

## Myth and Reality in the Battle between the Pygmies and the Cranes in the Greek and Roman Worlds

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**Abstract.** Ancient writers, such as Homer, Aesop, Hecataeus of Miletus, Herodotus, Aristotle, Philostratus, Pliny the Elder, Juvenal and others have often referred to the enmity and struggle between the Pygmies and the Cranes. It seems that this folk-tale was conveyed to the Greeks through Egyptian sources. Greek and Roman visual works of art depict the Pygmies fighting against the vigorous and violent attack of the birds, which in some cases was vicious. This article sets out to examine the reasons for the literary and artistic portrayals of the Battle between the Pygmies and the Cranes (*Geranomachy*) in the context of the migration of the cranes in the autumn from the Caucasus (Scythian plains) to Central (Equatorial) Africa. In addition, an attempt will be made to clarify whether the literary sources and visual works of art reflect myth and/or reality.

**Keywords:** Egypt; Ethiopia; *Geranomachy*; Migration; Nile; Scythia; Trojans.

### [en] Mito y realidad en la batalla entre los pigmeos y las grullas en el mundo griego y romano

**Resumen.** Escritores antiguos, tales como Homero, Esopo, Hecateo de Mileto, Herodoto, Aristóteles, Filóstrato, Plinio el Viejo, Juvenal y otros se refirieron frecuentemente a la enemistad y guerra entre los pigmeos y las grullas. Es posible que este cuento popular fuese transmitido a los griegos a través de fuentes egipcias. Obras de arte visual griegas y romanas describen a los pigmeos luchando contra el ataque violento de las grullas. Este artículo examina las razones de las representaciones literarias y artísticas de esta batalla (*Geranomachia*) en el contexto de la migración de estas aves en el otoño desde el Cáucaso (llanuras de Escitia) hasta el África Central (Ecuatorial). Además, intentará clarificar si las fuentes literarias y las obras artísticas reflejan el mito y la realidad.

**Palabras clave:** Egipto; Etiopía; *geranomachia*; migración; Nilo; Escitia; troyanos.

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*To the Memory of Edna Ben-Dov*

*Like pygmies we fight with cranes*— Henry David Thoreau

*War does not determine who is right, only who is left*— Bertrand Russell

## 1. Introduction

To the best of our knowledge, there are no Greek nor Roman literary sources referring to the meaning of the battle between the Pygmies and the cranes, neither a clear and unequivocal interpretation has been provided to date by modern studies. Each literary source mentioned in the present article has its own importance and is presented in chronological order, with the exception of Aristotle, who reveals more reliability regarding the migration of the cranes and the location of the Pygmies. Therefore, the aim of the article is to shed light on this obscure and enigmatic mythical tale and its representation in visual works of art, as well as to offer some ideas regarding its ambiguities and grasp the significance and importance of its message.

The Battle of the Pygmies and the Cranes (*Geranomachy*) is a theme that appears both in Greek myth and in Greek and Roman visual art (wall paintings, sculptural works, mosaics and vase paintings). Despite its interest and curious nature, the essential question is to what extent is there a degree of fantasy and realism in the realism in the episode. What did the Greek and Roman writers and artists really intend to express from the conceptual viewpoint when engaging with this unusual theme? Did they imagine it as an exotic epic, based on legends and rumors or did the theme express a kind of burlesque, in a spirit of parody? Did they refer to it as a real event, based on reliable information, due to their intellectual curiosity? In other words, did the theme express myth or reality with allegorical connotations? Did the Greek and Roman writers and artists perceive this theme as an allegory of the conflict between Greeks and Trojans, or between good and evil?

The *geranomachy* arouses great interest from both the conceptual and artistic points of view. It has also aroused the interest and curiosity of scholars, including those who explored Equatorial Africa.<sup>3</sup>

The Pygmies (πυγμαῖοι) and the cranes (γέρανοι)<sup>4</sup> are mentioned in several Greek and Latin literary sources, in which the Pygmies sometimes lose their battles with

<sup>3</sup> Cf. SCOBIE 1975, 122.

