Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore

Jennifer Larson

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GREEK NYMPHS

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In memory of

BARBARA HUGHES FOWLER

who was and remains an inspiration

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PREFACE

Why a study of nymphs? The field of religious studies has seen a recent trend toward examination of popular traditions as opposed to elite ones, for example, the series Princeton Readings in Religions, edited by Donald Lopez, Jr. This approach can be applied fruitfully to the field of classics, where both the sources themselves and the preferences of scholars have favored the experiences of the elite and the city dwellers over those of the more numerous rural populations. The gap that until recently existed in the scholarship on Greek magic, an aspect of the culture seldom mentioned in canonical literature, illustrates this point. The worship of nymphs was conceptually aligned with the rural and non-elite populations, though not confined to these groups. In the literature of classical Athens, we find comparatively few references to nymphs, while in the rural areas surrounding the city, their cults thrived at this period. The Hellenistic interest in pastoral themes and local traditions, however, made nymphs fashionable subjects for the sophisticated scholar-poets of Alexandria. Hence, in addition to improving our perception of ancient Greek religion, a study of nymphs can also shed light on the relationship between popular and elite traditions in Greek culture as a whole. A further and related focus of interest is the contribution that the study of nymphs can make to our understanding of women's lives in ancient Greece. Much attention has been given to the roles of goddesses in the rituals and myths that surrounded female rites of passage, but little attention has been paid to nymphs, figures who were probably much closer to the everyday lives of the majority of women.

In this text, I sometimes speak of devotion or devotionalism, which has special relevance to the worship of nymphs (and of many other Greek deities). By this term, I refer to individual piety, especially as expressed outwardly and materially through, for example, ex-voto offerings. Devotionalism also implies an emotional, not merely intellectual, apprehension of the divine. Participation in group rituals, such as processions or sacrifices, may partake of devotionalism insofar as the individual's sense of personal relationship with the deity is engaged. Devotional practices are to be found in all the world religions, though they have received little scholarly attention in comparison with theology and sacred texts. In the past, Western scholars of world religions have erroneously attributed devotionalism primarily to non-elite populations and women, and they have subscribed to a hierarchical model that valued internal, intellectual apprehension of the divine over emotional experience and external, material expressions of piety.

A final reason for undertaking this project is that little beyond the information in standard handbooks has been published that specifically addresses the nature and function of nymphs, and no book-length works in any language currently exist. The materials available to readers of English are particularly few. Much information is scattered in archaeological reports, corpora of inscriptions, and scholarly studies of other subjects. Yet nymphs and their cults were ubiquitous in the Greek world before Homer and remained so through the Hellenistic period and beyond. The nymph, in the guise of the modern Greek *neraïda*, is one of the small number of ancient deities who survived the transition to Christianity. Few other aspects of Greek religion have been so pervasive yet so little studied.

What is a nymph? This question, which I first asked myself when undertaking the research for a book on Greek heroines, has rarely been discussed in a scholarly fashion. I believe it has escaped attention because the answer was assumed to be self-evident, but the question of definition is not a simple one. Chapter 1 begins with a section that addresses basic problems of definition and taxonomy. In order to discuss the roles and functions of nymphs in Greek culture, we must be able to distinguish them from other, similar figures. Second, I discuss the conceptual and physical contexts in which the nymphs pursue their activities—the archetypal landscapes of mountain, spring, cave, grove, and meadow—and I examine some of the taxonomic categories that were applied to the nymphs by ancient commentators. An important social dimension of nymph worship is introduced in the section on divination and nympholepsy. Finally, a brief review of nymphs in Greek poetry through the Hellenistic period helps to clarify the ways in which the characterization of nymphs changed over time or by author and addresses their relative popularity in various genres and periods. Classical scholars will already be familiar with most of the texts discussed in this section, but I hope it will form a helpful introduction for general readers.

The second chapter, "Ancient and Modern Narratives," explores the kinds of relationships between heroes (or heroines) and nymphs illustrated in an-

tique literary sources, and it examines the striking parallels between these ancient narratives and their modern counterparts. The chapter argues for some degree of continuity between the ancient and modern materials, and it uses the insights of modern folklorists to provide an interpretation of the stories, focusing especially on the gender-related fears and desires expressed in them.

Chapter 3, "Gods, Goddesses, and Nymphs," shows how the nymphs interact in myth and cult with other deities of the Greek pantheon. Again, gender provides a strong organizational principle: the nymphs' relations with gods are usually envisioned in terms of sexual contact or familial relationship (lover, nurse, or daughter), while for goddesses they act as a supportive group of attendants who share a given goddess's functional and geographical sphere of influence. Both nymphs and goddesses are closely concerned with the stages of the female life cycle as these are conceptualized in Greek thought.

The fourth chapter, "Lore of the Nymphs in the Greek World," is a reference tool that summarizes the lore for each district of the ancient Greek world, excluding cave sites. To my mind, a geographical survey, illustrating the regional character of the myths and cults, is more useful for the present work than a chronological one. Though developments did, of course, take place over the centuries, they seem as a whole less helpful as a structural framework and less dramatic than regional differences. I balance this synchronic approach by summarizing chronological changes and by keeping the reader informed of and aware of chronological considerations throughout, particularly with regard to the dates of primary sources.

The final chapter, "Caves of the Nymphs and Votive Iconography," provides a detailed look at two important features of the nymphs' cult. The discussion of excavated nymph caves, arranged in roughly chronological order, examines the development and functions of these distinctive sites. The remainder of this chapter is a discussion of nymph iconography as it appears in the stone votive reliefs first popularized in fourth-century Attica. In this section, I examine the reliefs primarily from the perspective of content and function, and I am little concerned with the minutiae of attributions or dating (interested readers may further explore these issues through some of the sources in the bibliography). In order to provide context for the reader, I survey the iconographic antecedents of the votive reliefs, but considerations of space prevent a full treatment of the ways in which nymphs were visually represented in antiquity. Further iconographic information is scattered throughout the other sections, especially the geographical survey.

The chronological limits of the book are the eighth century B.C.E. through the Hellenistic period. Archaeological and art-historical evidence of the Roman period has generally been excluded, except where it could be assumed to cast light on previous ages (in this category, I would place, for example, the dedications to the nymphs in Roman Lykia and the funerary monument of Isidora in Egypt). Similarly, there has been no attempt at comprehensive coverage of Latin or late antique literature, but certain essential

texts, such as Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs* or Longus' *Daphnis and Chloë*, receive selective treatment.

Like many authors of books on classical subjects, I have failed to achieve consistency in the transliteration of Greek names. Generally, I prefer a direct transliteration, but several familiar names retain familiar Latinized spellings (Delphi, Corinth, Muses, Oedipus). Names of ancient authors and titles keep the Latinized spelling commonly used in reference works. All dates are B.C.E. unless otherwise specified, and all translations are my own except where otherwise noted.

Writing a manuscript is a solitary enterprise, but many people contribute to the making of a book. I owe thanks to the Kent State University Research Council and the Center for Hellenic Studies, which supported my scholarly activities. The interlibrary loan staff at KSU were extraordinarily helpful during the five years it took to prepare this book. Rosa Commisso and Mark Rubin helped me to obtain photographs. Professor Hans R. Goette of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI) generously offered me photos from his private collection. Rick Newton helped me with modern Greek. Christina Clark supplied useful references and encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank my dear husband, Bob, for his love and support.

August 2000 J. L.
Kent, Ohio

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GREEK NYMPHS

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1 WHAT IS A NYMPH?

1.1 Toward a Taxonomy

Scholars face a taxonomic dilemma in discussing the female figures of Greek mythology and cult. If the female under discussion is not a well-recognized goddess, one must decide (in the absence of convenient labeling by the ancient sources) whether to refer to her as a mortal woman (that is, a heroine), as a nymph, or as a member of some other group. Did the Greeks make a significant conceptual distinction between heroines and nymphs, and if so, what factors were used to distinguish them? No detailed discussion of these questions exists, and the matter of nomenclature has so far been idiosyncratic. It is, of course, made more tricky by the ambiguity of the term *numphê*, which can refer not only to the minor female divinities of the wild places but also to any nubile woman or, more commonly, to a bride.[1] The semantics of the term in the context of marriage is very close to the English *bride*, which describes a woman's status during limited periods both before and after her wedding. There is no necessary qualification of virginity. Occasionally, a *numphê* may be a mature, even matronly woman. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is addressed as *numphê* by Eurykleia, and on classical Attic reliefs dedicated to the nymphs, the conventions permitted sculptors to show the three nymphs as women of various ages (though never as aged crones). The crucial point is that, when applied to a mortal woman, the term *numphê* points to her status as a sexual being.[2]

The Greeks at all periods do seem to have recognized a distinction between mythological females who were to be understood as mortal women

and those who were divine nymphs, even when they did not invoke the terms *nymph* or *heroine*. In the sphere of cult, the same distinction applied. Below are enumerated the main criteria on which I base my understanding of this distinction.

