**The Dancing Satyr of Mazara del Vallo**

On the night of March 5, 1998, the fishing boat “Capitan Ciccio”, commanded by Francesco Adragna and owned by Scilla and Asaro, entered the port of Mazara del Vallo. On its stern it carried what would turn out to be the most profitable catch of its career and, undoubtedly, of all the ships of this important Sicilian port: the statue of the Dancing Satyr, caught by the boat’s drag-nets at a depth of about 480 metres between Pantelleria and Cap Bon, south of Sicily.

That day remains indelibly marked in my life because it was a heralded discovery that I was anxiously waiting for. A year earlier, 29 March 1997, I had taken part in the handing over of the Satyr’s left leg and I clearly remember the feeling of astonishment when I first set eyes on it, on a cold table of the Mazara del Vallo multi-purpose centre. I immediately realised that I was before the first clue of what, in the long history of archaeology, can be defined as a great discovery.

The Satyr is missing its arms and supporting right leg. The left leg has been found, but separated from just above the knee. There is a large hole on the top of the head at the cold-forged engraved flowing hair. The tail, located in the centre of the lumbar area where, currently, there is a circular hole for its insertion, is missing too. The eyes, between eyelids without lashes, were made by setting two almond-shaped pieces of alabaster after casting, with a circular seating for the iris that was lost. The mouth is half-open with well outlined lips.

The lost wax method used to create the statue was long and elaborate due to the complex movement, that prevented it being cast as a whole. It was made by welding together various parts: the head, torso, arms, right leg starting from half-way up the thigh and the left leg. The sex and remaining big toe were made in full casting. The head features some original technical solutions because, after welding the skullcap to the front section, the occipital section was left open so that the locks of hair (some of which were made separately) could be assembled at its margins.

The most significant characteristic of the statue lies in its magnificent head which is run through by an impalpable, and yet effective and vigorous, wind filled whirl, that shapes both the anatomical features (cheekbones, eyes, nose and mouth) and the splendid hair. The value and originality of the hair are increased by the movement that was given to the head. It is, in fact, unnaturally arched due to the force and the dynamic of the vorticose movement of the statue, which manages to upset the most elementary rules of naturalness and that can only be the work of a great master.

Whilst the identity of the statue has been verified, there is still a lively debate around the controversial attribution of the work to a prominent artistic personality. The differences arise because not everybody agrees on judging the work as original and unique. Some maintain that it is a Roman age copy even if, in truth, with weak supporting arguments.

I think that the Dancing Satyr is a Greek original produced in the decades that marked the transition from late classicism and early Hellenism, that is towards the end of the IV century BC, when the canons of late classical rigidity were shattering under the wave of the growing Hellenistic influence. And I also believe that the work is by a great artist of the ancient world or one of his close circle. It seems to me therefore convincing beyond measure to think of the Satyr as a veritable masterpiece of Greek art dating from the first Hellenistic period.

Moreno’s precise hypothesis who, as is well known, attributes the Satyr to Praxiteles, seeing the clarity of the structure and, most of all, the singular adipose softness of the incarnate elements as indicative of the vision of the great Greek sculptor, clearly comparable to those found in the Aphrodite of Knidos (swollen neck, strong chin with the characteristic dimple, full lips, large nose with a flat back, regular arch of the eyebrows) and in the radial pattern of the hair the Artemis of Gabii, is currently challenged by La Rocca’s humbler hypothesis that dates the work between the second half of the III century BC and the beginning of the II century, due to similarities with the head of the Young Girl in the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome as well as the Crouching Venus by Doidalses and the Anzio girl.

Moreno’s hypothesis about Praxiteles has been subsequently corroborated by Bernard Andrae’s authoritative analysis who, with extensive comparisons and considerations, has no doubts in attributing the work to the famous Greek sculptor. Similarly his hypotheses that the statue was part of Alaric’s, the king of the Visigoths, war loot, after the sack of Rome, seems to me to be equally convincing. As is well known one of the ships loaded with works plundered from the capital never reached destination, as it was swallowed up by the turbulent waters of the Strait of Sicily.

The key to understanding the popularity of this iconography in the following centuries lies in the great force given to the movement of the Satyr by an important Greek sculptor. There are countless works, sculptures, paintings and jewellery, that portray satyrs or maenads in the same vorticose movement. That fortuitous and successful kinetic intuition, wonderfully transferred in the Satyr bronze, was immensely successful, so much so that it was repeated in a multitude of works right through into the late Roman period, which means for at least five centuries! The Satyr is undoubtedly the prototype that inspired artists and craftsmen until the Augustan period and beyond, judging by the countless works portraying a similar iconography, such as the cameo in chalcedony agate attributed to Sostratus and the Corsini and Borghese kraters (end of the I century BC and beginning of the I century AD) and numerous sculptural reliefs, especially on sarcophaguses.

The Satyr was probably, due to static mythological and iconographical considerations, part of a sculptural complex with other satyrs and maenads, in a collective vorticose and ecstatic orgiastic dance typical of the Dionysian cycle.

The unnatural position of the head thrown fully back and the clearly raised position of the upper limbs clearly indicate the extreme dancing movement of the Satyr, undoubtedly aided by the atmosphere of orgiastic ecstasy due to the stimulating effect of woodland fumes and the inebriation of the wine. In this perspective it seems very likely that he was part of a vorticose round dance with other companions of the rite.

Going back to the reconstructible iconography, it is probable that the Satyr had the typical feline skin (panther), that accompanied him in his dances, draped on his right, or more probably, his left arm. Similarly likely his left hand held a vase (kantharos) used for the symposium. In his right hand he probably held the well-known thyrsus (long staff topped with a pine cone and decorated with ivy leaves and ribbons), that acted as a focus point to concentrate on, during the process of self-hypnosis that the Satyr underwent during his vorticose dance. Our Satyr danced by hopping just like children do when imitating birds or aeroplanes.

**Sebastiano Tusa, Regional Councillor for Culture and Sicilian Identity**