<sup>4</sup> See *GEL*, 345, s.v. 'γέρανος' (*Grus grus*, common grey crane), 'γερανομαχία'; 1550, s.v. 'πυγμαῖος' (pl. πυγμαῖοι);  *OCD*, 902, s.v. 'Pygmies'; WASER 1902-1909 (1965), cols. 3283-3317, s.v. 'Pygmaien' (including examples of works of visual art); WÜST 1959, cols. 2064-2074, s.v. 'Pygmaioi' (including literary sources and works of visual art); BECATTI 1965, 167-169, s.v. 'Pigmei'; DOUGLAS 1972, 105-107; POLLARD 1977, 83-84; JANNI 1978; DASEN 1993, 175-188, 294-304, Pls. 58-70; *LIMC* 7.1: 594-601, s.v. 'Pygmaioi'. For a general survey of the anthropological and socio-cultural aspects of the African Pygmies, see SEVERIN 1973, 69-92. Aristotle (Arist. *HA* 3.12 [519a 2-4]) claims that the crane's plumage is ashen-coloured at first, but blackens with age ("(...) none undergoes a change <of colour> through age except the crane, which begins as ashen-coloured and as it grows old its feathers get blacker"; Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* [ΤΩΝ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΑ ΖΩΙΑ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΩΝ], trans. A. L. Peck, The Loeb Classical Library [437], 9, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 2001); cf. also Plin. *HN* 10.42.80 ("(...) which among the larger class of birds only cranes do, for these grow black in old age"; Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae*, trans. H. Rackham, The Loeb Classical Library [353], 3, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1983); it is worth noting that today this theory is no longer accepted. The cranes are also mentioned in the Bible: see Isaiah 38:14 and Jeremiah 8:7.

the cranes. The Pygmies were, according to Greek mythology, a race of dwarfs living on the upper Nile, said to have been attacked by cranes. According to some scholars, this folk-tale, and especially the knowledge about Pygmies in Africa who lived to the south of Egypt, was conveyed to the Greeks through Egyptian sources.<sup>5</sup>

Fr. M. Snowden states that Ionian and Carian mercenaries served under Pharaoh Psammetichus (Psamtik) I (663-609 BCE) of the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Greek mercenaries, perhaps Egyptian-born and children of the mercenaries who had served under Psammetichus I, had been employed by Psammetichus II (594-588 BCE), among other foreign mercenaries, in his Nubian/Ethiopian campaign. A Greek inscription on the leg of a statue of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel records the participation of several Greek mercenaries in this campaign: Psammetichus, the son of Theocles, another mercenary from Teos (Ionia), another from Colophon (Ionia), and still another from Ialysos (on the island of Rhodes). By the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Greeks were well established in Naucratis. Greek residents of this city were in a position to acquire a sound knowledge of the country and its peoples. It was no doubt through Naucratis that the Greeks developed the interest in the Negro reflected in the art of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It seems, therefore, that sufficient time had elapsed to allow for reports to circulate in Greece, based on recently acquired Greek knowledge of black people. Consequently, it may be assumed that the Greek mercenaries in the armies of Kings Psammetichus I and II, upon their return home entertained various people with accounts of curious and odd stories.<sup>6</sup> These historical and epigraphic testimonies may form the common thread between the myth and the reality of the *geranomachy*.

## 2. The *Geranomachy* in the Literary Sources and Visual Works of Art: Context and Meaning

Homer was the first to mention the Pygmies, who were involved in a constant battle with the cranes, which in winter migrated to their homeland on the southern shores of the earth – encircling the river Oceanus: “(...) the Trojans came on with clamor and a cry, like birds, like the clamor of cranes that arises before the face of heaven when they flee from wintry storms and boundless rain, and with clamor fly toward the streams of Ocean, bringing slaughter and death to Pygmy men (...)”. In light of this citation, it may be assumed that the battle between the Pygmies and the cranes presents an allegory of the Trojan War, in which the flocks of cranes represent the Trojans and the Pygmies, the Greeks. On the other hand, it may be that this episode has been dealt with by some ancient writers with a certain trace of parody, especially of the heroic world, unfolding into a kind of burlesque of an exotic epic.<sup>7</sup> The comic and humorous appearance of the Pygmies, depicted in works of visual art, in the

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, HENNIG 1932, 20-24; SCOBIE 1975, 123.

<sup>6</sup> See SNOWDEN 1971, 103-104, 122; see also TOD 1933, 6-7, No. 4; BERNAND – MASSON 1957, 1-46.

<sup>7</sup> Hom. *Il.* 3.2-6 (Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray, The Loeb Classical Library [170], 1, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1999); Eust. *Il.* 371-372 (ed. M. van der Valk, *Eustathii Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem Pertinentes*, 1, Leiden, 1971, 586-589). According to Aristophanes (*Ar. Av.* 710), the crane flies to Libya in the sowing season: στείρειν μὲν, ὅταν γέρανος κρώζουσ’ εἰς τὴν Λιβύην μεταχωρῆ (“When to Libya the crane flies clanging again, it is time for the seed to be sown”; Aristophanes, *Aves* [OPNIΘΕΣ] – *The Birds*, trans. B. B. Rogers, The Loeb Classical Library [179], 2, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> See ARIAS – HRMER 1962, 291-292; CHARBONNEAUX *et alii* 1971, 63, Ill. 64 (on p. 60); see also BOARDMAN 1974, 34, Ill. 46.8.

