from the archers. Cook highlights the problem of the number of the Niobids and the number of arrows; each one of the Gods is holding only one arrow. Could this mean that we are dealing with a version where the some children are spared?<sup>98</sup> He disregards this argument by stressing the simplicity and immediacy of the messages on pottery during the archaic era. Moreover, such version appeared much later. Thus, it must be assumed that the Niobids would be killed with a single shot.<sup>99</sup> The depiction of the shows a certain preference in this theme by the Etruscan clientele and highlights its importance.

#### 4.2.2 Calyx Krater by the Niobid Painter

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Exported from Athens but found in Orvieto, Italy, this calyx krater constitutes an exceptional example of the Niobids' massacre (Fig.2). It dates back to 460-450 B.C.E. and according to Beazley it has been attributed to Niobid Painter who got his name from this representation. Sophie Padel-Imbaud, whose description accompanies the vessel on the database of the Museum of Louvre where it has been housed since 1883, the painter

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<sup>98</sup> Cook 1964, 7-8.

<sup>99</sup> Cook 1964, 8.

was probably inspired by the contemporary wall paintings in Stoa Poikile in Athens and Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi possibly made by Polygnotus.<sup>100</sup>

Opposed to A side, where Hercules is depicted in a relaxed and majestic pose among warriors, this side is a most tense scene of the brutal killing, just like it happens at the pediments at Olympia where the contrast between front and back side is deliberate.<sup>101</sup> Artemis, drawing an arrow from the quiver ready to kill the next Niobid seems calm and determined, while Apollo's body on the other hand has been drawn in such way that the viewer can feel the threat of his presence and the upcoming slaying. The Niobids are lying on the ground already dead, hit by the swift arrows or soon dying. This is an active image of vengeance where the divine power triumphs over the human helplessness which is stressed by the absence of Niobe.



*Figure 2. The slaughter of the Niobids. Attic Red-figure Calyx Krater by the Niobid Painter, ca. 450 B.C.E.*

This krater is unique from different perspectives. The red-orange clay became the canvas where Niobid painter drew the figures realistically on various wavy groundlines, in great detail and a variety of positions, frontal and three quarter views.<sup>102</sup> The tree next to Apollo and the abandonment of the ground line offered the essence of perspective and third dimension.

What is even more remarkable is that this is not a small representation on a shoulder of an amphora. It is a main scene on a vessel for mixing water and wine, an essential piece

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<sup>100</sup> Padel-Imbaud 2013, 15 April. This argument is based on the arrangement of the figures and the conveyance of depth and space by Polygnotus, who possibly painted these murals in the period 480-460 B.C.E. For detailed discussion, see Pedley 2002, 240.

<sup>101</sup> Pollitt 1999, 45; Pedley 2002, 239.

<sup>102</sup> Pedley 2002, 239.

for the formalized social drinking for symposium. The slaughtering of children is not naturally an attractive topic in social encounters but it could constitute the base for exchanging ideas regarding human condition, divine malevolence and injustice and reflecting on relevant tantalizing topics that flourished during the classical era.<sup>103</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Athenian Red-Figure Amphora by the Niobid Painter

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The preference of the Niobid painter to the divine retribution is supported by another piece of his work, a red-figure amphora that dates back to 475-425 B.C.E (Fig. 3).

Not much information can be given on the vase. Found in Vulci at the beginning of the 19th century, this amphora has a most interesting and unusual depiction; Artemis, once again armed with a bow and a quiver, is pursuing not a Niobid but Niobe herself who is holding one of her children in her arms.

In this case the violence is raw; the goddess stands merciless in front of a mother and the scene could be a reminder of the moment in Sophoclean *Niobe* where the crestfallen is begging Artemis to kill her first instead of her innocent daughter. Niobe is an example of a devoted mother who is trying to protect her child from danger, ready to sacrifice her life instead.



*Figure 3. Artemis and Niobe fleeing with child. Athenian Red-Figure Amphora by the Niobid Painter ca. 475-425 B.C.E.*

#### 4.2.4 Athenian Red-Figure Cylix by the Phiale Painter

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A cylix (drinking cup) attributed to the Phiale painter, features a similar scene on its exterior. As far as the utility of the vessel is concerned, the drinking cups had a complementary role to the kraters at the symposia. Special emphasis was given by the

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<sup>103</sup> Taplin 2007, 44.

artists to the inner side, as the representations were gradually being revealed while drinking. However, the exterior side offered a wide surface for complex depictions which could also provide the foundations for deep discussions.