1. Terminology used by ancient sources. Surprisingly often, the Greek sources take the trouble to identify nymphs. The clues are easy to miss if, for example, one passes over the formula "daughter of Asopos" without realizing that the father mentioned is a river god. More often, the terms *naiad* and *nymph* are juxtaposed in order to make the sense unmistakable. This practice begins in Homer and continues as a habit of diction through late authors. Similarly, certain names are typical of nymphs, particularly names containing the element *naïs* (naiad) or those ending in the suffix *-rhoê*, so that they describe the flowing movement of water. Such etymologies are suggestive, but not infallible, indicators.

2. Parentage. Nymphs are described with great frequency as the daughters of Zeus, of Ge, or of various river gods. Acheloös, to some degree a generalized river god, often figures as the father, but many others are also invoked, depending on the region. Heroines, on the other hand, are normally the daughters of heroes. One gray area in this regard, discussed below, involves the daughters of primordial and indigenous kings, such as the Danaids and the daughters of Kekrops.

3. Mortality and the death narrative. While the ultimate mortality of nymphs was debated among ancient authors (1.4.1, 2.4), it was clear to the ancients that they enjoyed a superhuman lifespan far outstripping that of mortal men and women. For practical purposes, they were immortal, while heroines were all too easily killed. In the myths of heroines, as in those of heroes, the manner and location of death is often a matter of great interest. This mythic emphasis on death is complemented by the focus of heroic cults at what were believed to be the tombs of the heroes and heroines.

4. Gender restrictions and vulnerability to mortal men. The nymph is a highly ambiguous figure. Though sexually desirable, she is usually free of the familial restrictions applied to mortal women and can rarely be fully domesticated. Nymphs may be sexually promiscuous, and they often act as the aggressors in ephemeral affairs with mortals. Furthermore, such affairs can be deadly to the male, as the cases of Daphnis and Rhoikos show. Unlike nymphs, mythological heroines who indulge in promiscuity or violence are usually punished in one fashion or another. Moreover, the narratives of cult heroines often emphasize their passive availability to men's use and their vulnerability to male violence.[3]

5. Role in heroic genealogies and narrative flexibility. The nymph often played a role in local genealogies as the earliest, autochthonous ancestor and provided a link to and an implicit claim upon the land and its resources. Nymphs likewise seem to figure significantly in mythic genealogies that deal with the period of the Great Flood and with colonization. The activities or characters of such nymphs are seldom described in a detailed narrative. This

is in contrast to heroines, who may be virgins, wives, or crones, admirable or villainous, and who play detailed roles in the local myths.

6. Association with a water source. Nymphs regularly personify and inhabit springs, rivers, and lakes. One of their main mythic and cultic functions is to provide fresh water. The same is not true of heroines, though they are sometimes associated with springs. When this is the case, there may be a parallel tradition that involves a tomb.[4]

7. Special functions in relation to the gods. A female who is part of Artemis' or Dionysos' mythic retinues or who takes part in the care of infant gods is likely to be a nymph. While the cult of heroines usually exists within a familial context, so that they are worshiped in conjunction with a husband or son, nymphs are associated with Hermes, Apollo, Pan, the river god Acheloös, and other deities. Their cult organization is not analogous to the family but to the relationship between a god and his *thiasos* or the chorus leader and chorus.

8. Cultic functions. Comparison of the discernable functions of nymph and heroine cults reveals some overlap. This is not surprising: Greek deities presided over a limited number of timeless human concerns, and no sharp division of labor existed. The main area of overlap encompasses human fertility, childbirth, and childcare. This kourotrophic function can be further divided into concern for young children and concern for those who are approaching adulthood, a group of special interest to the community as future warriors and fertile wives.[5] These concerns form a spectrum of life experiences with birth at one end and entry into adult status at the other. The participation of nymphs at each stage of this process is well documented (3.2). Heroines may play similar roles, especially when concerns about nurturance are given a civic focus, and the association of heroines with the Attic Arrhephoria and Arkteia has been much discussed.[6]

Some important divergences in function can also be discerned between the two groups. Nymphs, because of their association with springs, are often healing deities. Healing gods as a rule are close to a water source, preferably one that is heated or has interesting mineral properties, such as the sulfurous springs of the Anigrid nymphs at Samikon. Though there are several examples of heroes who heal, there is little evidence for heroine healers; Kearns suggests that this gap corresponds to the societal restraints on female physicians.[7] Another area that nymphs normally do not share with heroines is that of inspiration and, to a lesser extent, divination.

9. Physical setting and significance of the cult places. Heroines' tombs and shrines, like those of heroes, tend to be strategically located in central spots within the city walls, usually in the agora or, occasionally, at gates as protective guardians. Sometimes, they are literally focal points of the city. The tomb of Antinoë, founder of the city of Mantineia, was the *hestia koinê*, the "public hearth."[8] The cult places of nymphs, on the other hand, are as a rule associated with natural features: rivers, caves, and springs. Many, if not most, nymph cults are rural (unsurprising in view of their importance in pastoral

life), and the fact that they are tied to naturally occurring caves and water sources limits their spatial flexibility. However, it is too simplistic to say that nymphs are rural and heroines are urban, for exceptions abound.

Both nymphs and heroines contribute to the community's sense of itself in history (through the presence in the community of well-known water sources or natural objects and of heroic monuments, respectively). On the other hand, heroines are more likely to have civic functions of little concern to nymphs. The political importance of heroic relics is well recognized, and the relics of Alkmene and Hippodameia were prized and disputed in the same way as those of Orestes.

10. Objects commemorating cult. For fourth-century Attica, especially, two separate series of votive reliefs with well-developed iconography can be compared: one for heroic figures and one for nymphs. Sculptural conventions oppose the domestic setting of a banquet for heroic figures with natural settings in caves for nymphs, and familial relationships with "choric" ones. The fourth-century calendars of the Attic demes Erchia and Marathon honor nymphs and heroines separately, which suggests that even in the case of localized anonymous figures, the distinction still holds.[9]

11. Other narrative or cultic motifs. Satyrs or silens, herding and pastoralism, caves, trees, bees, and honey are all common motifs in the myths and cults of nymphs. None of these criteria should be employed alone or applied too rigidly, but taken as a whole they can provide a workable method for us to distinguish nymphs from heroines as well as from various minor goddesses, and they indicate that the Greeks generally did the same. Of course, there are hybrid cases of female figures who exhibit some characteristics of both nymph and heroine; there is no use attempting to force such individuals into one category or the other. Again, our picture of most mythic and cultic figures is built up from various ancient sources, which may or may not agree on essential points.

As mentioned above, the daughters of early kings are often ambiguous figures. In *Greek Heroine Cults*, I classified Aglauros, Pandrosos, and Herse as heroines because of their conformity to an Attic and Boiotian pattern in which the king's daughters willingly sacrifice themselves to save the city.[10] Yet the daughters are nymphlike in their association with Pan's sanctuary on the north slope of the Akropolis (4.2.1). The daughters of Danaus are closely associated with water sources and the myth of a drought in the Argolid. Amymone, in particular, shows several nymphlike characteristics. There is a spring or stream Amymone in which maidens bathe for ritual purposes. Amymone was sent to find water, pursued by a lusty satyr (a motif borrowed from the early iconography of nymphs), and impregnated by Poseidon, who showed her the springs of Lerna as a reward for her favors (4.4.2).

Dirke is another good example of a hybrid type. Dirke is a river that flows through Thebes and, in some accounts, a spring. She is described as a daughter of Acheloös by Euripides. Yet Dirke also infiltrates human genealogies as

the wife of Lykos and rival of Antiope. She has an important death narrative, the story that she was trampled beneath a bull in punishment for her cruelty to Antiope. Finally, she had a tomb in Thebes, a secret spot where the old archon passed on his office to the new. Thus, Dirke with her human genealogy, tomb, and civic importance ends up looking more like a heroine than a nymph.[11]

Kallisto is often considered a nymph because of her companionship with Artemis. Yet Kallisto's tomb was a cult place in Arkadia; the ancient sources reflect the confusion over her status (4.4.3). Kallisto illustrates another problem in identifying nymphs: local goddesses were sometimes assimilated into the Olympian pantheon by demotion to the rank of nymph. This appears to be the case for Kallisto as well as for certain Kretan nymphs, such as Diktynna or Britomartis, both of whom seem to have been cult figures supplanted by Artemis.