role of Greek heroic warriors, emphasizing their corpulence, physical distortion and smallness, is in contrast to the graceful slimness and elegance of the cranes.<sup>8</sup> In addition, “The stories of the battle of the Pygmies may have belonged to the category of comic poems, *παίγνια*, attributed to Homer, which caricatured the deeds of Homeric heroes by describing small innocuous animals at war, like frogs and mice in the *Batrachomyomachia*. This parodic dimension is especially acute in the description by Philostratus<sup>9</sup> of their assault against Heracles”.<sup>10</sup>

In Aesop’s fables, there is a hint of the intention of the cranes to fly to the land of the Pygmies so as to obtain food:

Some Cranes settled down in a Farmer’s field that was newly sown. For some time the Farmer frightened them away by brandishing an empty sling at them. But when the Cranes found that he was only slinging to the winds, they no longer minded him, nor flew away. Upon this the Farmer slung at them with stones, and killed a great part of them. ‘Let us be off,’ said the rest, ‘to the land of the Pygmies, for this man means to threaten us no longer, but is determined to get rid of us in earnest’.<sup>11</sup>

Ancient writers, such as Hecataeus of Miletus<sup>12</sup> and Aristotle among others,<sup>13</sup> located the Pygmies in Eastern Africa, near the sources of the Nile. On the other hand, P. E. Arias and M. Hirmer claim that other authors have placed them in Scythia (Central Eurasia) near the shores of the Black Sea or “in the marshy regions of Thrace, where the cranes halted twice a year in their migrations between Scythia and Egypt”.<sup>14</sup>

Herodotus mentions the flocks of cranes that fly from the wintry weather of Scythia every year to spend the winter in warm lands in the vicinity of the Nile;<sup>15</sup> he also refers to the “little men of stature smaller than common” of Central Africa.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle states explicitly that the cranes migrated in autumn<sup>17</sup> from Scythia through the Balkans to their wintering places in eastern Sudan, western Ethiopia and southern (Upper) Egypt, where Pygmy settlements exist: “(...) for they (the cranes.- AO-SM) move from the Scythian plains to the marshes above Egypt from where the Nile flows; this is the region whereabouts the Pygmies live (for they are no myth, but there truly exists a kind that is small, as reported –both the people and their horses– and they spend their life in caves)”.<sup>18</sup> According to this statement, it seems that Aristotle

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MINTO 1960, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Philostr. *Im.* 2.22 (Heracles among the Pygmies).

<sup>10</sup> See DASEN 1993, 181.

<sup>11</sup> Aesop. 141 (Fable: The Farmer and the Cranes; ed. and trans. Th. James, *Aesop’s Fables: A New Version, Chiefly from Original Sources*, London, 1848).

<sup>12</sup> Hecat. *FGrH*, I, F 328a-b (page 43); he points out erroneously that the Pygmies were farmers (*γεωργικοί δέ εἰσιν*).

<sup>13</sup> Arist. *HA* 7(8).12 (597a 5-9). As to the Pygmies, see also Ctesias of Cnidos, *FGrH*, III, 688, F 45 (21-24) (on pages. 492-494); Basilis, *FGrH*, III, 718, F 1 (page 642).

<sup>14</sup> See ARIAS – HIRMER 1962, 292.

<sup>15</sup> Hdt. 2.22.

<sup>16</sup> Herodotus (2.32) knew of an expedition by the Nasamonians to the Niger, which encountered a race of dwarfs, but he does not call them Pygmies.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle correctly dates the migration season of the cranes in autumn to the marshland, near Lake Tana in Ethiopia, where the Blue Nile rises, and their return in spring.

<sup>18</sup> Arist. *HA* 7(8).12 (597a 5-9).



was referring to the folk-tale of the Pygmies and their struggle with the cranes as a real event and not a myth.<sup>19</sup>

Philostratus, in his biography of Apollonius of Tyana (1<sup>st</sup>-century CE teacher and religious reformer), claims that “They (Ethiopia and India) also produce beasts seen nowhere else, and black people, as no other continents do, and they contain tribes of Pygmies and of humans that bark in various ways, and similar wonders”.<sup>20</sup> Strabo mentions Homer’s assertion about the cranes “When they flee from the coming of winter and sudden rain, and fly with clamour toward the streams of Oceanus, bearing slaughter and doom to the Pygmy men”; and adds: “Since, then, Oceanus stretches along the entire southern sea-board, and since the cranes migrate in winter to this entire sea-board, we must admit that the Pygmies also are placed by mythology along the entire extent of that sea-board. And if men of later generations restricted the story about the Pygmies to the Ethiopians next to Egypt alone, that would have no bearing on the facts in ancient times”.<sup>21</sup> He also states: “(...) and they revived, also, the Homeric story of the battle between the cranes and the ‘Pygmies’, who, they said, were three spans tall”.<sup>22</sup>