This particular cylix was produced in Athens between 440-430 B.C.E. but it was excavated in Vulci. Since 1867, it belongs to the collection of Greek and Roman Antiquities of the British Museum but as the surface is much injured, no image has been published for the public.

According to the curator's description, there are two separate scenes of the slaughter of the Niobids in the exterior of the cup. In the first scene beardless Apollo, whose name is written on an inscription, is shooting a boy. He is depicted with his special attributes, the bow and the quiver-case hanging from his right shoulder while he is pointing an arrow towards the fleeing boy with his extended fore-finger. The Niobid is turning his back at the archer in an attempt to escape and he is raising his right arm in order to protect his face. In the middle of the surface Phiale painter drew a tree just like the Niobid painter in order to give the essence of ground and depth. On the right side of the tree there is a woman on the move with her arms open in an act of despair who has been identified as Niobe by Raoul-Rochette.<sup>104</sup>

On the second scene, remaining loyal to the details of the myth, the Phiale painter depicts Artemis whose name is also inscribed. She is shooting a female Niobid who makes a dramatic movement lifting her hand on her forehead. She is trying to escape the wrath of the goddess and so do her two running brothers on each side. One of them is holding a stone against Artemis with his brother probably on his assistance.<sup>105</sup>

The painting on this cup combines the essence of the two previous examples. On the one hand there is violence, aggression and divine retribution while on the other hand there is terror, fear and despair from the side of the Niobids, who despite the fact that they are aware of their fate, they are still trying to escape. Two of the male Niobids in fact are possibly trying to attack the goddess if the image has been interpreted correctly.

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<sup>104</sup> British museum 2013, 10 April.

<sup>105</sup> British museum 2013, 10 April.

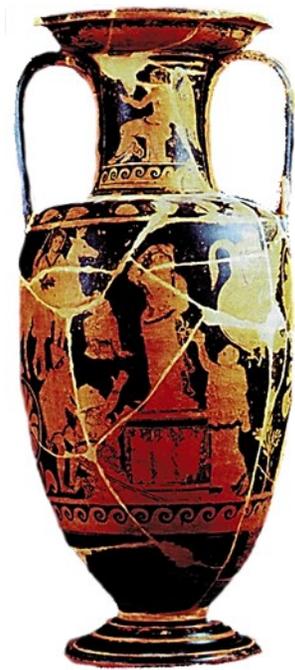
In the middle of the scene there is the terrified woman, the mother with her arms open trying to protect her innocent children and stop the massacre. The image of the exterior part of the cup could be possibly characterized most tense; the viewer at the symposium would immediately recollect the myth of Niobe, her hubris, the repercussions of attempting to rise above human station and the limitless power of the gods.

#### 4.2.5 Neck Amphora from Tomb 24, Roccagloriosa

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Found in Roccagloriosa, a western Lucanian site, this amphora is the first example of Mourning Niobe (Fig.4). It has been dated back to 390-380 B.C.E. and it is accompanied by rich contextual information which allows a more thorough analysis of the depiction.

Roccagloriosa was a well-structured and rich settlement of the fourth century B.C.E. and



*Figure 4. Mourning Niobe.  
Neck Amphora from Tomb 24,  
Roccagloriosa, ca. 390-380  
B.C.E.*

excavations have unearthed a cemetery separated by low walls built in order to distinguish the burial sites of two major aristocratic families.<sup>106</sup> On the northern part of the wall, there is tomb 24 with the dominating presence of a mature female on a stone bed; at her feet among luxurious tomb goods, this red-figure amphora was found.<sup>107</sup>

Niobe is standing on a base depicting the three fates, while she has gradually begun to transform into a stone. On the right, an old man, most probably Tantalus is kneeling in front of the base while being supported by an attendant.

On the left an old woman is raising her hand towards her. Niobe makes the typical mourning movement, bringing her arm to her forehead. Apollo and Artemis are also present.