Female pluralities, particularly triads, are ubiquitous in Greek mythology and cult. Some of these, like the daughters of Proitos or Minyas, are mortal women, and others are divine. The Okeanids are the daughters of the primordial river Okeanos and are hence an early generation of nymphs. Okeanids appear occasionally in myths (most notably as the companions of Persephone before her abduction), figure rarely in cult, and serve mainly as genealogical starting points.[12] Nereids are the daughters of the sea god Nereus and are the marine counterpart of the nymphs who live in springs and woods. The most famous of the Nereids is Thetis, who has an important cosmological status as well as being the mother of Achilles. The Nereids share many features with the nymphs who live on land, particularly their love of the dance and their occasional liaisons with mortals. I do not treat the Nereids at length in this book, because a detailed study of them already exists.[13] The Pleiades are the daughters of the Titans Atlas and Pleione. Their status as primordial figures is consistent with what we know of nymphs. Maia, the mother of Hermes, is a Pleiad whose name means "nurse." The Pleiads as a group are especially important in the genealogies of the Peloponnese (4.4.3), Samothrace, Boiotia, and Euboia. Sources disagree on the parentage of the Hesperides, though they always favor primordial deities, such as Night, Hesperis, and Atlas. These maidens, with the serpent Ladon, were the guardians of a tree of golden apples, located in the famous garden of the Hesperides at the western border of the river Okeanos, given to Hera as a wedding gift. Like other female pluralities, they were famous for their singing. Apollonius of Rhodes regarded them as tree nymphs and goddesses of vegetation.[14]

The Muses, Charites, and Horai are groups closely allied to the nymphs, and they fulfill under other names many of the functions otherwise attributed to nymphs (e.g., causing the crops to ripen or producing inspiration). They are primarily cultic entities, though we do find some mythic mentions of their choruses and their function as escorts of the gods and goddesses. There can be little doubt that the Muses and the Charites developed from the same ancestral stock as the nymphs and are in fact more specialized members of

the same general group. Both had localized cults that spread within limited areas, yet they became known on a Panhellenic scale at an early date. The Muses' function (4.3.1, 4.7.1) as the catalysts of divine inspiration correlates with aspects of the more humble phenomenon of nympholepsy, and their associations with mountains, springs, and the pastoral milieu are definitely nymphlike.[15]

Later in this book, I discuss the convergence of nymph and Muse in Thrace, Attica, Boiotia, Lydia, Lykia, and Sicily. The Charites, or Graces, had important cults at Athens, Orchomenos, and Paros. Like the nymphs, they act as companions and attendants of certain Olympian deities, particularly Aphrodite and Hermes. They, too, are goddesses of vegetative abundance and moisture as well as creative inspiration. The most striking correspondences between Charites and nymphs, however, appear in iconography, where both groups are depicted as dancing triads. Charites and nymphs occasionally appear together in both poetry and iconography.[16] The Horai, or Seasons, said by Hesiod to be daughters of Zeus and Themis, resemble the Charites but are closer to simple personifications of natural abundance. They, too, act as escorts of the gods, and Homer describes them opening the gates of the sky for Hera. Like the nymphs and Charites, they are associated with weddings, childcare, and choruses.[17] Female pluralities are further discussed in the section on votive iconography (5.2).

1.2 Nymphs in the Landscape

In the Greek imagination, nymphs are inseparable from the landscape. To a greater degree than most other Greek deities, they are closely associated with certain topographical features. The most basic of these is the spring, for nymphs are above all deities of water. While many nymph names contain the transparent root *-rhoê* (e.g., Kallirhoë, "lovely flowing"; Okyrhoë, "swift flowing"), derivations from Indo-European roots describing the properties of running water have been proposed for nymph names as diverse as Peirene, Salmakis, Neda, Gargaphia, and Arethousa.[18] Nymphs are thought to inhabit all watery places, and the many collective designations for nymphs include those of the rivers (*potamêides*, *epipotamides*), springs (*naiades*, *krênaiai*), marshes (*limnaiai*, *limnades*, *heleionomoi*), and water in general (*hudriades*, *ephudriades*).[19] Although most of these terms are attested only after the classical period, the term naiad (*naïs* is related to the Greek verb *naô*, "flow") is used from the time of Homer forward as a substitute or qualifier for *numphê*.[20] From Homer to the late epigrams in the *Greek Anthology*, nymphs are consistently the inhabitants of water sources and providers of fresh water. Their cultural significance thus stretches far beyond the spring itself to all the symbolic and practical uses of water.[21]

The spring might be described as the microhabitat of the nymph; if this is so, the macrohabitat is the mountain, which is regularly defined in both

ancient and modern Greece not by a specific height but by its opposition to "the plain." A "mountain," *oros*, need be little more than a hill in terms of altitude. Yet *oros* carries a consistent range of associations in Greek thought. In myth and cult, it is regularly the meeting place of gods and mortals (Hesiod and the Muses or Anchises and Aphrodite) and a place where societal norms undergo temporary reversal, as in Dionysiac revels. It is space beyond, and contrasted with, urban areas.[22] It is the setting for many activities of economic importance. To take Attica as an example, Parnes (like Pelion in Thessaly) was a source of timber and charcoal; Pentelikon and Hymettos were sources of marble; Hymettos was a site for apiculture. The economic significance of mountains also lay in the age-old practice of pastoral transhumance.[23] Herders of sheep and goats grazed their stock on the plain during the colder half of the year (September through March), and during the hot months, when the lower areas were barren and dry, they moved to the higher altitudes where green plants and water could still be found.

Goats and, to a lesser extent, sheep can be grazed well in the rocky scrub and wooded areas of the mountain slopes. They share part of this habitat with bees, who are dependent on the wildflowers in the open areas like the slopes of Hymettos. Finally, the hunt took place in the wild mountain spaces, particularly in the pine and oak woods. The nymphs are associated with all of these occupations at one time or another. The activities of herding, beekeeping, tree cutting, hunting, and even quarrying might fall under their purview because of their spatial and conceptual ties to the *oros*. Homer calls them *orestiades numphai*, and we hear later of *oressigonoi numphai* (mountain-born nymphs) and *oreades*.[24]

The third specific landscape feature associated with nymphs is the cave (also, of course, a feature of the *oros*). Geology has played a serendipitous role here, for the rocky karst landscape of Greece is riddled with caves created by the action of water (5.1). Caves large and small are likely to contain springs, and in fact the cave is the most common cult site of the nymphs, although by no means belonging exclusively to them. Again, caves were used in antiquity both as convenient homes for bees, who require shelter plus a water source, and as temporary shelters for herders and quarrymen. Caves had a symbolic value out of proportion to their minor economic value: they regularly appear in mythology as the birthplaces and homes of deities and monsters, the sites for sexual intercourse (usually of an illicit character), and the spots where heroic infants are exposed.[25] The nymphs, as cave deities, figure in many of these stories.

Finally, certain places characterized by abundant water, shade, and vegetation, often semicultivated vegetation, were imbued with the nymphs' presence. These places were above all pleasing to the senses; they invited passersby to stop and refresh themselves. The traditional motif of the *locus amoenus*, or pleasant spot, goes back to Hesiod's description of his midday rest beside a cooling spring.[26] Hesiod himself does not mention the nymphs, but many later versions of the *locus amoenus* include them. Homer, for his part, uses the

characteristic triad of spring, cave, and vegetation, particularly poplar trees, to describe the lovely abodes of Kalypso, the Ithakan nymphs, and the nymphs of Goat Island, opposite the Kyklopes (1.4.1).

The classic example of a *locus amoenus* is Plato's description in the *Phaedrus* of a pleasant spot beside the Ilissos River. Sokrates and his companions reach a certain place marked by a plane tree and a spring, a shrine for the nymphs and Acheloös (the generalized river god who often appears with them in cultic contexts). Both the landscape and the time of day are significant. The plane trees and their cool shade, the riverbank, the grassy slope, the sound of cicadas all combine to create an inviting place to rest. The hour of midday, when one is inclined to seek shade beneath a tree, is also the hour when divine epiphanies are most likely.[27]

Such a place as this is never without a divine presence, which accounts for the appeal of the landscape and its strong influence upon the susceptible observer. As Sokrates says, "Truly the place seems divine [*theios*], so do not be surprised if I often seem to be *numpholêptos* as my discourse progresses, for I am already almost uttering dithyrambics."[28] The term *numpholêptos*, or "seized by the nymphs," has several possible meanings, but in this case it describes an access of poetic inspiration brought on by Sokrates' surroundings. Contrary to his usual custom of questioning his interlocutors, he is voluble, expressing himself in an elevated poetic fashion. The close relationship between poetic inspiration and prophecy in Greek culture is well known, and nympholepsy could also be manifested as a prophetic gift (1.3).

Any spot that is refreshingly cool, green, and pleasing to the eye might be the abode of nymphs. According to Dionysius of Halikarnassos, each natural space has a divinity appropriate to it. The spaces that belong particularly to nymphs, he says, are meadows and verdant areas. Some of these spots were unmarked places in the wild, but more often there was minimal cultivation and improvement on nature: the *pêgê*, or spring, in its natural state might become a *krênê*, a "fountain" with a basin or cistern.[29] There might be a shrine, an altar, or a grove set apart by a low wall as a sacred area. Such places were gardens of the nymphs, a more overtly erotic concept, which overlaps with that of the *locus amoenus*. Often the garden was located at the mouth of a cave, an arrangement well attested in both literature and cult.