Pliny the Elder locates the Pygmies’ population somewhere between Egypt and Ethiopia: “Some writers have actually reported a race of Pygmies living among the marshes in which the Nile rises”.<sup>23</sup> He also notes the ovine (rams and she-goats) cavalry of the Pygmies and their ongoing conflict with the cranes, emphasizing their strategy of seizing the cranes’ eggs before they could hatch another generation of winged super-soldiers:

Beyond these in the most outlying mountain region we are told of the Three-span men and Pygmies, who do not exceed three spans, *i.e.* twenty-seven inches, in height; the climate is healthy and always spring-like, as it is protected on the north by a range of mountains; this tribe Homer has also recorded as being beset by cranes. It is reported that in springtime their entire band, mounted on the backs of rams and she-goats and armed with arrows, goes in a body down to the sea and eats the cranes’ eggs and chickens, and that this outing occupies three months; and that otherwise they could not protect themselves against the flocks of cranes that would grow up; and that their houses are made of mud and feathers and egg-shells. Aristotle says that the Pygmies live in caves, but in the rest of his statement about them he agrees with the other authorities.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> African Pygmies can be found nowadays, probably as in ancient times, in various places in Africa: the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, the Equatorial Guinea, The Central African Republic, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, etc. Most Pygmy communities are to some extent hunter-gatherers, meaning that they do not grow anything, living partly but not exclusively on the wild products of their environment. Although Pygmies are generally thought of as forest dwellers, some groups may live in open swamp or desert (see SEVERIN 1973, 69-92).

<sup>20</sup> Philostr. VA 6.1.2 (Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, ed. and trans. Ch. P. Jones, The Loeb Classical Library [17], 2, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Str. 1.2.28 (Strabo, *The Geography* [ΣΤΡΑΒΩΝΟΣ ΓΕΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΩΝ], trans. H. L. Jones, The Loeb Classical Library [49], 1, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Str. 2.1.9; see also Str. 15.1.57 (Strabo, *The Geography* [ΣΤΡΑΒΩΝΟΣ ΓΕΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΩΝ], trans. H. L. Jones, The Loeb Classical Library [241], 7, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> Pliny, *HN* 6.35.188 (Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae* trans. H. Rackham, The Loeb Classical Library [352], 2, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Plin. *HN* 7.2.26-27. Pliny’s statement, as that of Strabo (15.1.57), that the Pygmies conducted operations to destroy the eggs of the cranes sounds doubtful.

Pliny adds that “The race of Pygmies have a cessation of hostilities on the departure of the cranes that, as we have said, carry on war with them”.<sup>25</sup>

Ancient writers have often referred to the enmity and struggle between the Pygmies and the cranes, adopting various tales.

The Greek grammarian Antoninus Liberalis tells that Hera had caused the conflict between the Pygmies and the cranes, as punishment for an immodest and disrespectful behavior of the queen of the Pygmies:

Among the people we call Pygmies there was born a girl called Oenoe who was of flawless beauty but she was graceless by nature and overweening. She cared not a rap for Artemis and Hera. She was married to one of the citizens, Nicodamas, a good and sensible man, and gave birth to a child called Mopsus. And all the Pygmies, who loved to show kindness, brought her many gifts to celebrate the birth of the child. But Hera found fault with Oenoe for not honouring her and turned her into a crane, elongating her neck, ordaining that she should be a bird that flew high. She also caused war to arise between her and the Pygmies. Yearning for her child Mopsus, Oenoe flew over houses and would not go away. But all the Pygmies armed themselves and chased her away. Because of this there arose a state of war then as well as now between the Pygmies and cranes.<sup>26</sup>

Juvenal refers concisely in his *Satires* to the war between the Pygmies and the cranes, claiming that “The Pygmy warrior marches forth in his tiny arms to encounter the sudden swoop and clamorous cloud of Thracian birds;<sup>27</sup> but soon, no match for his foe, he is snatched up by the savage crane and borne in his crooked talons through the air. If you saw this in our own country, you would shake with laughter; but in that land, where the whole host is only one foot high, though like battles are witnessed every day, no one laughs!”.<sup>28</sup>

Aelian (Claudius Aelianus) writes in his work *On the Characteristics of Animals* the following story about the Pygmies and their war with the cranes:

As to the race of Pygmies I have heard that they are governed in a manner peculiar to themselves, and that in fact owing to the failure of the male line a certain woman became queen and ruled over the Pygmies; her name was Gerana, and the Pygmies worshipped her as a god, paying her honours too august for a human being. The result was, they say, that she became so puffed up in her mind that she held the goddesses of no account. It was especially Hera, Athena, Artemis, and Aphrodite that, she said, came nowhere near her in beauty. But she was not destined to escape the evil consequences of her diseased imagination. For in consequence of the anger of Hera she changed her original form into that of a most hideous bird and became the crane of today and wages war on the Pygmies because with their excessive honours they drove her to madness and to her destruction.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Plin. *HN* 10.30.58.

