

**A SHORT ACCOUNT
OF THE
NIOBE GROUP**

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BY
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O Niobe, con che occhi dolenti
Vedeva io te segnata in su la strada
Fra sette e sette tuoi figliuoli spenti
Dante, Purg. xli. 37-38.

NEW YORK:
L. W. SCHMIDT, 24 BARCLAY ST.
1875.

The Niobe Group.

INTRODUCTORY.

Of all the works of plastic art that have descended to us from antiquity, there is perhaps not one that is so difficult to treat as the Niobe Group. The following paper lays no claim to either exhaustiveness or originality; but, as there does not exist in English any comprehensive account of the Group, it may serve to increase the interest now beginning to be felt in many quarters for the great, earnest products of Greek art.

The writer has seen and examined casts, photographs, and many engravings of all that remains of the group. Of the antiques, he has seen only those in Munich, Berlin, London, and Paris. The chief authorities consulted by him are the following :

1. *Dr. K. B. Stark.* Niobe und die Niobiden in ihrer literarischen künstlerischen und mythologischen Bedeutung. Leipzig, 1863.
2. *Dr. K. B. Stark.* Nach dem griechischen Orient. Heidelberg, 1874.
3. *Dr. Carl Friedrichs.* Bausteine zur Geschichte der griechisch-römischen Plastik, oder Berlin's antike Bildwerke. Düsseldorf, 1868.
4. *Adolf Trendelenburg.* Niobe, Betrachtungen über das Schöne und Erhabene. Kleine Schriften. Leipzig, 1871.
5. *Joh. Overbeck.* Geschichte der griechischen Plastik für Künstler und Künstlerfreunde. Zweite Auflage. Leipzig, 1869.

The subject is treated under the following heads :

1. The Niobe Myth.
2. The Condition of Artistic Thought at the Time when the Original of the Niobe Group was produced.
3. The Niobe Group, its History and present Condition.
4. The Original Aspect and Purpose of the Group.
5. Motives of the Group and Description of the separate Statues.

I. THE NIOBE MYTH.

The first mention made of Niobe in Greek literature occurs in the twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad*, lines 602-617. Achilles, addressing Priamos, who has come to beg the body of the slain Hectôr, says:

“Behold, thy son is ransomed, aged man,
 As thou hast begged, and lies in state. At rise
 Of Morn thou shalt behold and bear him hence.
 But now let us bethink ourselves to sup;
 For even the fair-haired Niobe bethought
 Herself of food, though children twelve lay dead
 Within her halls, six daughters and six sons
 In youthful prime. The sons Apollo slew
 With arrows from his silver bow, incensed
 At Niobe; the daughters, Artemis
 The archer-queen, because she made herself
 The peer of Lâtô of the beauteous cheeks,
 Whom she reproached as mother of but twain,
 While she herself had given to many birth.
 But they, though only two, slew all of hers.
 And these for nine days’ space lay stretched in blood,
 And there was none to give them burial,
 For Kronos’ son had made the people stones.
 But on the tenth the gods Uranian
 Interred them. Yet did Niobe bethink
 Herself of food, though worn with waste of tears.
 And now among the rocks and lonely hills
 Of Sipylos, where Ile, tradition says,
 The resting-places of the goddess nymphs
 That lightly tript on Achelôôs’ banks,
 Although a stone, she broods upon the woes
 Inflicted by the gods.”

This, as far as the consciousness of the Greeks was concerned, is the kernel of the story, which it would be easy enough to connect with dawn-myths, as is the custom at present, or with a mystic philosophy, as was the custom half a century ago. We shall do neither, but shall give the myth in its fully developed form, as it was known to the tragedians Æschylos and Sophoklēs, who made it the theme of tragedies in the century before the date of the Niobe Group.

In the burg or castle of her father Tantalos, situated on a bend of Mt. Sipylus, a little to the north of Smyrna in Lydia, Niobe was born. Already her father had given evidence of that *ὕβρις*, or insolence, which characterized and destroyed himself and all his race. The youthful Niobe, however, seems to have led as innocent and idyllic a life as her hardly more fortunate counterpart, the Krimhild of the *Nibelungenlied*. Sappho tells us that "Lêtô and Niobe were very loving companions," and a picture at Herculaneum represents the two playing together. More fortunate had it been for Niobe had she not been so intimate with the divine Lêtô. In this, as in many other cases, familiarity bred contempt, albeit Lêtô was a goddess.

When Niobe grew up to womanhood, she was wooed and won by Amphion, son of Zeus and Antiope, twin-brother of Zêtheus, and king of Thebes in Bœotia, the same who, by the music of his lyre, induced the stones to come and build themselves into walls around his powerful capital. Thus Niobe, herself the grand-daughter of the father of the gods, married a son of Zeus, a man in every way worthy of her. In her married life, she met with everything that could make her happy and develop in her that insolence, or forgetfulness of her human limitations, which the Greeks believed to be the inseparable nemesis of incessant good fortune. Besides the high birth, the personal beauty, and the unbounded wealth, which she had inherited, she had now sovereign power, a husband whom she adored, and, what appealed more than all else to her womanly nature, a family of blooming children, each fit to have been the direct offspring of a divinity. The number of

these children is variously given by different poets. Homer, as we have seen, gives her six sons and six daughters, and that was probably the uniform number in the yet older forms of the myth. Hesiod apparently gave her ten sons and ten daughters, and in this he was followed by Mimnermos, Pindar, and Bacchylidés. Sappho gave her nine sons and nine daughters, while Alkman reduced the number to five sons and five daughters. The number most generally assigned to her, however, and the number assumed by the tragedians who may be supposed to have specially influenced the artist of the Niobe Group, was seven sons and seven daughters. There are special reasons connected with the worship of Apollo for fixing upon the double of seven, rather than the double of six, as the number of Niobe's children.