With the "dear nymphs," unlike the Olympian gods, one could feel an intimate bond, and the nymphs had a sensual, sexual aura shared by none of the Olympian goddesses except Aphrodite. Aphrodite too was worshiped in gardens, and the fertile, moist parts of the landscape were associated with female anatomy in a metaphor that is probably universal. The words *kêpos* (garden), *leimôn* (meadow), *delta*, and *pedion* (plain) were all informal terms that referred to the female genitalia, and maidens picking flowers in meadows, like Kore or Europe, are archetypes of sexual vulnerability.[30]

The nymphs, as providers of water, are naturally associated with all types of vegetation, including grasses, flowers, and, above all, trees. The oak, the plane tree, and the black poplar are their special favorites, the latter two spe-

cies being most abundant beside rivers and springs. While hamadryads and dryads (2.4) are most often mentioned in the late sources, we also hear of elm and ash nymphs (*pteleades*, *meliai*) as well as nymphs connected with fruit, nut, and other trees.[31] Other nymphs associated with vegetation include Syrinx (reed), Leiriope (lily), the Ionides (violets), Rhodos (rose), and the Pterides (ferns).[32]

Mnesimachus of Phaselis, with the gusto for classification characteristic of the Hellenistic period, comments that some of the nymphs are heavenly (presumably the Pleiades or Hyades), some are upon the earth, some are in the rivers, some on marshes, and some in the sea.[33] The tendency of generalizing late sources is to classify nymphs by the landscape features they inhabited, and while this concept certainly existed from Homer's time onward, we should also keep in mind the local character of nymphs. In poetry and cult, they were just as likely to be described with reference to specific rivers, islands, or mountains. Examples discussed in this book include the Leibethrides, Kithaironides, Anigrides, Amnisides, and Asopides.

1.3 Nympholepsy and Divination

The attribution of divinatory powers to the nymphs or to those inspired by them was not uncommon in the Greek world. The nymphs' fundamental association with water, the vector of prophecy and inspiration, and their close association with the mantic god Apollo were both salient factors. In a fragment of Aeschylus, we hear of nymphs who are *namerteis*, truthful or infallible. The word is also a favorite epithet for the watery prophets Proteus and Nereus.[34] Prophetic nymphs, though not abundant in mythology, appear regularly, including Daphnis, the nymph who first prophesied at Delphi before Apollo's arrival; Erato, the Arkadian nymph who gave oracles of Pan; and Oinone, the nymph who foretold her lover, Paris', death. The mothers of prophets tend to be nymphs, as Teiresias' mother is Chariklo, the favorite nymph of Athena.

Few actual oracles of the nymphs, in the sense of sanctuaries where oracular responses could be obtained, are known. An outstanding example is the oracle at the Korykian cave of the nymphs at Delphi (5.1.5). Amandry, the excavator, argued that the 23,000 astragaloi deposited at the cave had served an oracular function.[35] Astragaloi, the "knucklebones" of sheep and goats, were used for both gaming and divination in a manner similar to dice. Children formed collections of them, and they are found as grave gifts and as occasional dedications in sanctuaries. But in any sanctuary with such a huge number of astragaloi, the likelihood is that their dedication as gifts was incidental to their main purpose as divinatory tools. In antiquity, people consulted astragaloi as they might now use tarot cards or read tea leaves. The use of astragaloi, however, was a poor person's method of divination, much in keeping with the other offerings at the cave, which were almost uniformly

humble and of poor quality. Those who could not afford consultation at the oracle of Apollo made the journey up to the cave to consult the nymphs, perhaps in conjunction with Hermes.

At the end of the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*, Apollo bestows upon Hermes certain oracular bee maidens as a sort of consolation prize for his refusal to let the younger god share in his own mantic privileges. These three sisters live "beneath a ridge of Parnassos" and teach a form of divination that Apollo practiced as a boy when he still worked as a herdsman. Apollo cedes this method to his younger brother, Hermes, along with dominion over domestic animals but denies to him the loftier mantic privilege: knowledge of the will of Zeus. These bee maidens have long been identified with the Thriai, Parnassian nymphs who nursed Apollo and were the personification of divination with pebbles, *thriai*.[36] But the bee maidens are more probably the Korykian nymphs, whose cave corresponds to the *Hymn*'s description of an oracle near Delphi but "apart from" Apollo. Myths that identify bees with nymphs or that make bees the nymphs' proxies are plentiful enough to make this explanation plausible.[37]

In Apollodorus' version of the myth, Hermes trades his shepherd's pipes for Apollo's golden wand, which Apollo owned when he herded cattle, plus the rights to divination by pebbles.[38] Hermes' role as the god of cleromancy, a humble form of divination with small objects, such as lots, pebbles, dice, or astragaloi, fits the evidence from the cave well, but the oracle mentioned in the *Hymn* works only through the agency of prophetic bees, who must be given offerings of honey. Visitors to the Korykian cave probably began their consultation by making a libation of this liquid, then asked a question and cast their astragaloi in order to receive a simple yes or no answer. It is also possible that bees, whether wild or domesticated, inhabited the cave and played some role in the divination process.

The only other historical example of a nymph sanctuary that served as an oracle is the nymphaion at Apollonia in Illyria, which provided yes or no answers to petitioners who threw incense into its fires (4.5.3). Far from being the products of a fixed sanctuary, oracles inspired by nymphs were much more likely to circulate as verse collections under the name of the nympholept prophet Bakis. There were supposedly several individuals called Bakis, so that the name is actually a categorical term for male prophets, just as Sibyl is more a designation of occupation than a personal name and was applied to several different female prophets. The oldest of the Bakides was from Eleon in Boiotia and was inspired by the nymphs. Prophets called Bakis were also linked to Attica, Lokris, and Arkadia.[39] Though actual Bakides probably gave oracles firsthand in the early archaic period, by the fifth and fourth centuries the Bakides and Sibyls themselves had been largely replaced by wandering chresmologues, oracle mongers who compiled and offered access to collections of oracles attributed to famous seers. Attitudes toward the chresmologues varied. More sophisticated observers, such as the comic poets, made a practice of lampooning oracle mongers, their influence over

the demos, and their manipulation by politicians. Herodotus quotes with credulous approval several oracles of Bakis that refer to the outcome of specific battles in the Persian war.[40]

Several further references to oracles of Bakis are preserved in the comedies of Aristophanes, most notably in the *Peace*, in which the chresmologue Hierokles arrives and declares the oracular authority of the nymphs in order to pour gloom over Trygaios' celebration of the return of Peace. These comic oracles take riddling and somewhat hackneyed forms, which are nevertheless not far in style from genuine examples: "timorous gulls, you have trusted the fox cubs" and "it is not pleasing to the blessed immortals that we cease the battle cry, until the wolf and the sheep be wedded." In the *Knights*, Kleon/Paphlagon attempts to use a collection of Bakid oracles to maintain control over Demos.[41] Such collections of oracles, which drew heavily upon bodies of popular wisdom, such as proverbs, could be easily interpreted and manipulated to serve political purposes. At the same time, the public had an inexhaustible appetite for supernatural pronouncements and predictions, and oracles were also held in high regard by many statesmen. Access to and control over oracles was a source of political prestige and authority throughout antiquity but appears to have been especially important in archaic Greece. The Athenian tyrant Peisistratos' political use of oracles and amassing of oracle collections is well known; he also is said to have gone by the epithet Bakis, as if he himself were a nympholept.[42] That the tyrant might have wished to take on himself the authority of the nymphs, in much the same way he did that of Athena, is not surprising.

This brings us to the term *nympholepsy*, which is a blanket word that can be used to describe several overlapping concepts. First and foremost, as Connor has shown, the term refers to a heightening of awareness and elevated verbal skills believed to result from the nymphs' influence on a susceptible individual. It is in this sense that Boiotian Bakis was inspired to produce oracles, and it is this form of nympholepsy to which Sokrates alludes when he playfully announces that he is on the verge of speaking in dithyrambs under the influence of the nymphs of Ilissos (1.2). In such contexts, poetry and prophecy, always closely related, cannot be separated, and the nympholept, like the poet, the Sibyl, or the Pythia, experiences a state of divine madness but not one that his or her contemporaries would regard as pathological. Similarly, Amelasagoras (or Melesagoras) of Eleusis, the reputed author of a history of Attica, claimed to be wise (*sophos*) and prophetic (*mantikos*) because he was *ek numphôn katochos*, "overpowered by the nymphs."[43]

In the postclassical period, however, possession by the nymphs began to be seen as an abnormal and dangerous state hardly distinguishable from illness, and this idea is the direct precursor of the fear, prominent in modern Greek folklore, of being beaten or stricken by the *neraïdes* (2.1, 2.3.2). Another sense of the term nympholepsy, also best attested in the postclassical period, is that of physical rather than mental rapture by the nymphs. In

mythology and cult, we have Hylas, Bormos, and Dryope, who were snatched away into the company of the nymphs, and in funerary inscriptions, we find that children or young women were sometimes said to have been so abducted or received (2.3.1).