<sup>26</sup> Ant. Lib. *Met.* 16 (trans. and commentary F. Celoria, *The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis*, London–New York, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> They are apparently called thus due to their encampment in Thrace, when migrating from their native land Scythia (today Russia) to the south, and most probably they reached eastern Africa.

<sup>28</sup> Iuv. *Sat.* 13.167-173 (Juvenal, *Satires*, trans. G.G. Ramsay, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1961).

<sup>29</sup> Ael. *NA* 15.29 (Aelian, *De natura animalium* [ΠΕΡΙ ΖΩΩΝ ΙΔΙΟΤΗΤΟΣ] – *On the Characteristics of Animals*,

Aelian also confirms explicitly the migration of the cranes to Egypt:

... they prepare to emigrate and to set out for the Nile, longing for the warmth and for the food that is to be had there during the winter (...) and fly straight to Egypt, traversing the widest seas on outstretched wing, never landing, never pausing to rest. And they fall in with the Egyptians as they are sowing their fields, and in the plough lands they find, so to speak, a generous table, and though uninvited partake of the Egyptians' hospitality.<sup>30</sup> In summer they remain in their country (Thrace), but in mid-autumn they leave for Egypt, Libya, and Ethiopia, appearing to know the map of the earth, the disposition of the winds, and the variations of the seasons. And after spending a winter like spring, when again conditions are becoming tolerably settled and the sky is calm, they return.<sup>31</sup>

Oppian of Cilicia (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), or possibly another Oppian of Syria (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), sang the following verse on cranes: “ἀπ’ Αἰθιοπίων τε καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι ροάων ὑψιπετῆς γεράνων χορὸς ἔρχεται ἡεροφώνων” (“from Ethiopia and the streams of Egypt cometh the high flying chorus of airy voiced cranes”).<sup>32</sup>

The authors of the above-mentioned literary sources were undoubtedly inspired by folk-tales and rumors regarding the hostility and battle between the Pygmies and the cranes. As they had not experienced themselves the events they describe in their works, the whole episode developed into a myth, with possible allegorical connotation. It should be noted that Aristotle was the only ancient writer to recount explicitly the real existence of the Pygmies at the sources of the Nile and the possible battle with the cranes.

Varro refers to the flock of cranes that his friend Seius kept on his estate, probably for consumption.<sup>33</sup> Several other authors, such as Horace,<sup>34</sup> Statius,<sup>35</sup> Aulus Gellius<sup>36</sup> and Athenaeus,<sup>37</sup> mention the consumption of cranes at feasts in their time. Another interesting and important testimony is provided by Pliny, who states that in his time cranes were much in demand as food:

Cornelius Nepos, who died in the principate of the late lamented Augustus, when he wrote that the practice of fattening thrushes was introduced a little before his time, added that storks were more in favour than cranes, although the latter bird is now one of those most in request, whereas nobody will touch the former.<sup>38</sup>

trans. A. F. Scholfield, The Loeb Classical Library [449], 3, London–Cambridge [Mass.], 1972). See also Ov. *Met.* 6.90-92; Ath. *Deipnos.* 9.393e-f.

<sup>30</sup> Ael. *NA* 2.1 (Aelian, *De natura animalium* [ΠΕΡΙ ΖΩΩΝ ΙΔΙΟΤΗΤΟΣ] – *On the Characteristics of Animals*, trans. A. F. Scholfield, The Loeb Classical Library [446], 1, London–Cambridge [Mass.], 1971).

<sup>31</sup> Ael. *NA* 3.13.

<sup>32</sup> Opp. *Hal.* 1.620-621 (Oppian, *Halieutica* [*On Fishing*], ed. and trans. to German F. Fajen, Stuttgart–Leipzig, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Varro *RR* 3.2.13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Hor. *Sat.* 2.8.86-87.

<sup>35</sup> Stat. *Silv.* 4.6.1-9.

<sup>36</sup> Gell. *NA* 6.16.1-5.

<sup>37</sup> Ath. *Deipnos.* 4.131f.

<sup>38</sup> Plin. *HN* 10.30.60.

