

Ladies at Louteria: Evidence of Water Cult in Transition Rites of Magna Graecia in South Italian Vase-Painting

The importance of water in nuptial and funerary rites as a means to purify and create symbolic divisions between one state of being from another is well documented in literary sources of mainland Greece, such as Thucydides' mention of water for bridal baths in Athens coming from the Enneakrounos, the fountain house built at the Kallirrhoe spring (2.15.5). Even a particular vase shape, the loutrophoros, a special type of long-necked amphora, was created to carry water for ritual washing, first associated with preparing the deceased for burial and later connected to weddings, seen particularly clearly in 5th century B.C. Attic examples, which are decorated predominantly with nuptial scenes, are shown being carried by figures in scenes of the bride's bath and the *epaulia*, the day after the wedding night when the bride received presents from family and friends. Numerous loutrophoroi fragments discovered at the Nymphe shrine in Athens indicate that new brides may have marked the conclusion of their weddings by dedicating the containers used to prepare them for their new roles as wives and soon-to-be mothers. The connection between sources of water, the nymphs said to inhabit them, and young women on the cusp of marriage likely came about because of the double meaning of the term "nymphe."

Despite a lack of ancient written evidence, female nuptial rituals in Magna Graecia to also appear to have been closely connected with bodies of water and washing, such as at the Grotto Caruso outside the walls of Locri Epizephyrii. Here, a cave containing a spring was enlarged during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. for a cult of the nymphs and other gods associated with the natural world and chthonic realm including Persephone, Dionysos, and Aphrodite. Inside the cave, a large basin of water (ca. 30-40 cm. deep) was accessed by a staircase, into which the young women are believed to have descended, bathed, and re-emerged, perhaps

mimicking the katabasis and anodos of Persephone. Such practices may well explain the frequent appearance of louteria, water basins on a tall foot, in scenes of women, youths, and Erotes frequent in South Italian vase-painting of the 4th century B.C., generally characterized in scholarship as courting or nuptial tableaux. However, this iconography is much more multifaceted, considering how the overwhelming majority of these vases are found in tombs, rather than in sacral or domestic contexts, and identical louteria appear with depictions of mourners around funerary monuments, sometimes inside the grave marker itself when it is a naiskos (a small temple-like shrine). This paper explores how “courting scenes” on South Italian vases reveal the close interconnection between marriage and death that distinctively manifested themselves in material and visual culture of the western Greek world.