Finally, the term nympholept could be used to describe someone who exhibited an unusual degree of religious devotion to the nymphs. This state need not exclude the qualities of heightened sensation and expression described above but was not manifested primarily in poetic or prophetic utterances. Instead, it was evident in a person's extended commitment to the maintenance of a specific cult of the nymphs, especially through the embellishment of cave sanctuaries. The investment of time, resources, and physical labor needed for such devotions, which were highly personal in character, would have set the nympholept apart from the rest of the population.

Epimenides of Phaistos, the famous wonder worker of the archaic age, appears to have been a nympholept of sorts. His 57-year slumber in a cave is reminiscent of modern Greek folktales about men held captive in caves by the *neraïdes*. According to one account, he wished to build a sanctuary of the nymphs (a behavior typical of the nympholept) but heard a voice saying, "not a *hieron* of the nymphs, but of Zeus." Other stories have him receiving magic food from the nymphs, which he kept in a cow's hoof. This food, perhaps honey, allowed him to subsist with no other form of nutrition and was completely absorbed by his body. Finally, as in the case of many other prophets, his mother, Balte, was reputedly a nymph.[44] The neo-Pythagorean holy man Apollonios of Tyana argued that water was superior to wine as a beverage to facilitate divination "for we are nympholepts and Bacchants of sobriety."[45]

For a number of years, around the turn of the fifth century, the Attic cave of Vari (5.1.9, figure 1.1) was the haunt of a Theran immigrant named Archedamos, who thought of himself as a nympholept. Archedamos did a great deal of physical labor in order to improve the cave, cutting stairs, inscriptions, and sculptures into the rock, including a self-portrait. This relief, clearly an amateur work, shows him wearing a short chiton and holding stone-cutting tools. It is inscribed twice with his name, which appears a total of six times on inscriptions from the cave. Two rupestral examples appear near the first landing as one descends into the cave. One simply says "Archedamos the Theran," and the other states, "Archedamos the Theran, a nympholept, at the instructions of the nymphs [*phradaisi numphôn*] worked out this cave." A block of stone found near the large enthroned figure in the south chamber was probably once set up near the entrance to the cave. Each side recounts different activities of the nympholept. The first says that "Archedamos the Theran cultivated a garden for the nymphs." The other side, more difficult to interpret, says that Archedamos built a dwelling for the nymph (singular) and further describes him as *cholonodches*, an unknown word. Connor suggests that it might re-

Figure 1.1 Vari cave: Archedamos on left. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens.

fer to bile, *cholos*, since an Aristotelian medical text attributes inspired states to an abundance of hot bile.[46] Archedamos could have been referring to what he considered the physical basis of his condition, while the spiritual basis was possession by the nymphs. All three of the lengthier inscriptions have heightened, poetic diction and hexametric cadences. The inscriptions show variations in both dialectal and letter forms, which suggest that they were carved over a long period. Yet all could be accommodated within the lifetime of Archedamos.

Certain features of the evidence are worthy of comment. First, Archedamos seems proud of his physical exertions on behalf of the nymph(s); he does not share the elite aversion to manual labor. We do not know whether he was a freed slave or simply an immigrant, whether he supported himself through some trade or lived at the cave and was supported by the offerings of visitors. In any case, both his metic status and his retreat to this isolated rural spot make him marginal to Athenian society. The cult he oversees seemingly has no civic, tribal, domestic, or deme affiliation. His marginality is typical of visionaries across cultures, who either belong to an outsider class in the first place or deliberately remove themselves from the mainstream. This separation, however, does not imply complete disengagement from society. The nympholept, like possessed persons in other cultures, had a recognized social role that was enhanced by his withdrawal and isolation. Connor plausibly suggests that Archedamos, as a nympholept, prophesied for pilgrims to the cave.[47]

Second, Archedamos speaks twice of plural nymphs, at whose suggestion he worked out the cave and for whom he tended the garden, and once of an individual nymph for whom he built a dwelling. These activities have undertones that, in view of the erotic significance of gardens and enclosed chambers, might have been much more obvious to the ancients. One thinks both of Odysseus' sexual captivity in the cave and garden of Kalypso and of his building with his own hands a nuptial chamber and bed for his bride, the symbols of their marital intimacy. Onesagoras, another nympholept who filled a cave in third-century Cyprus with dedications to an individual nymph, referred to her as sister, daughter, and possibly as lover. Like Archedamos, Onesagoras created self-portraits, incised faces on the pots that he dedicated to the nymph. The nympholept's devotion is not self-effacing; on the contrary, he feels the need to proclaim his presence over and over, asserting the exclusive character of his relationship with the nymph(s).

Thessalian Pantalkes, a near-contemporary of Archedamos, similarly maintained a cave near Pharsalos and left inscriptions that detail his activities (5.1.6).[48] The earlier inscription, dating from the fifth century, announces that Pantalkes dedicated something ("this work" or, perhaps, "this tree") to the goddesses (i.e., the nymphs); a second sentence, difficult to interpret, mentions a laurel.[49] The later inscription belongs several decades later, sometime in the fourth century. Composed in dactylic hexameters of simple diction, it reads:

θεός
τύχα
Χαίρετε τοὶ προσιόντες, ἅπας θῆλύς τε καὶ ἄρσην,
ἄνδρες τε ἠδὲ γυναῖκες, ὁμῶς παῖδές τε κόραι τε,
χωρόνδ᾽ εἰς ἱερὸν Νύμφαις καὶ Πανὶ καὶ Ἑρμῆι,
Ἀπόλλωνι ἄνακτι καὶ Ἡρακλεῖ καὶ ἑταίραις,
Χίρωνος τ᾽ ἄντρον καὶ Ἀσκλαπίου ἠδ᾽ Ὑγιείας·
τούτων ἐστὶ τὸ χωρίον ἅπαν ἰαρωτά τ᾽ ἐν αὐτῶι
ἔμφυτα καὶ πίνακες καὶ ἀγάλματα δῶρα τε πολλά·
ἄνδρα δ᾽ ἐποίησαντ᾽ ἀγαθὸν Παντάλκεα Νύμφαι
τῶνδ᾽ ἐπιβαινέμεναι χώρων καὶ ἐπίσσκοπον εἶναι,
ὅσπερ ταῦτ᾽ ἐφύτευσε καὶ ἐξεπονήσατο χερσσίν,
ἀντίδοσαν, δ᾽ αὐτῶι βίον ἄφθονον ἤματα πάντα·
Ἡρακλέης μὲν ἔδωκ᾽ ἰσχύν, ἀρετήν τε κράτος τε
ὤιπερ τούσδε λίθους τύπτων ἐπόησ᾽ ἀναβαίνειν,
Ἀπόλλων δὲ δίδωσι καὶ υἱὸς τοῦδε καὶ Ἑρμῆς
αἰῶν᾽ εἰς τὸν ἅπαντα ὑγίειαν καὶ βίον ἐσθλόν,
Πὰν δὲ γέλωτα καὶ εὐφροσύνην ὕβριν τε δικαίαν,
Χίρων δ᾽ αὐτῶι δῶκε σοφόν τ᾽ ἦμεν καὶ ἀοιδόν·
ἀλλὰ τύχαις ἀγαθαῖς ἀναβαίνετε, θύετε πάντες,
εὔχεσθε, εὐφραίνεσθε· κακῶν δὲ ἐπίλησις ἁπάντων
ἐνθάδ᾽ ἔνεστ᾽, ἀγαθῶν δὲ..ρη πολέμοιο τε ν[ί]κη.

GOD
FORTUNE

Welcome visitors, every male and female,
men and women, boys and girls,
to a place holy to the Nymphs and Pan and Hermes,
Lord Apollo and Herakles and his companions [fem.],
the cave of Chiron, and of Asklepios and Hygeia.
Theirs is the place, and all the sacred things in it,
growing things and tablets and dedications and many gifts.
The Nymphs made Pantalkes a gentleman
they who walk these places; and made him overseer.
He tended these plants and shaped things with his hands
and in return they gave abundance for all his days.
Herakles gave him strength, excellence and power
with which he smote the stones and made a way up.
Apollo and his son Hermes give
health and prosperous living through the whole age;
Pan gave laughter and good cheer and righteous unrestraint;
Chiron gave him to be wise and a poet.
But go up with good fortunes. Let all sacrifice,
pray, and enjoy yourselves. Forgetfulness of all cares
is here, and a share of good things, and victory in strife.[50]

The first part of the inscription welcomes visitors and lists the deities who are honored in the cave. The second part recounts Pantalkes' role in the administration of the cave as a cult site: how he created a path to the cave opening, planted a garden outside it, and oversaw the votive offerings. The nymphs provided the original impetus for his actions, and other deities contributed to his efforts by giving him strength, health, a good living, and happiness. It has been suggested that Pantalkes and Archedamos are both legendary founder figures rather than historical persons, but their distinct, vivid personalities seem to belie this view. It is possible that some of the inscriptions were carved by followers rather than by the nympholepts themselves. Yet Pantalkes could have been the author of both of the inscriptions that bear his name, in spite of their apparent chronological separation. He might have begun his work as a young man with the shorter inscription and composed the longer one as a valedictory, summarizing his achievements and making it clear that he expected the cave to be maintained for posterity. (Onesagoras, the Cypriot devotee of the nymph at Kafizin, seems to have dedicated an inscribed pot after his retirement, in which he calls himself the good steward of the nymph.)[51] In that case, the age of the dedications in the cave, as at Vari, would indicate that votives were already being placed there when Pantalkes began his work.

