

ARETHUSA AND ALPHEUS



In October 2023, Vicki and I stayed for ten days in Syracuse (Sicily) on the island of Ortygia (our flat looked east over the Ionian Sea, top right). In reality, Ortygia is more of a promontory and the oldest part of the city, though technically it is an island as it is cut off from the mainland by a canal that runs from the large harbour, out to the left, to the small harbour you can see at the top.

Siracusa is as old a place as you will find practically anywhere in the world, built, colonised, recolonised and rebuilt, by succeeding waves of invaders: Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Franks, Arabs, Normans, Mussolini's fascists - the list is long. Everywhere you look, you find remains of temples, a

Greek theatre, magically situated on the hills facing the Ionian Sea, a Roman amphitheatre close by, and extraordinary quarries where stone was extracted for cities to be erected, to be later razed or plundered to make way for new cities.



One of the most magical places on the island is the Fonte Aretusa (the Fountain of Arethusa - the wooded circle mid-left on



the aerial photo). Only a few metres from the sea it is a deep pool, forty or fifty metres in diameter - and the real surprise is that this is a *freshwater* pond on a sea-bound island. It is home to palms, ancient fig trees, willows and papyrus plants (rarely found outside Egypt), as well as ducks, geese, myriads

of birds who all gather in the evenings at sunset to roost noisily in the sheltering trees - and, of course, it is home to Arethusa, the *genius loci*, or spirit of the place.



The myth of Arethusa and her flight from Alpheus, a river-god who lusts after her, is apparently a confusion of nomenclature by the Phoenicians and the Greeks. The Phœnicians, finding the fountain surrounded with willows, gave it the name of ‘Alphaga,’ or ‘the fountain of the willows.’ Others gave it the name of ‘Arith’, signifying a stream. The Greeks, arriving there centuries after, not understanding the signification of these words and remembering their own river Alpheus, which arose in Arcadia making its way through the land of Elis, imagined that since the river and the fountain had nearly the same name, Alpheus had mysteriously crossed the sea, to arrive in Sicily.

From this grew the myth that somehow, the streams that fed this miraculous freshwater spring must have travelled magically under the sea from Greece. And the story of Arethusa’s mad dash across countries and seas to escape the clutches of the lustful river-god Alpheus, ending in their (soft



porn) dissolution in mutual ‘liquefaction’ (cf Robert Herrick), is the outcome of the confusion of names and an attempt to explain the inexplicable. In reality, the freshwater streams that feed the pool come from deep underground streams below the sea, to emerge in several pools or springs in Ortygia

- but they come from above Syracuse and not from Greece!

Historically, this meant that the ancient promontory, with its fortress at the tip, was well able to withstand sieges. Admiral Nelson, indeed, his ships were replenished with fresh water from here in July 1798, just before the Battle of the Nile, where he defeated Napoleon's fleet on the 1st August.

The most beautiful retelling of the story of Arethusa's is Ovid's handling of it in Book 5 of his 'Metamorphoses'. Here is the original Latin version by Publius Ovidius Naso, known to us as Ovid, and I have added my own version in English (helped by some other translations as my own school Latin has become very *rubiginosus* or rusty).

METAMORPHOSES BOOK V *

*"Exigit alma Ceres nata secunda recepta,
 quae tibi causa fugae, cur sis, Arethusa, sacer fons.
 conticuere undae, quarum dea sustulit alto
 fonte caput viridesque manu siccata capillos 575
 fluminis Elei veteres narravit amores.
 'pars ego nympharum, quae sunt in Achaide,' dixit
 'una fui, nec me studiosius altera saltus
 legit nec posuit studiosius altera casses.
 sed quamvis formae numquam mihi fama petita est, 580
 quamvis fortis eram, formosae nomen habebam,
 nec mea me facies nimium laudata iuvabat,
 quaque aliae gaudere solent, ego rustica dote
 corporis erubui crimenque placere putavi.
 lassa revertabar (memini) Stymphalide silva; 585
 aestus erat, magnumque labor geminaverat aestum:
 invenio sine vertice aquas, sine murmure euntes,
 perspicuas ad humum, per quas numerabilis alte
 calculus omnis erat, quas tu vix ire putares.
 cana salicta dabant nutritaque populus unda 590
 sponte sua natas ripis declivibus umbras.
 accessi primumque pedis vestigia tinxi,
 poplite deinde tenus; neque eo contenta, recingor
 molliaque inpono salici velamina curvae*



One of the extraordinary grottoes in the quarries above Syracuse - called by Caravaggio the 'Ear of Dionysius', with astonishing acoustics. While I was there, a group of nuns started singing 'Ave Maria' - it was utterly ethereal!

