



# Eutychides' *Eurotas*

## A Contribution to the study of the iconography of swimmers in Ancient art

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In his Book xxxiv of *Natural History*, while enumerating the works of the most famous bronze sculptors, Pliny the Elder mentions, among other things, an artwork dating from the turn of the fourth and third centuries BC: Eutychides' personification of Eurotas, a river crossing Laconia from north to south, "of which it has been frequently remarked that the work of the artist [appears] more flowing the waters even [of the river]" (*in quo artem ipso amne liquidiore plurimi dixere*).<sup>1</sup> This present sketch aims to explore what could lie behind this intriguing mention of a statue that has not survived to our times, and what the Eurotas sculpted by Eutychides might have looked like.

At first interpretation, it is difficult to imagine that the phrase *isto amne liquidior* refers to anything other than the exceptional fluidity of movement distinguishing the posture that the figure has been captured in. The conviction that this is precisely the special formal and compositional feature that Pliny had in mind is reinforced by an epigram written by his contemporary, Philippus of Thessalonica, devoted to the statue in question:

Eurotas, as if just bathing in the currents [of the river],  
the artist formed [him] in fire.

Waving all his limbs from side to side, wet  
from the crown of his head to the toenails, he flows.  
This is art challenging the river. O, who has persuaded  
bronze [to] boast [of being] more flowing than water?

(Ευπώταν ὡς ἄρτι διάβροχον ἔν ῥεέθροις  
εἴλκυσ' ὁ τεχνίτης ἐν πυρὶ λουσάμενον·  
πᾶσι γὰρ ἐν κώλοις ὑδατούμανος ἀμφινέυκεν

<sup>1</sup> C. Plini Secundi *Naturalis historiae libri xxxvii*, C. Mayhoff (ed.), vol. 5: *Libri xxxi–xxxvii*, Lipsiae 1897, pp. 189–190 (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana).

ἐκ κορυφῆς ἐς ἄκρους ὑγροβατῶν ὄνυχας.  
ἀ δὲ τέχνα ποταμηῶ συνεπήρικεν· ἅ τις ὁ πείσας  
χαλκὸν κωμάζειν ὕδατος ὑγρότεον;)²

Even without a full understanding of the elaborate metaphors and intricate word-play which, in a manner typical of Hellenistic *ekphrasis*, constitute the literary idiosyncrasy of this text,<sup>3</sup> one can conclude from it that, firstly, Eutyichides depicted the personification of Eurotas as a swimmer (this is indicated by the use of the verb ὑγροβατέω) dynamically moving his limbs (πᾶσι γὰρ ἐν κώλοις ἀμφινένευκες), and secondly, that he did it in a way suggesting the presence of water (ὡς [...] διάβροχος ἔν ῥεέθροις). In the last line of his work, Philippus, like Pliny, refers to the topos of the victory of art over nature – in this case over the river element – by describing the statue as “more flowing than water” (ὑδατοσ ὑγρότερς), which is a close equivalent of Pliny’s phrase *amne liquidior*. In a nutshell, while Pliny only allusively mentions the impression of fluidity of movements, saying nothing about the arrangement or posture of the figure, Philippus of Thessalonica’s epigram allows us to assume with near certainty that this fluidity was characterized by the dynamic movements of the personified Eurotas shown as a swimmer.<sup>4</sup>

The preserved representations of the personification of the Laconian river – representations that leave no doubt as to their identification, either thanks to the iconographic context (typically, the theme of Leda and the Swan) or thanks to accompanying inscriptions – do not correspond to the above characteristics in any way. Eurotas – like the personifications of other rivers, with the Tiber and the Nile at the forefront – was usually represented as a bearded man in the prime of his life, typically equipped with the standard attributes of river deities (a jug, a horn of plenty, a crown of water weeds), and above all, he was shown in a reclining or seated position, devoid of any clear signs of movement. Less frequent representations of the youthful (smooth-faced) god are also static in their character.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another, and probably the most famous work by Eutyichides – namely, the Tyche of Antioch – might help us imagine what the non-surviving product of art “more

2 *Antologia Palatyńska* IX. 709. *The Greek Anthology*, with an English Translation by W.R. Paton, vol. III, London–New York 1925, pp. 390–392 (Loeb Classical Library 84).