Pantalkes does not refer to himself as a nympholept, and he seems more gregarious and self-confident than Archedamos, with his hearty invitation to visitors and his greater skill at versification. But, as in Archedamos' case, it was the nymphs who conferred a special status on Pantalkes, making him *anêr agathos* and *episkopos*. It is they who appear in the earlier inscription as the sole recipients of his attentions (the cults of the other deities must have accrued over the years as the cave's reputation grew). And, like Archedamos, he is proud of his physical labor. There have been attempts, none so far successful, to link the Vari and Pharsalos caves historically.[52] More likely than a direct influence from Thessaly to Attica is that there was a widespread, shared concept in the late fifth century of how devotion to the nymphs might manifest itself.

This religious mentality was still in force when Onesagoras worshiped a nymph at a cave in third-century Cyprus, though there are some noticeable differences. Onesagoras' cave, in spite of his own enthusiasm, did not become a place of pilgrimage like the caves of Vari and Pharsalos. The cult was of interest only within Onesagoras' own circle of associates and quickly faded when Onesagoras died (5.1.13). As late as the third century C.E., we find an unusual degree of devotion to the nymphs attested in the gravestone inscription of one Chrysogonos of Kos, who calls himself *latris numphôn*, "servant" of the nymphs.[53]

Gender and sexuality appear to be significant in the phenomenon of nympholepsy as a whole. It is certainly no coincidence that the male Bakid prophets were thought to be possessed by nymphs, while the Sibyls and the Pythia were possessed by Apollo. Possession may be understood in sexual terms, so

that the possessing deity acts as an overmastering sexual partner (as in Vergil's famous description of the Sibyl's struggle with Apollo).[54] Obviously, male possession by female deities raises interesting questions of sex-role reversal. Though none of our sources explicitly address this aspect of nympholeptic prophecy, such a role reversal should not be surprising in view of similar reversals in the mythological material: not only is Hylas passively possessed by lustful nymphs, but Rhoikos and Daphnis are punished for indiscretions by their nymph mistresses (2.4.1, 2.5.1). For devotional nympholepts, similar dynamics might have been at work.[55] The use of titles such as *despotis* for the nymph and other language that suggests the subordination of the devotee to the nymphs' will might have had erotic connotations. There are no attested examples of female nympholepts except in the mythological and funerary materials, where they are thought of as joining the company of the nymphs.

One outstanding instance of nympholepsy remains to be discussed. Near Plataia on the border of Attica and Boiotia was a well-known cave of the nymphs, which today remains unidentified. According to Pausanias, it lay on Mount Kithairon about two miles down from the site of the altar for the Great Daidala. "There is the cave of the Kithaironides nymphs, called the Sphragidion, and there is a story that the nymphs used to give oracles [*manteusthai*] there in the old days." The cave came to the attention of authors like Pausanias not because of its oracles but because it figured in a Delphic oracle concerning the battle of Plataia. Upon Mardonios' invasion in 479, Aristides received a response from the Pythia assuring him that the Athenians would be victorious if they made prayers to Zeus, Hera Kithaironia, Pan, and the Sphragitic nymphs and sacrificed to seven heroes. These were all deities of the area around Plataia, where the battle was expected to take place.[56] After the war, the tribe Aiantis, because of its great valor in the battle, was chosen to conduct sacrifices for the Sphragitic nymphs on behalf of the whole city, with the victims and other paraphernalia provided at state expense. Thus, the state's interest in the cult developed only through a quirk of fate; had it not been for the war, the cave would have remained an obscure site of purely local interest, as described by Plutarch: "The cave was on one of the peaks of Kithairon facing the summer sunsets, and in it there was also an oracle [*manteion*] in former days. Many of the locals, whom they called nympholepts, were possessed [*kateichonto*]."[57]

This account is of particular interest because it brings together elements of the phenomenon of nympholepsy that remain separate in the rest of our evidence. Nympholepsy occurs as a result of the supernatural influence that emanates from a specific site, the Sphragidion. This recalls Sokrates' statement in the *Phaedrus* that his altered mental state was linked to the location itself: the shrine of the nymphs and Acheloös on the Ilissos River. As in that dialogue, not everyone who inhabits or visits the place is affected; only certain individuals seem susceptible to the state of nympholepsy. On the other hand, we hear of "many" possessed persons in connection with this cave, a fact that diverges significantly from the evidence of Archedamos, Pantalkes,

and Onesagoras, all isolated individuals who associated themselves with caves. In the community around the Sphragidion, nympholepsy seems to have been, if not a group phenomenon, at least a recognized characteristic of the residents. Moreover, this characteristic probably worked to benefit the community, since outsiders would have visited and brought offerings for the purpose of consulting the oracle.

The name of the Sphragitic nymphs presents something of a mystery. Sphragidion, the name of the cave, derives from the word *sphragis*, "seal" or "signet ring." The same word is used in enigmatic fashion by Theognis, who speaks of placing a "seal" upon his utterances lest they be stolen or altered.[58] Ford has offered an interpretation of the Theognidean passage, which I think applies equally well to the Sphragitic nymphs. In his reading, the metaphorical application of the seal is not an assertion of authorship but of authority. The concern was not that verses be attributable to a specific author, but that their essential soundness, as products of divine inspiration, be identifiable.[59] Seals were used to guarantee the genuineness of documents, that of oracles in particular. The authenticity of oracles, which carried a great deal of political weight, was a matter of great moment in the archaic period. Hipparchos, for example, expelled the chresmologue Onomakritos from Athens when he was discovered tampering with an oracle of Musaios. Theognis, with regard to poetry, insists that no one shall "substitute an inferior thing for the genuine [*esthlon*] thing that is there." And later in the corpus, we hear of the duty owed by the *theoros* to whom an oracular response is entrusted: "You will not find any remedy if you add anything, nor will you escape from veering, in the eyes of the gods, if you take anything away." Poetic authority, which derives from the Muses, and oracular authority, which derives from other gods, such as Apollo or the nymphs, are two sides of the same coin.[60]

Thus it seems possible that the name applied to our nymphs and their cave referred specifically to their oracular authority. The symbolic power of the *sphragis* might also have been at work in the Korykian cave, where the excavators found an extraordinary accumulation of signet rings (5.1.5). These are uniformly of cheap quality, made of bronze or lead rather than gold and silver, but display a wide range of iconography, most of it not immediately relevant to the nymphs. Apparently, it was the dedication of the signet itself, not the scene upon it, that pleased the oracular goddesses.

1.4 Nymphs in Greek Poetry

1.4.1 *Homer, Hesiod, and the Homeric* Hymns

In the Homeric epics, our earliest literary sources, the nymphs already have most of their defining characteristics. The picture that we find in Homer, furthermore, proves to be remarkably stable through time, with only a few

major developments occurring later. The word *numphê* is used from the beginning to mean both "bride" and "female water/landscape deity." In addition, both Helen and Penelope are addressed flatteringly as *numpha philê*, presumably referring to their status as sexually desirable wives.[61]

Toward the end of the *Iliad*, Zeus tells Themis to summon all the gods to a council. Even the gods who inhabit the surface of the earth are included, and virtually all come to the palace of Zeus on Olympos:

> οὔτε τις οὖν ποταμῶν ἀπέην νόσφ᾽ Ὠκεανοῖο,
> οὔτ᾽ ἄρα νυμφάων, αἵ τ᾽ ἄλσεα καλὰ νέμονται
> καὶ πηγὰς ποταμῶν καὶ πίσεα ποιήεντα. (Hom. *Il.* 20.7–9)
>
> None of the rivers was absent, except Okeanos, nor any of the nymphs who inhabit the lovely groves and the springs of rivers and the grassy meadows.

The nymphs are listed together with the rivers, an association that will long continue. The homes of the nymphs are enumerated: groves, springs, and meadows. *Odyssey* 6.123–24 adds mountains to the formulaic list of places where one is likely to find nymphs. The standard Homeric parentage of the nymphs is provided somewhat earlier in this book, in the famous simile that compares Nausikaä among her maidens to Artemis surrounded by a chorus of nymphs:

> τῇ δέ θ᾽ ἅμα νύμφαι, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,
> ἀγρονόμοι παίζουσι· γέγηθε δέ τε φρένα Λητώ·
> πασάων δ᾽ ὑπὲρ ἥ γε κάρη ἔχει ἠδὲ μέτωπα,
> ῥεῖά τ᾽ ἀριγνώτη πέλεται, καλαὶ δέ τε πᾶσαι· (Hom. *Od.* 6.105–8)
>
> and with her dance the nymphs of the wild places, the daughters of aigis-bearing Zeus, and Leto is delighted in her heart; for above them all she holds her head and easily outshines them, though all are lovely.