When the worship of Apollo and Artemis, the divine offspring of her old divine playmate Létô, or rather, when the worship of Létô herself, was introduced into Thebes, and when the Theban women, warned by Mantô the daughter of Teiresias the prophet, went in procession to the altar of the goddess, to perform the rightful acts of sacrifice and worship, the beautiful and haughty queen drove after them in her chariot, and with indignation commanded them to desist and leave the altars of Létô, reminding them that she, their visible queen, the daughter of Tantalos, the grand-daughter of Atlas and of Zeus himself—she, the wife of Amphion—she, the possessor of uncounted wealth—she, the divinely fair—she, the mother of seven sons and seven daughters,—far better deserved their worship than Létô, whose only recommendation was that she was the mother of two children, and whom the earth had almost refused a spot to give these birth in. With such haughty language, she drove the Theban women from the altars of Létô. The latter, indignant at the insult done to her divinity, laid her complaint before her two children, Apollo and Artemis, and entreated them to take vengeance for her. Her entreaties met with a ready response, and the god of the silver bow and the archer-queen, descending, slew in one day, the former all the sons of Niobe, the latter all the daughters, and left their mother childless. In the bereaved Niobe, the heavenly descended

queen and the human mother now struggle for mastery. Unrelenting to the last, and disdaining to utter a complaint or an entreaty or to shed a tear, she, nevertheless, suffers such pain, that Zeus, seeing it to have reached the limit beyond which the human cannot pass, is himself moved to pity, turns her into stone, and, in a whirlwind, carries her off back to her native Siplyos, the scene of her innocent youth, where, say the poets, she still sits in stone and weeps.

It will be observed that in many, though in no very essential points, this form of the myth differs from that given in Homer. In Homer, for example, Zeus turns the people of the country into stone, so that they cannot bury the dead: in the developed myth, he turns Niobe herself into stone, which weeps and shows more feeling than she.

In its oldest, Homeric form, the myth of Niobe has already almost forgotten its origin in natural phenomena and passed into the moral sphere. But even here it still bears some traces of its origin, and these are even more numerous and more distinctly pronounced in later poetry. Even were we not aided by the etymology of the word *Niobe*, which undoubtedly means *snow*, or *snow-cloud*, or *snow-goddess*, we should hardly find any difficulty in tracing the myth to its origin. (See Max Müller, *Zeitschrift für vergl. Sprachforschung*, vol. xix., pp. 42-3.) Niobe is the snow-cloud which covers and conceals the lofty mountain peak, and whose offspring are the lower snowy summits. Niobe aspires to be the equal of the skyey powers, and seems for a time to be all-prevailing. But the spring-time comes, and the warm sun smites and destroys the children of Niobe, which disappear under the teeming earth. The snow-cloud is wafted by the swift, warm wind of Zeus from the towering peak, which now stands out bare and rocky, and seems to weep the rivulets that flow down to water the vales below.

How conscious the poets of the best days of Greece were of the natural origin of the myth may be seen from a passage in Sophoklês (*Antigonê*, lines 823 sqq.), in which the fearless daughter of Œdipous, doomed to be buried alive, compares herself to Niobe, in words which baffle all translation:

“ Yea, I have heard speak of the Phrygian
Stranger, Tantalos' child, and her
Dismal death upon Siplyos' height.

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Like stubborn ivy, about her grew up
 Strong stone; and, as she melts in tears,—
 Such is the legend,—
 Tempestuous rains and snows never forsake her,
 But bathes the breast of her 'neath brows all tears."

The myth appears in various places both in Greece proper and in Asia Minor, and almost wherever there are lofty, cloud-compelling mountain-peaks. It was finally located on Mount Sipylus, in the neighborhood of Smyrna. When this took place, it is impossible to say; but there can hardly be any doubt that the passage in Homer which records the location is a late interpolation. As we have seen, the connection with Sipylus must have been familiar before the time of Sophoklês. Anakreôn, or whoever wrote the odes attributed to him, tells us that "the daughter of Tantalos once stood a stone on the Phrygian hills," and there are other allusions of a similar kind. The cause which led to the bringing of Niobe into connection with Mount Sipylus we can perhaps trace out.

Pausanias, speaking of the theatre of Dionysos at Athens, says of a cave connected with it, "There are in it an Apollo and an Artemis destroying the children of Niobe. This Niobe I myself saw when I ascended Mount Sipylus. When closely approached, it seems merely a mass of unhewn stone, without any resemblance at all to a woman, weeping or otherwise; whereas, if viewed from a distance, it strikes one at once as representing a woman weeping and bowed down." From this and other allusions it is quite plain that the ancients were acquainted with a rude statue, hewn in high relief out of the rocky side of Mount Sipylus, and representing a woman sitting bowed down in the attitude of weeping. This statue, which was originally perhaps intended to represent Kybelê, the mother of the gods, was—not improbably at the time of the Ionian migration—mistaken for Niobe. The Niobe-myth was ever afterwards connected with Mount Sipylus.

The statue in question has been re-discovered in modern times, and still corresponds accurately to the description given of it by Pausanias. It is hewn out of the solid rock, and is about four times life-size. The face of the rock has been made even to the height of about fifty feet. In this