According to Fracchia, the context, as well as the fact that the vase was decades older than the other objects in the tomb, are

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<sup>106</sup> Fracchia 2012, 72-73.

<sup>107</sup> Fracchia 2012, 73.

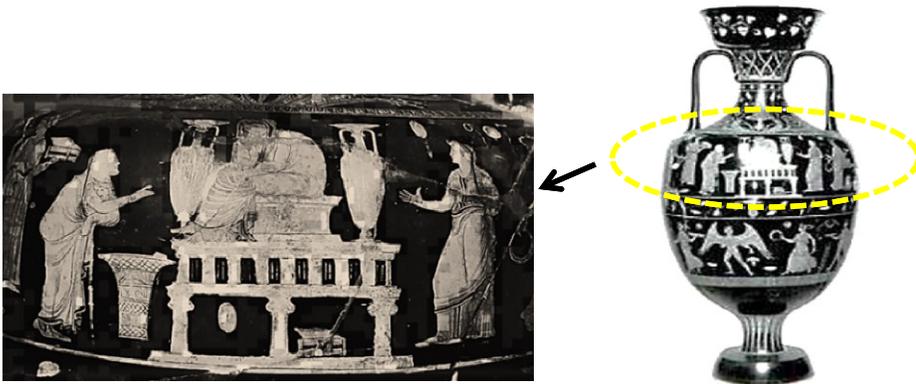
key factors to determine the purpose of image.<sup>108</sup> The deceased was a woman of power and aristocratic status so it is natural to acquire objects that would reflect her prominent position. The amphora was probably produced on her demand and no instance would be more suitable than the one of Niobe in order to highlight the ideas of ancestry, lineage and pride.

As seen from the sources, Niobe was a character that enjoyed a unique social status; granddaughter of the father of the gods, daughter of the king of Lydia, wife of the king of Thebes, close friends with Leto according to Sappho, she was an exceptional example of nobility and connection of dynasties.<sup>109</sup> By displaying this amphora, the owner indirectly reminded her environment of her own ancestry and aristocratic ties and presented herself as an archetype that possibly incorporated the contemporary values.

#### 4.2.6 Varrese Painter; two examples of femininity

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Unlike the case of the amphora found in Roccagloriosa site, there is not much contextual information for the following two examples.



*Figure 5. Niobe sitting and lamenting on tomb. Apulian Amphora most likely related to Aeschylus' Niobe by the Varrese Painter, 340*

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<sup>108</sup> Fracchia 2012, 73.

<sup>109</sup> Fracchia 2012, 73.

The first one (Fig.5) is an amphora dated to 340 B.C.E. which can be found today at the National Archaeological Museum in Taranto. Taplin, in *Pots and plays* dedicates a lengthy passage on this particular vase in an attempt to connect its depiction to Aeschylus' lost play.<sup>110</sup>

Niobe is veiled, sitting on the top of a large tomb in a mourning position between two ribbed funerary amphorae. Her legs are painted in white so as to show her ongoing petrification. On her left there is an old man addressing her but not in the dramatic way of the Roccagloriosa; he seems to have an advisory role. On her right there is an old woman and if there is in fact a connection to the play, this could well be Antiope. Niobe is undoubtedly an example of grief and lamentation and is dominating the scene. However, Fracchia also underlines the importance of the other figures of women that are depicted, as well as the objects.<sup>111</sup>

Under the tomb there is an open jewelry chest while, apart from the main characters, women are holding a lyre, a fan and a wreath, all objects connected to women's everyday life. The lyre in particular, apart from signifying marriage, is also a direct reference to Niobe's husband, Amphion, famous for playing this instrument during the building of the walls of Thebes.<sup>112</sup>

Niobe is not only a mother, a queen and an archetype of heroic grief but she is also a woman and this side is highlighted by her being surrounded by objects pertaining to the female world.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Taplin 2007, 74.

<sup>111</sup> Fracchia 2012, 77.

<sup>112</sup> Fracchia 2012, 77.

<sup>113</sup> Fracchia 2012, 77.