The phrase "daughters of aigis-bearing Zeus" is the usual formula applied to the nymphs (though it is not exclusive to them), and the nymphs are provided no alternative genealogies in Homer except in special cases like those of Kalypso, whose father is Atlas, or the daughters of Helios, Phaëthousa and Lampetië.[62] The nymphs' association with Artemis will remain a fixture in epic contexts though rare in other genres and only occasionally attested in cult (3.2.2).

Returning to the *Iliad*, we find the earliest examples of what will later become a staple of folktales, the idea that nymphs sometimes couple with mortal men (2.2). Homer relates the genealogies of several Trojans and Trojan allies killed in battle, and he mentions that their parentage is unusual:

Δρῆσον δ᾽ Εὐρύαλος καὶ Ὀφέλτιον ἐξενάριξε·
βῆ δὲ μετ᾽ Αἴσηπον καὶ Πήδασον, οὕς ποτε νύμφη
νηΐς Ἀβαρβαρέη τέκ᾽ ἀμύμονι Βουκολίωνι.
Βουκολίων δ᾽ ἦν υἱὸς ἀγαυοῦ Λαομέδοντος
πρεσβύτατος γενεῇ, σκότιον δέ ἑ γείνατο μήτηρ·
ποιμαίνων δ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ὄεσσι μίγη φιλότητι καὶ εὐνῇ
ἡ δ᾽ ὑποκυσαμένη διδυμάονε γείνατο παῖδε. (Hom. *Il.* 6.20–26)

Now Euryalos slaughtered Opheltios and Dresos, and went after Aisepos and Pedasos, whom the naiad nymph Abarbareë once bore to noble Boukolion. Boukolion himself was the son of haughty Laomedon, eldest born, but his mother conceived him in secrecy. While herding his flocks he [Boukolion] made love with the nymph, and she became pregnant and bore twin boys.

This is the first recorded use of *naïs* (naiad), a term indicating that Boukolion's lover was a spring nymph. Boukolion, "the cowherd," was the illegitimate son of the Trojan king Laomedon and the nymph Kalybe, according to Apollodorus, and like his father sired offspring with a nymph (Abarbareë) in an illicit encounter. Their sons, Aisepos and Pedasos, were eponyms of a river and town in the Troad.[63] The description of Boukolion looks forward to pastoral themes that would later become popular (4.9.1).

The motif of a mortal's sexual encounter with a naiad nymph recurs twice more in the *Iliad*:

ἔνθα πολὺ πρώτιστος Ὀϊλῆος ταχὺς Αἴας
Σάτνιον οὔτασε δουρὶ μετάλμενος ὀξυόεντι
Ἠνοπίδην, ὃν ἄρα νύμφη τέκε νηΐς ἀμύμων
Ἤνοπι βουκολέοντι παρ᾽ ὄχθας Σατνιόεντος. (Hom. *Il.* 14.442–45)

First then, swift Aias, son of Oileus, rushed out and stabbed with his sharp spear Satnios, Enops' son, whom the excellent naiad nymph bore to Enops as he tended his herds by the Satnioeis River.

Ἰφιτίωνα
ἐσθλὸν Ὀτρυντεΐδην πολέων ἡγήτορα λαῶν,
ὃν νύμφη τέκε νηΐς Ὀτρυντῆϊ πτολιπόρθῳ
Τμώλῳ ὕπο νιφόεντι Ὕδης ἐν πίονι δήμῳ· (Hom. Il. 20.382–85)

[Achilles killed] Iphition, the noble son of Otrynteus and a lord over many people, whom a naiad nymph bore to Otrynteus, sacker of cities, under snowy Tmolos in the rich countryside of Hyde.

In all three of the passages I have cited, the nymphs or their offspring are associated with specific local topography: the Satnioeis River, the eponyms Aisepos and Pedasos, and Mount Tmolos in Lydia. In the *Iliad*, such encoun-

ters happen only to the Trojans and their allies and are absent from the genealogies given for the Achaians. Apparently, the motif of the mortal herdsman who is loved by a local nymph was at first confined to Asia Minor; Griffin has suggested that it is in origin a variation of the union of the Great Goddess with a mortal consort (2.5.2). Unions between nymphs and mortals, however, were not unknown to the Achaians, for Achilles was born of Peleus and the unwilling Nereid, Thetis.

In book 6 of the *Iliad*, we hear how Achilles killed Andromache's family, including her father:

> κατὰ δ᾽ ἔκτανεν Ἠετίωνα,
> οὐδέ μιν ἐξενάριξε, σεβάσσατο γὰρ τό γε θυμῷ,
> ἀλλ᾽ ἄρα μιν κατέκηε σὺν ἔντεσι δαιδαλέοισιν
> ἠδ᾽ ἐπὶ σῆμ᾽ ἔχεεν· περὶ δὲ πτελέας ἐφύτευσαν
> νύμφαι ὀρεστιάδες, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο. (Hom. *Il.* 6.416–20)
>
> He killed Eëtion, but did not strip his armor, for he felt scruples at this. But he burned the body with its cunningly wrought armor, and piled a grave mound over it, and the mountain nymphs, daughters of aigis-bearing Zeus, planted elm trees about it.

The participation of the mountain nymphs in the hero's funeral is intriguing. Why did they honor Eëtion thus? Did Eëtion, like some of the other Asiatic noblemen, have a liaison with a nymph? Or is this an early example of the pathetic fallacy, whereby the natural world, personified in the nymphs, expresses its sorrow at his death? Certainly, the respect shown by the nymphs seems to parallel the actions of Achilles in seeing to Eëtion's funeral. Andromache's father was such a great man that even his enemy honored him, while the nymphs came out of the mountains to do the same. This passage is later imitated more than once, and the nymphs are said to plant trees on the graves of Protesilaus and other heroes (1.4.4).

In the last book of the *Iliad*, Achilles tells Priam the story of Lydian Niobe, who dared to compare herself to Leto and was punished by the loss of her children and by metamorphosis into a stone. Priam must eat in spite of his grief, for even Niobe once did so:

> ἢ δ᾽ ἄρα σίτου μνήσατ᾽, ἐπεὶ κάμε δάκρυ χέουσα.
> νῦν δέ που ἐν πέτρῃσιν ἐν οὔρεσιν οἰοπόλοισιν
> ἐν Σιπύλῳ, ὅθι φασὶ θεάων ἔμμεναι εὐνὰς
> νυμφάων, αἵ τ᾽ ἀμφ᾽ Ἀχελώϊον ἐρρώσαντο,
> ἔνθα λίθος περ ἐοῦσα θεῶν ἐκ κήδεα πέσσει. (Hom. *Il.* 24.613–17)
>
> But when she was worn out with weeping, she remembered her food. And now somewhere among the rocks, in the lonely mountains of Sipylos, where they say are the couches of the divine nymphs who

dance around the river Acheloios, there even as a stone she nurses her sorrows from the gods.

Here again, the nymphs are at home beside mountain and river. They engage in one of their favorite activities, dancing, and they have "couches" or "beds," probably in a cave. The habitations of the nymphs were often imagined to contain furniture of a sort, perhaps suggested by the natural rock formations found in caves. This is the case with the cave of the nymphs on Thrinakia, the home of the Sun's cattle:

ἦμος δ᾽ ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἠώς,
νῆα μὲν ὡρμίσαμεν, κοῖλον σπέος εἰσερύσαντες·
ἔνθα δ᾽ ἔσαν νυμφέων καλοὶ χοροὶ ἠδὲ θόωκοι. (Hom. *Od.* 12.316–18)

As soon as early-born, rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, we dragged up our ship and drew her into a hollow cave, and there were the lovely dancing floors and seats of the nymphs.

And, again, in the cave of the nymphs on Ithake, there are wonderful furnishings:

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη,
ἀγχόθι δ᾽ αὐτῆς ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἠεροειδές,
ἱρὸν νυμφάων, αἳ νηϊάδες καλέονται.
ἐν δὲ κρητῆρές τε καὶ ἀμφιφορῆες ἔασι
λάϊνοι· ἔνθα δ᾽ ἔπειτα τιθαιβώσσουσι μέλισσαι.
ἐν δ᾽ ἱστοὶ λίθεοι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε νύμφαι
φάρε᾽ ὑφαίνουσιν ἁλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι·
ἐν δ᾽ ὕδατ᾽ ἀενάοντα. δύω δέ τέ οἱ θύραι εἰσίν,
αἱ μὲν πρὸς βορέαο καταιβαταὶ ἀνθρώποισιν,
αἱ δ᾽ αὖ πρὸς νότου εἰσὶ θεώτεραι· οὐδέ τι κείνῃ
ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ᾽ ἀθανάτων ὁδός ἐστιν. (Hom. *Od.* 13.102–12)

At the head of the harbor is a long-leafed olive tree, and near it is a pleasant, shadowy cave sacred to the nymphs called naiads. In it are stone mixing bowls and jars and there too the bees store honey. And in the cave are long looms of stone, where the nymphs weave sea-purple cloth, a wonder to see, and there are ever-flowing springs. There are two doors: that toward the north wind is the way down for humans; but that toward the south wind is holy indeed. Men do not enter by that way, but it is the path of the immortals.