nudaque mergor aquis. quas dum ferioque trahoque 595
mille modis labens excussaue brachia iacto,
nescio quod medio sensi sub gurgite murmur
territaque insisto propioris margine ripae.
"quo properas, Arethusa?" suis Alpheos ab undis,
"quo properas?" iterum rauco mihi dixerat ore. 600
sicut eram, fugio sine vestibus (altera vestes
ripa meas habuit): tanto magis instat et ardet,
et quia nuda fui, sum visa paratior illi.
sic ego currebam, sic me ferox ille premebat,
ut fugere accipitrem penna trepidante columbae, 605
ut solet accipiter trepidas urguere columbas.
usque sub Orchomenon Psophidaue Cyllenenque
Maenaliisque sinus gelidumque Erymanthon et Elin
currere sustinui, nec me velocior ille;
sed tolerare diu cursus ego viribus impar 610
non poteram, longi patiens erat ille laboris.
per tamen et campos, per opertos arbore montes,
saxa quoque et rupes et, qua via nulla, cucurri.
sol erat a tergo: vidi praecedere longam
ante pedes umbram, nisi si timor illa videbat; 615
sed certe sonitusque pedum terrebat et ingens
crinales vittas adflabat anhelitus oris.
fessa labore fugae "fer opem, deprendimur," inquam
"armigerae, Diana, tuae, cui saepe dedisti
ferre tuos arcus inclusaue tela pharetra!" 620
mota dea est spissisque ferens e nubibus unam
me super iniecit: lustrat caligine tectam
amnis et ignarus circum cava nubila quaerit
bisque locum, quo me dea texerat, inscius ambit
et bis "io Arethusa" vocavit, "io Arethusa!" 625
quid mihi tunc animi miserae fuit? anne quod agnae est,
si qua lupos audit circum stabula alta frementes,
aut lepori, qui vepre latens hostilia cernit
ora canum nullosque audet dare corpore motus?
non tamen abscedit; neque enim vestigia cernit 630
longius ulla pedum: servat nubemque locumque.
occupat obsessos sudor mihi frigidus artus,
caeruleaeque cadunt toto de corpore guttae,
quaque pedem movi, manat lacus, eque capillis
ros cadit, et citius, quam nunc tibi facta renarro, 635
in latices mutor. sed enim cognoscit amatas
amnis aquas positoque viri, quod sumpserat, ore
vertitur in proprias, et se mihi misceat, undas.
Delia rupit humum, caecisque ego mersa cavernis
advehor Ortygiam, quae me cognomine divae 640
grata meae superas eduxit prima sub auras.'

Book 5: 572-641 Calliope sings of the story of Arethusa

Ceres happy at the return of her daughter, asks her gently,

“What was the cause of your flight, Arethusa, and why are you now a sacred fountain?”

The waters fall silent while their goddess lifts her head from the deep pool and squeezing the water from her sea-green tresses, she tells of the former loves of that river of Elis.

“I was one of the nymphs who lived in Achaia,’ she replies, ‘none of them keener than I to travel the woodland, none of them more eager to set out the fishing nets. I never sought fame for my looks, but, although I was strongly built, I was called beautiful. My looks, praised too much, gave me little pleasure. I blushed like some country wench at the gifts of my body, those things that other girls were accustomed to revel in. I thought it a crime to please.

“Exhausted (I remember), I was returning from the Stymphalian woods. It was hot, and my efforts had increased the heat I felt. I came to a river without a ripple, slipping along without even a murmur, clear to its bed in whose depths you could count every pebble: you would scarcely think the current moving. Silvery willows and poplars, fed by the waters, gave natural shade to the sloping banks. Approaching, I dipped my toes in, Then I was up to my knees, and not content with that I undressed and draped my light clothes on a hanging willow before plunging naked into the stream. While I gathered up the water and splashed, gliding around in a thousand ways and stretching up my arms to shake off the water, I thought I heard a murmur beneath the surface in the middle, and in fear I made for the nearest bank.

““What are you rushing for, Arethusa?’ Alpheus called from his waves. ‘Why are you rushing?’ he called again to me in a loud voice.

“I fled just as I was, without my clothes (I had left them on the other bank), but he pursued me all the more fiercely, burning with desire, and my nakedness made it seem that I was the readier for him. So, I fled, and so he wildly followed - just as doves fly from a hawk on fluttering wings and the hawk hunts down poor frightened doves. Past Orchemenus I still ran on, by Psopis, and Cyllene and the ridges of Maenalus, by chill Erymanthus - the River

Elis was no faster paced. But I could not get away from him; I was unequal in strength, and he had far more stamina than I.

Across plains, however, over tree-covered mountains, through rocks and crags, and even where there were no paths, on I ran. The sun was at my back, and I saw a long shadow stretching before my feet, unless it was my fear that perceived it. I was terrified by the sound of feet behind me, and the deep panting of his breath stirred the ribbons in my hair.

“Exhausted from my efforts to escape him, I cried out, ‘Help me: I will be taken! Diana, help me! I was your weapon-carrier, the one to whom you often gave your bow to carry and your quiver with all its arrows!’ The goddess was moved, and raising an impenetrable cloud, she threw it all about me.

“The river-god circled the concealing fog, and fruitlessly searched about the hollow mist. Twice, without understanding, he circled the place, where the goddess had hidden me, and twice called out, ‘Ho! Arethusa!’ You may guess how wretched my feelings were at that! Perhaps those of a lamb who hears the wolves howling round the high pen, or a hare who, hidden in the briars, sees the dogs’ hostile muzzles, and dares not twitch any part of its body.

“He did not go far because he could see no signs of my tracks further on. Instead, he scrutinised the cloud and the place. Cold sweat poured down my captive limbs, and dark drops trickled from my whole body. Wherever I moved my foot, a pool gathered, and moisture dripped from my hair, and faster than I can now tell the tale I turned to liquid.

“And then the river-god saw the object of his desire in the water, and putting aside the form of a man that he had assumed, he changed back to his own watery substance, and mingled with my currents. The Delian goddess split the earth, and plunging down through secret caverns, I was brought here to Ortygia, especially dear to me because it has the same name as my goddess - the ancient name stood for Delos where she was born, and this was the first place to lead me to the air above.”



Ducks swimming around, with papyrus plants and palms.