Plutarch alleges that the eyes of live cranes were sewn up, and the birds were then kept in the dark, so that they could be domesticated and fattened for the table, “making the flesh appetizing with strange compounds and spicy mixtures”.<sup>39</sup>

The *geranomachy* was favoured in Greek black figure vase paintings. The best-known portrayals of the struggle appear on the foot of the François Vase (*ca.* 570 BCE, by the potter Ergotimos and the painter Kleitias), with 19 Pygmies mounted on goats fighting 14 cranes. The Pygmies are shown attacking the birds with various weapons: swords, slings and hooks (**Figs. 4-6**). On a fragment from a Corinthian portable clay altar (*ca.* 530-520 BCE), a Pygmy attacks a crane with a club and holding it by the neck, while the crane defends itself with its long beak (**Fig. 9**).<sup>40</sup> The battle also appears clearly on the mouth of a spherical *aryballos* signed by Nearchos, dated to *ca.* 550 BCE, where the Pygmies attack the cranes with clubs and some of them also hold round shields (**Figs. 12-13**).<sup>41</sup> In the Classical period depictions of the Pygmies fighting the cranes featured in the traditional manner, as on the earlier vases. Thus, for example, a Pygmy holding a club attacks a crane nearby, on a *rhyton* by the Sotades painter (**Fig. 7**), on a neck amphora by the Epimedes painter (**Fig. 10**), and on a *pelike* where a group of cranes attack a kneeling Pygmy (**Fig. 11**). The Brygos painter depicts the Pygmies as realistic plump dwarfs, either attacked by cranes or attacking them with clubs or swords (**Fig. 8**). The scene of the battle is frequently represented in a variety of additional Greek painted vases, where the Pygmies fight the cranes with clubs, spears and defend themselves with round shields and animal hides; in some cases they hold the birds by the neck, strangling them (**Figs. 14-19**). The episode also appears in various artistic media of the Archaic and Classical periods,<sup>42</sup> as well as of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Plu. *Mor.* 2.997a (Plutarch, *Moralia, On the Eating of Flesh* [ΠΙΕΠΙ ΣΑΡΚΟΦΑΓΙΑΣ], trans. H. Cherniss – W. C. Helmbold, The Loeb Classical Library [406], 12, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1984); see also DOUGLAS 1972, 106.

<sup>40</sup> Cranes are also depicted without Pygmies on a relief on an Egyptian mastaba of the V<sup>th</sup> and VI<sup>th</sup> dynasties at Saqqara, on engraved Athenian gems of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and on silver goblets of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE found in Thrace and Boscoreale (see ARNOTT 2007, 53-54). Pygmies without cranes appear, for example, in a Nilotic scene from a Pompeiian fresco, where they are hunting crocodiles and an hippopotamus (see BRAGANTINI – SAMPAOLO 2010, 418, Ill. 216).

<sup>41</sup> See HOMANN-WEDEKING 1968, 113-115.

<sup>42</sup> See also WASER 1902-1909 (1965), cols. 3283-3317, *s.v.* ‘Pygmaien’; WÜST 1959, cols. 2064-2074, *s.v.* ‘Pygmaioi’; DASEN 1993, 294-304, Pls. 58-70; LIMC 7.2, Ills.1- 5, 7-9, 11, 13, 15-18, 20, 20bis, 35-36, 40 (pages 466-475).

<sup>43</sup> See LIMC 7.2, Ills. 22-23, 26, 28-34, 37-39, 41, 44, 46a-46b, 47, 47b, 47g, 48-49, 51-52a, 53, 53b, 53h, 54-58, 59a, 61, 61a, 64, 64a, 65, 65a, 65e, 65f, 66, 66c, 68b (pages 472-486).