The emphasis on the traditional role of women by the Varrese painter is also visible in the amphora found in the Akademische Kunstmuseum with a very important addition, the *naiskos* (Fig.6). *Naiskos* (small temple) is a structure with columns of sepulchral meaning and, according to Keuls, it “signifies the eternal status and the transition into immortality”.<sup>114</sup> *Naiskos* made its appearance on the vases found in elite burials in Daunia and Peucetia in the middle of the fourth century and became an essential part on sepulchral iconography as seen, for instance, in the plurality of Niobe examples.



*Figure 6. Mourning Niobe standing on tomb. Amphora attributed to the Varrese painter, ca. 340 B.C.E.*

In this depiction, the features are similar to the Taranto amphora. Niobe is surrounded by young women each of whom is holding objects connected to marriage, fertility and beauty. A kalathos, a basket with fruit, is also displayed as an example of the fertility of the earth and relevant agricultural activities. However, mourning Niobe standing in naiskos and slowly turning into stone is once again dominating. Tantalus, representing dynastic ties, is not depicted, neither is the old nurse, a fact which differentiates these amphorae to the one found in Roccagloriosa.

#### 4.2.7 Closure: The Campanian Red-figure Hydria

This hydria, a vessel used for carrying water, is perhaps one of the best illustrations of Niobe’s mourning. It was published in 1972 by Trendall who attributed it to the hand of the Libation Painter. Nowadays, it belongs to Nicholson museum in Sydney (Fig.7).

In the center Niobe is standing in a *naiskos* but the offerings placed at the grave are probably dedicated to her children.<sup>115</sup> She is depicted veiled, in the conventional gesture

<sup>114</sup> Keuls 1997, 188-191.

<sup>115</sup> Trendall 1971, 58.

of mourning but, in contrast to the other examples, the petrification has proceeded; the painter has covered her body with white paint until the level of her waist.



*Figure 7. Red-figure hydria with almost fully petrified Niobe at the tomb, ca. 325 B.C.E. Nicholson Museum,*

On the left side allegedly Tantalus is holding his scepter showing his aristocratic status and he is supported by a young attendant while kneeling on the step of the Naiskos in despair<sup>116</sup>. His expression is most dramatic, he is frail and standing helpless in front of the gradual death of his daughter. On the other side, a woman is sitting on the steps of the naiskos but the colour of her hair shows that she is young in age, so it is impossible for her to be Antiope. She could be an attendant. The gods are depicted close to the action but simultaneously at a distance; a seated veiled woman that could possibly be Leto or Artemis and Apollo holding his special attribute, the laurel branch.

The lack of information regarding the provenience makes it impossible to give more information about the symbolism of this vase. What can be told is that it has been inspired by the contemporary vases from Taranto and Apulia and just as in previous cases, it could reflect the qualities of the deceased; Niobe is here the example of the dedicated mother, the woman who finds no purpose in life after the death of her children and although she is causing her father the similar pain, she is unable to desist despite his pleading.

Trendall has made a connection to the Aeschylean tragedy, however there are two important deviations;<sup>117</sup> Niobe is standing, not sitting and, most importantly, the attendant is young while the play dictates the presence of an old woman. In any case, it could be inspired by a later tragedy with remains lost up to date, where Niobe is handled in a similar way as the great tragedian did.

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<sup>116</sup> Green et al. 2003, 63.

<sup>117</sup> Trendall 1971, 58;

## Chapter 5 – Reflections and Conclusions

The principle that has inspired this paper is that every myth, text or image should be open to many interpretations without preconceptions. It would be rather naïve to support an opposite argument; perception is subjective and relative.

I attempted to apply it on the literary sources regarding Niobe, some easier to find and analyze like Homer, some neglected and even unmentioned in handbooks, like the Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedies. The results of this analysis were far from disappointing; I encountered four different themes in four different cases that all developed around the same axis, Niobe's hubris. Therefore we have:

- The theme of reconciliation with loss and consolation for the pain in Homer. Niobe is the example of a human who has experienced the most severe pain and still manages to accept the idea of the death of her offspring.
- The theme of human-divine relationship and responsibility in Aeschylus and the roots for human hubris that can be traced in divine jealousy and malevolence. It is remarkable how lamentation is described as well as the importance of lineage.
- The theme of human weakness, evident in Niobe's sudden realization of her cosmic status while witnessing the slaughter of her unmarried girls in the Sophoclean tragedy. The dramatized killing leaves no room for consolation or mourning, just the despair of a mother imploring to be killed instead of her child.
- Finally, the theme of the unfairness of the gods regardless of status and origin, the disproportionate retaliation and the inexplicable will of gods as seen in *Antigone*.