3 On the style of Philip of Thessalonica, see, among others: K. Diltthey, *Kritische Bemerkungen zur griechischen Anthologie*, “Rheinisches Museum für Philologie. Neue Folge, 27, 1872, pp. 801–803; A. Cameron, *The “Garland” of Philipp*, “Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies”, 21, 1980, pp. 43–62; I. Männlein-Robert, *Griechische Kunst und römischer Stil. Zum Eurotas-Epigramm des Philipp von Thessalonike (AP IX 709 = GP I 63)*, [in:] *Festschrift für Udo W. Scholz zum 65. Geburtstag*, L. Braun, M. Erler (Hrsg.), Würzburg 2004, pp. 35–48 (= “Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft” 28a).

4 I am leaving aside here the possibility of translating the Latin adjective *liquidus* as “clear, pure”, and the Greek ὑγρός as “wet” or “flexible”, and for the purposes of these considerations I will assume that Pliny and Philippus had in mind the fluidity of movements suggested by Eutyichides. Similar assumption was made, among others, by: T. Dohrn, *Antike Flussgötter*, [in:] *Mouseion. Studien aus Kunst und Geschichte für Otto H. Förster*, H. Ladendorf, H. Vey (Hrsg.), Köln 1961, p. 70; J.A. Ostrowski, *Personifications of Rivers in Greek and Roman Art*, Warszawa–Kraków 1991, p. 25 (*Studia ad Archeologiam Mediterraneam Pertinentia* 12); M. Flashar, *Eutyichides* (I), [in:] *Künstlerlexikon der Antike*, R. Vollkommer (Hrsg.), München–Leipzig 2001, p. 244.].

5 G. Steinhauer, *Eurotas*, [in:] *Lexikon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 4, Zürich–München 1988, p. 93; A. Gómez Mayordomo, *Iconografía de las personificaciones fluviales en la musivaria romana: el caso del Eurotas*, “Diacronía”, 1, 2019, pp. 49–67.

flowing than even the river” mentioned by Pliny and characterized in considerable detail by Philip-  
pus looked like. The representation of the patroness of the Syrian city, created around 300 BC, also did not survive to our times, but it was depicted many times (for instance, on coins issued in Antioch), paraphrased (to mention, for example, Tyche of Palmyra<sup>6</sup>), and above all, reproduced in the form of solid sculptural copies, including large-format ones, such as the specimen in the Vatican Museums (see: **Fig. 1**).<sup>7</sup> Thanks to all the representations, paraphrases, and copies, it is known that Eutychides showed himself in this work as a bold experimenter, successfully continuing the explorations undertaken before him by his master, Lysippos, in the field of dynamic and multidirectional, “spatial” arrangement of figures, non-obvious ponderation, and combining seemingly contradictory, usually mutually exclusive effects: the naturally, even nonchalantly free pose, versus the dignity dictated by the representative function of this type of images.



1

For the purposes of the present discussion, the most important thing is that Eutychides’ Tyche – full of youthful charm, and sitting on the slope of a rocky outcrop