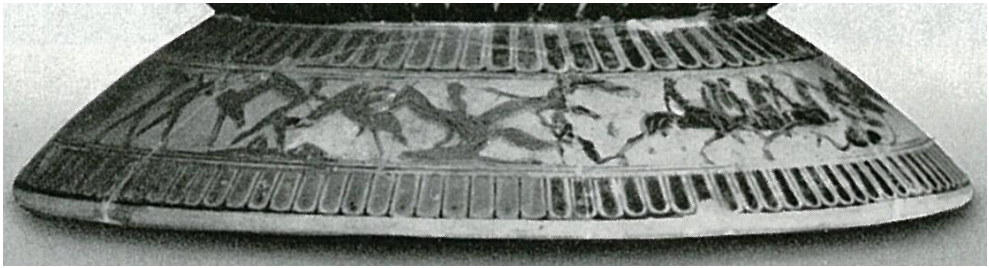


**Figures 1-3.** Flocks of cranes in the Lake ha-Hula, Upper Galilee, Israel (photos: AO).

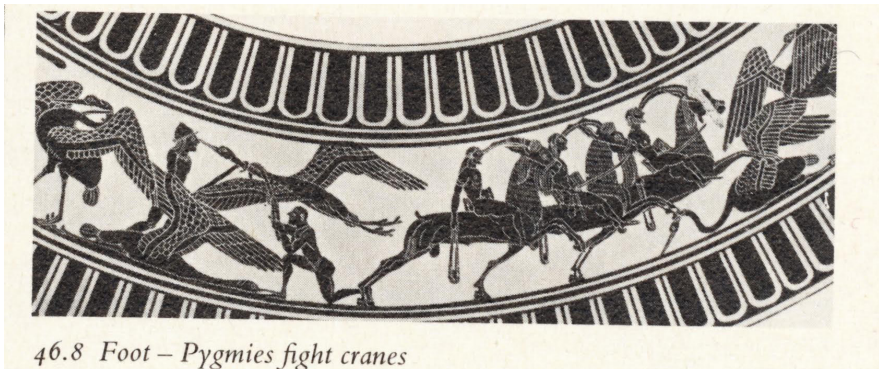




**Figure 4.** The François Vase (from: ARIAS – HIRMER 1962, Pl. 40).

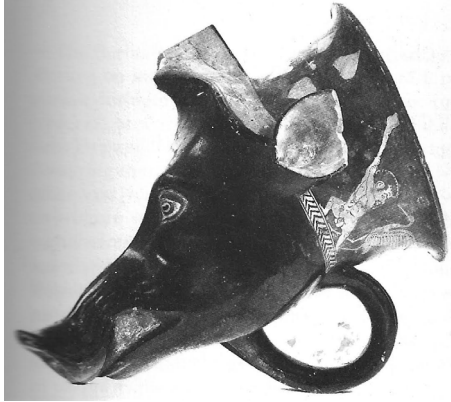


**Figure 5.** Images of the Battle between the Pygmies and the Cranes on the foot of The François Vase (from: BOARDMAN 1978, 42, Ill. 46.1).



**Figure 6.** Images of the Battle between the Pygmies and the Cranes on the foot of The François Vase (from: BOARDMAN 1978, 44, Ill. 46.8).

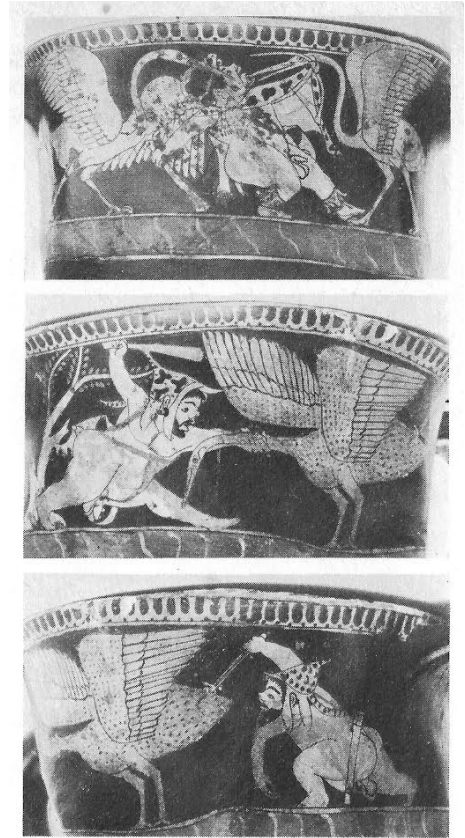




**Figure 7.** *Rhyton* in the manner of the Sotades Painter (from: BOARDMAN 1989, Ill. 107 [left]).



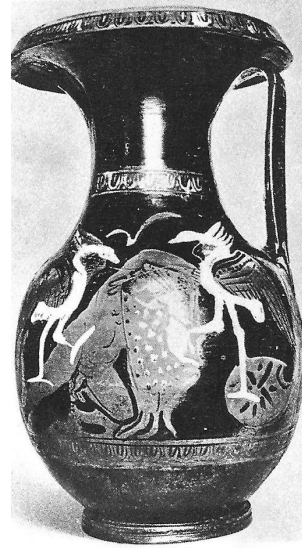
**Figure 9.** Clay altar (from: DASEN 1993, Pl. 61 [2]).



**Figure 8.** *Rhyton* (neck) by the Brygos Painter (from: BOARDMAN 1979, Ill. 258).



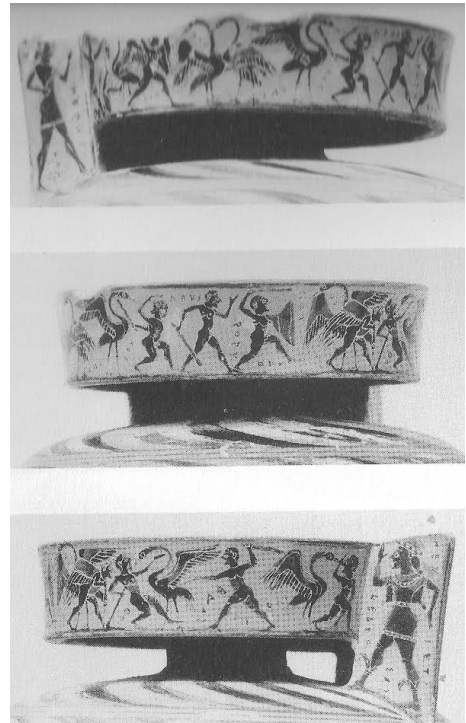
**Figure 10.** Neck amphora by the Epimedes Painter (from: BOARDMAN 1989, Ill. 148).