Four passages of different level of depth and maturity illustrated a myth of a woman embracing many qualities and feelings; beaten but courageous, silent but deeply angry and hurt, devastated and begging but always punished for the same crime.

In the second part of the research, the analysis of the pictorial representation, the pattern was similar:

- In the examples of the attic black and red-figure pottery, the main focus was the Massacre of the Niobids. Even at a low scale, the artists chose to depict the most dramatic moment of the myth, the divine retribution. In the cases of the Tyrrhenian amphora and the calyx krater from Orvieto, the gods are represented as ruthless carriers of justice ready to restore the balance through the entrapment and slaughter of the innocent children who are trying to flee. The absence of Niobe stresses the helplessness of the children but also removes the focus from her insolence; it is the gods' position and actions that are being criticized in a way. As far as the amphora by the Niobid Painter and the cup by the Phiale painter are concerned, Niobe receives a more active role and gives the image greater psychological depth. She incorporates the value of the devoted mother who is gradually crushed by the view of the merciless gods slaying her offspring. She is trying to be a protector but she is aware of the inevitable end.
- In the Italian red-figure vase painting, Niobe became a multidimensional character; she became the woman, the queen, the daughter and the wife without losing the role of the shattered veiled and gradually petrifying mother who embraced otherworldliness. The Niobe of Roccagloriosa, belonging to a prominent aristocratic woman, highlighted her lineage, pride and social status as member of glorious mythical dynasties. The Niobe of the Varrese Painter revealed her femininity through the depiction of objects connected to women's world. In the case of the Amphora, the adoption of *naiskos* gave the depiction a twofold meaning; death but also transition into immortality, transforming Niobe into an example of perseverance and hope. Finally, in the hydria attributed to Libation Painter, Niobe incarnates the role of the devoted mother to its absolute extent; unable to live without her children who died due to her own folly, she is welcoming her own death and absolution.

Returning to the aim of this present Thesis, my purpose was to see how biased we are when interpreting the Greek myths, using the myth of Niobe as a key-study. I cited the

modern views prevailing in mythological handbooks which basically portray the legend as an example of hubris. This position is not false but it is incomplete and it is a result of the dominant approaches towards Greek antiquity. It is true that the unchangeable core through time above any means of expression is Niobe's boasting and the subsequent punishment. However, I reckon that I demonstrated the fact that for the ancient contemporary listener or viewer the matter was more complex.

In the myth of Niobe there is a web of themes weaved around this core at different stages and in different occasions; it is them that define its essence in each case. The legend gave the motive to delve into the matters of motherhood, femininity, pride, lineage and social status, consolation, human-divine relationships as well as divine injustice; modern ignorance towards these aspects would be at least unfair. Being biased towards ancient Greek myths deprives them from their beauty and intricacy and I believe that through the new scientific methods within classics, history and archaeology, this problem will be resolved and at this point, with this hope, this discussion comes to an end.

## Literature

### List of Abbreviations according to the American Journal of Archaeology

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<i>AJP</i>	American Journal of Philology
<i>BAPD</i>	Beazley Archive Pottery Database
<i>CQ</i>	Classical Quarterly
<i>CVA</i>	Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum
<i>Hermes</i>	Hermes. Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie
<i>HSCP</i>	Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
<i>JP</i>	Journal of Philology
<i>JRA</i>	Journal of Roman Archaeology
<i>LIMC</i>	Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae (Zurich and Munich 1974–)
<i>OCD</i> <sup>3</sup>	S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth eds., <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> . 3 Oxford 1996
<i>RVAp</i>	A.D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, <i>The Red-Figured Vases of Apulia</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik

## Ancient Sources

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The abbreviations used for the ancient sources follow the instructions of *OCD*<sup>3</sup>:

<i>Apollod(orus)</i>	Apollodoros from Athens, <i>The library: in two volumes</i> , trans. Sir James George Frazer London 1921.
Aristoph(anes) <i>Frogs</i>	Aristofanes, <i>The comedies of Aristophanes. Vol. 9, Frogs</i> , trans. A. H. Sommerstein Warminster 1996.
Hom(eros) <i>Il(iad)</i>	Homeros, <i>The Iliad</i> , trans. A.T. Murray, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1924.
Plut(archos) <i>Mor(alia)</i>	Plutarch, <i>Morals</i> , corrected and revised by William W. Goodwin, Cambridge 1874.
Soph(ocles) <i>Ant(igone)</i>	Sofokles, <i>The plays and fragments. P. 2, The Antigone</i> , 2. ed., trans. Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb, Cambridge 1891.
Soph(ocles) <i>El(ectra)</i>	Sofokles, <i>Electra</i> , trans. E. P. Coleridge. New York, 1938

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Fig.1: Classical art research centre and the Beazley archive. 2013, 20 March. "Classical Art Research Centre Extensible Database (XDB)." *Classical art research centre and the Beazley archive*. <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/browseCVARRecord.asp?id={0DDB7E97-4965-4C6E-BCA9-EFDCB49DEE6B}>.

Fig. 2: Louvre. 2013, 15 April. "Attic Red-Figure Calyx Krater known as the Niobid Krater." *Louvre*. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/attic-red-figure-calyx-krater-known-niobid-krater>.

Fig.3: Classical art research centre and the Beazley archive. 2013, 20 March. "Classical Art Research Centre Extensible Database (XDB)." *Classical art research centre and the Beazley archive*. <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/browse.asp?tableName=qryData&newwindow=&BrowseSession=1&companyPage=Contacts&newwindowsearchclosefrombrowse=>.

Fig.4: Photograph retrieved from Fracchia 2012, 72.

Fig.5: Photograph retrieved from Taplin 2007, 74.

Fig.6: Photograph retrieved from Fracchia 2012, 76.

Fig.7: Photograph retrieved from Green et al. 2003, 63.

## Appendix

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1. Niobe, translation by D.L. Page. The lines are attributed to Niobe who speaks in first person singular. The sequence of the fragments follows the one of Fitton-Brown.<sup>118</sup>

*NIOBE. Now I only mourn my father, strong Tantalus,  
who begot me and gave me forth in marriage;  
to such a life without a haven has he been driven aground by Phoebus;  
the high winds of calamity assault our house. 5  
Your own eyes behold my wedding's end:  
three days already sitting here upon the tomb,  
moaning above my children dead,  
I mourn the misfortune of their beauty.  
Man brought to misery is a shadow, nothing else.  
Strong Tantalus will presently come hither . . . 10  
So, the anger of Phoebus against Amphion,  
wherefore he has destroyed his house with outrage, root and branch,  
I will expound to you—you are not enemies.  
God first creates a fault in man, 15  
when He is minded utterly to ruin his estate.  
Man must attend meantime to the good fortune that God gives him,  
and guard his lips from insolence.  
They whose turn it is to prosper never think  
that they shall stumble and spill forth the (welfare) of to-day. 20  
For see, I too, exultant in the beauty . . .*

Tantalus:

*I sow a field twelve days' journey wide, even the Berecynthian land, whereAdrastea's seat and  
Ida resound with lowing oxen and bleating sheep, and the whole plain roars. (T.G.F 158)*

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<sup>118</sup> Page 1924, 9; Fitton Brown 1954,

*My soul, which was up above in heaven, has fallen to earth and says to me: Learn not to honour too much the things of mortal life (T.G.F. 159)*

Unknown speaker:

*For, alone of gods, Death loves not gifts; no, not by sacrifice, nor by libation, canst thou aught avail with him; he hath no altar nor hath he hymn of praise; from him, alone of gods, Persuasion stands aloof (T.G.F.161)*

Niobe:

*The kindred of the gods, men near to Zeus, whose is the altar of Zeus, their sire, high in clear air on Ida's hill, and in their veins not yet hath ceased to flow the blood divine (T.G.F. 162)*

Unknown speaker:

*And to ashes will I burn the house of Amphion by my fire bearing eagles (T.F.G.160)*