The elements of the Homeric nymph cave often reappear in later cult and literature. The nymphs' abode is always described as a pleasant, cool place. A tree or grove stands outside, while in or near the cave is a water source.

These scenes influenced the motif of the *locus amoenus* so familiar in later Greek literature. Here, too, for the first time, we see the close association of nymphs and bees in Greek thought. This link must be due to the fact that the wild bees' favorite homes were tree trunks and caves, also two principal haunts of nymphs. The two entrances, one for mortals and one for gods, reappear in later descriptions of nymph caves (1.4.5).

In the Ithakan portions of the *Odyssey*, we also get a first look at the cultic relationship between mortals and nymphs. As Odysseus begins to realize he has reached Ithake at last, Athena tells him that he will recognize his home beyond doubt by the landmark of the nymphs' cave:

> τοῦτο δέ τοι σπέος εὐρὺ κατηρεφές, ἔνθα σὺ πολλὰς
> ἔρδεσκες νύμφῃσι τελήεσσας ἑκατόμβας·
> τοῦτο δὲ Νήριτόν ἐστιν ὄρος καταειμένον ὕλῃ. (Hom. *Od.* 13.349–51)
>
> This is the vaulted cave, where you used to offer to the nymphs many complete hekatombs; and here is Mount Neriton, clothed in trees.

According to Athena, it was Odysseus' regular practice to offer hekatombs, costly sacrifices that traditionally consisted of a hundred oxen. This is a generous offering indeed for nymphs, and one that is unparalleled in later literature and cult, though animal sacrifices for the nymphs are common enough. When Odysseus recognizes his home, he first kisses the earth, then prays to the nymphs:

> νύμφαι νηϊάδες, κοῦραι Διός, οὔ ποτ᾽ ἐγώ γε
> ὄψεσθ᾽ ὔμμ᾽ ἐφάμην· νῦν δ᾽ εὐχωλῇς ἀγανῇσι
> χαίρετ᾽· ἀτὰρ καὶ δῶρα διδώσομεν, ὡς τὸ πάρος περ,
> αἴ κεν ἐᾷ πρόφρων με Διὸς θυγάτηρ ἀγελείη
> αὐτόν τε ζώειν καί μοι φίλον υἱὸν ἀέξῃ. (Hom. *Od.* 13.356–60)
>
> You naiad nymphs, daughters of Zeus, I never thought I would see you again, but now I greet you with loving prayers. And I will give gifts too, as before, if the daughter of Zeus, she that drives the spoil, will graciously allow me to live, and bring to manhood my dear son.

Clever Odysseus divides his prayer between the goddesses of his home and the powerful Olympian who stands before him. The Ithakan nymphs are never presented as active players in the narrative the way Athena is. We see places associated with them, and we hear characters praying to them, but they do not show themselves. Odysseus is now back in the "real" world as opposed to the fantastic world of his travels, and the only overt supernatural element in the Ithakan narrative is Athena herself. On the other hand, the unseen presence of the nymphs is constantly suggested. By a sort of divine metonymy, they are the island itself, and they represent all that Odysseus is

struggling to regain, homecoming in every sense of the word—not merely a physical homecoming and reclaiming of the land but recognition of his true identity.[64] In spite of Odysseus' craftiness, there is a special poignancy about his prayer to the nymphs, native goddesses of the island. This scene is the first of a series of emotional reunions, which bring Odysseus ever closer to the ultimate meeting with his bride, Penelope. Near the town is another cult place of Ithakan nymphs, a classic *locus amoenus*:

ἄστεος ἐγγὺς ἔσαν καὶ ἐπὶ κρήνην ἀφίκοντο
τυκτὴν καλλίροον, ὅθεν ὑδρεύοντο πολῖται,
τὴν ποίησ᾽ Ἴθακος καὶ Νήριτος ἠδὲ Πολύκτωρ·
ἀμφὶ δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ αἰγείρων ὑδατοτρεφέων ἦν ἄλσος,
πάντοσε κυκλοτερές, κατὰ δὲ ψυχρὸν ῥέεν ὕδωρ
ὑψόθεν ἐκ πέτρης· βωμὸς δ᾽ ἐφύπερθε τέτυκτο
νυμφάων, ὅθι πάντες ἐπιρρέζεσκον ὁδῖται· (Hom. *Od.* 17.205–11)

They came to a fair-flowing wrought fountain, whence the townspeople drew water. Ithakos had made it, and Neritos, and Polyktor, and completely encircling it was a grove of water-nourished poplars. Cold water flowed down from the rock above, and on the top was built an altar of the nymphs where all passers-by made offerings.

Nymphs preside at the water sources used by the townsfolk as well as those in the rural and wild areas. This fountain is a *krênê*, a built fountain with a spout and basin, rather than a simple spring welling out of the ground. It was built by Ithakos, Neritos, and Polyktor, apparently the first colonists of the island. Ithakos is the eponymous hero of the island, while Neriton is one of its mountains. As in the Iliadic descriptions of nymphs in the Troad, the Ithakan nymphs here are closely associated with topography and aboriginal heroes. We learn that it was customary for anyone passing by to pay his or her respects to the nymphs; this also was true in later cult practice.[65]

In the humble hut of the swineherd Eumaios, we witness a private offering to the nymphs. A boar is slaughtered for the herdsmen's evening meal, and during the sacrificial ritual, "first offerings" of bristles from its head and bits of flesh and fat from its limbs are made to "the immortals." After cooking the meat, Eumaios carefully carves it:

καὶ τὰ μὲν ἔπταχα πάντα διεμοιρᾶτο δαΐζων·
τὴν μὲν ἴαν νύμφῃσι καὶ Ἑρμῇ, Μαιάδος υἱεῖ,
θῆκεν ἐπευξάμενος, τὰς δ᾽ ἄλλας νεῖμεν ἑκάστῳ· (Hom. *Od.* 14.434–36)

And dividing up the whole, he allotted seven portions. With a prayer he put down one for the nymphs and Hermes, son of Maia, and the others he distributed to each man.

It is appropriate for Eumaios, as a herdsman, to make an offering to the nymphs and Hermes together, for they are rustic gods who protect and increase livestock. (Note that Hermes is also evoked in the Ithakan landscape at the Hill of Hermes.)[66] When Odysseus meets the princess Nausikaä, the nymphs are described as a chorus flocking about Artemis, who is taller and lovelier than they. This epic simile has an aristocratic flavor in its themes of choral competition and physical beauty and presents the nymphs as chaste yet desirable. With the sacrifice of Eumaios, we have an entirely different picture of the nymphs as the objects of veneration by a humble herdsman (the swineherd being lower on the social ladder than any other). Nymphs were the sexual companions of Hermes, and their cultic linkage with him promoted fertility. These two opposed ways of looking at nymphs, in relation to Artemis and in relation to Hermes, continued to exist side by side in later Greek culture (3.2.2).

Homer also touches upon the role of the nymphs as guardians of herds in book 12, in which nymphs act as divine keepers for the flocks of their father Helios (*Od.* 12.131–36), and in book 9, when Odysseus and his men arrive on a game-filled island opposite that of the Kyklopes. The nymphs of the island are well disposed toward the visitors and allow them to partake of the island's wild livestock. Their abode is a *locus amoenus*, well watered and green with vegetation:

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος ῥέει ἀγλαὸν ὕδωρ,
κρήνη ὑπὸ σπείους· περὶ δ᾽ αἴγειροι πεφύασιν.
(Hom. *Od.* 9.140–41)

At the head of the harbor, a spring of bright water flows from beneath a cave. And round about it poplars grow.

ἦμος δ᾽ ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἠώς,
νῆσον θαυμάζοντες ἐδινεόμεσθα κατ᾽ αὐτήν.
ὦρσαν δὲ νύμφαι, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,
αἶγας ὀρεσκῴους, ἵνα δειπνήσειαν ἑταῖροι. (Hom. *Od.* 9.152–55)

When early-born, rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, we walked around the island marveling at it. And the nymphs, daughters of aigis-bearing Zeus, roused the mountain goats, so that my comrades might dine.

Finally, there are Kalypso and Kirke, both of whom seem to have an odd intermediate status between the other nymphs in the Homeric poems and the major goddesses, like Athena. Of the two, Kalypso is by far the more nymphlike. In *Odyssey* book 5, she is called "nymph," "queenly nymph," and "lovely-haired nymph." She is also referred to numerous times as a goddess.[67] Later, in his account of his adventures, Odysseus refers to her as "dread goddess" and "dread goddess with human speech."[68] Kalypso lives on an extremely remote island, Ogygië, far from the areas where either mortals or other gods live, as Hermes ruefully remarks after his journey there. Like other