**Figure 11.** *Pelike* of Group G (from: BOARDMAN 1989, Ill. 411).



**Figure 12.** Spherical *aryballos* signed by Nearchos (from: HOMANN-WEDEKING 1968, 114).



**Figure 13.** Details of Fig. 12 (from: DASEN 1993, Pl. 59 [1a-c]).





**Figure 14.** *Kantharos*  
(from: DASEN 1993, 185, Fig. 13. I).



**Figure 15.** *Skyphos*  
(from: SNOWDEN 1971, Ill. 6).



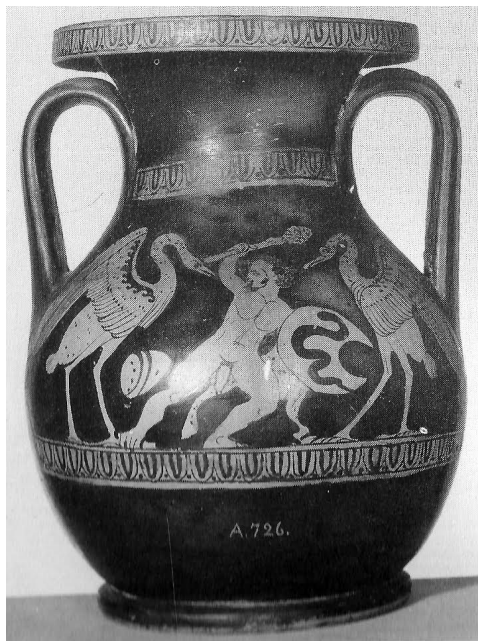
**Figure 16.** *Hydria* (from: DASEN 1993, Pl. 60 [3]).



**Figure 17.** *Rhyton* (from: DASEN 1993, Pl. 65 [3]).



**Figure 18.** *Oinochoe* (from: DASEN 1993, Pl. 69 [1]).



**Figure 19.** *Pelike* (from: DASEN 1993, Pl. 69 [2]).

### 3. Summary

The scholars mentioned above dealt with the battle between Pygmies and cranes in the Greek and Roman worlds, without referring to the significance of the “event”. This enigmatic and curious topic led us to offer an interpretation, based on ancient literary sources.

Indeed, the Greeks narrated the “event” as a mythical story, with some fantasy, humour, parody, burlesque and/or allegorical connotations, but we wish to propose that beyond these aspects, this theme expresses a reality, that is, the struggle of the Pygmies for survival. The above-mentioned Roman literary sources, which refer to the consumption of the flesh of the cranes, imply that the Pygmies in the Greek world fought for the same aim. In other words, this battle appears to display a real hunting scene and not merely a mythical tale.

It seems plausible that the marshes of the Lake ha-Hula, Upper Galilee, was a traditional resting place for cranes on their migration from the Scythian plains to eastern Africa in Antiquity, as it still is today (**Figs. 1-3**).<sup>44</sup> These cranes were of grey/ash colour, different from the endemic crowned cranes of Africa.

The African Pygmies,<sup>45</sup> especially those in eastern Africa, are usually characterized as hunter-gatherers and not as farmers, as Hecataeus stated.<sup>46</sup> Their battle with the cranes reflects in fact a real event that occurred every year, when in autumn the birds migrated and spent the winter in the marshy areas, at the source of the Blue Nile, near Lake Tana in Ethiopia.

Naturally, the Pygmies met with the vigorous and violent resistance of the cranes, which viciously attacked them, as can be seen in Greek and Roman visual works of art. Several depictions show wounded, dead or dying Pygmies lying on the ground, mutilated by cranes. The existence of these dwarfs, who still exist today in Africa, is indeed neither imaginary nor mythical, but definitely real. Undoubtedly, physical distortion or abnormality tends to be seen as an exotic and curious feature. Thus the myth, shrouded in mystery, aroused the interest and curiosity of ancient writers and artists/artisans, and modern scholars alike.

We can conclude that the tale of the battle between the Pygmies and the cranes can be interpreted as a real and true event, clothed in a mythical vestment, in the Greek and Roman worlds, in which the Pygmies hunt the birds in order to consume their flesh. It would seem that the *geranomachy* reflects not only the intellectual curiosity and imagination of the Greek and Roman writers and artists/artisans, but also their awareness and knowledge of seasonal phenomena, indicating the reality and authenticity of the episode.

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<sup>44</sup> Thousands of cranes can be seen in the marshes of the lake ha-Hula each season, on their way from the Caucasus to eastern Africa and back.

<sup>45</sup> See above, n. 20.

<sup>46</sup> See above, n. 13.

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