1. Tyche of Antioch, a copy of a statue by Eutychides, Vatican Museums, Wikimedia Commons

- 6 M. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, London 1976, fig. 146. Other cases of similarity of images of patron goddesses (personifications) of cities to Tyche of Antioch are described by E. Almasri et al., *An enthroned Tyche statue from Gadara/ Umm Quais, Jordan*, “Acta Historiae Artium”, 58, 2017, pp. 5–20.
- 7 T. Dohrn, *Die Tyche von Antiochia*, Berlin 1960; Ch.M. Havelock, *Sztuka hellenistyczna. Sztuka świata starożytnego od śmierci Aleksandra Wielkiego do bitwy pod Akcjum* [Hellenistic Art. Art of the Ancient World from the Death of Alexander the Great to the Battle of Actium], translated by E. Suskiewicz, Warszawa 1972, p. 134; J.Ch. Balty, *Antiochea*, [in:] *Lexikon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 1, Zürich–München 1981, p. 844 (inventory No. 27); R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture. A Handbook*, London 1991, pp. 76–77; M.L. Bernhard, *Sztuka hellenistyczna*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 209–214; M.D. Stansbury O’Donnel, *Reflections of the Tyche of Antioch in literary sources and on coins*, [in:] *An Obsession with Fortune. Tyche in Greek and Roman Art*, S.B. Matheson (ed.), Yale 1994, pp. 51–63; M. Flashar, *Eutychides*, pp. 243–244; A.A. Kluczek, *Świat rzymskich monet. O książce Sculpture and coins: Margarete Bieber as Scholar and Collector*, edited by Carmen Arnold-Biucchi, Martin Beckmann, “Loeb Classical Monographs” 16, Cambridge, MA 2018, “Klio”, 62, 2022, pp. 176–177.



2. Orontes, detail of figure 1

(representing Mount Silpius, on the slope of which ancient Antioch stretched) with easy grace and freedom, wrapped in an elegantly draped cloak – rests her right foot on a much smaller personification of Orontes, a river flowing around the Syrian metropolis from the west (see: **Fig. 2**). The river is represented by a half-length portrait of a naked youth with widely spread, slightly bent arms, stretching out his chest and energetically raising his head turned to the side. Since in the Vatican copy his body, cut off below the sternum, is set on a surface diversified with furrows, it can be assumed that the artist's intention had been to suggest that the figure was emerging from the waves. The arrangement of the upper part of the body and, above all, the characteristic arrangement of the arms leave no doubt that the personification of Orontes is shown here as a swimmer crossing the watery depths, using the most popular image formula in antiquity – one that appears, for instance, on the red-figure amphora in the Louvre (see: **Fig. 3**)<sup>8</sup> or in the floor mosaics of the Baths of Neptune in Ostia (see: **Fig. 4**)<sup>9</sup> – which is associated with the freestyle crawl.<sup>10</sup> Although by today's standards, in the Vatican copy of Eutychides' work, the freestyle crawl appears to be a somewhat clumsy, even desperate version of that

8 A. Mayor, *The Amazons. Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World*, Princeton 2014, fig. 7.2.

9 J.T. Bakker, *The Buildings in Ostia (Topographical Dictionary)*, <<https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio2/4/4-2.htm>> (as of 8 March 2024).

10 The ancient iconography of swimmers is discussed by, among others: H.A. Sanders, *Swimming among the Greeks and Romans*, "The Classical Journal", 20, 1925, pp. 566–568; J.P. Tuillier, *Athletic exercises in ancient Rome. When Julius Caesar went swimming*, "European Review", 12, 2004, pp. 415–426; S. Avramidis, *Ancient art on swimming*, "International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education", 5, 2011, pp. 331–339. Extensive source and iconographic material is compiled by K.E. Carr, *Shifting Currents. A World History of Swimming*, Chicago 2022, pp. 27–66. Compare: *Hesiod, the Persians, and Peeing in the Pool*, <<https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2022/07/25/hesiod-the-persians-and-peeing-in-the-pool>> (as of 7 March 2024).



swimming stroke (as if Orontes was struggling to stay afloat and barely catching his breath), there is no doubt that in Eutychedes' intention and in the eyes of his viewers, he was a skilled swimmer.

Janusz A. Ostrowski and Max Flashar emphasize the fact that depicting the river personification as a swimmer was something novel and exceptional at the beginning of the Hellenistic era, the result of Eutychedes's noteworthy iconographic inventiveness.<sup>11</sup> However, to fully appreciate its innovation, one must realize that the novelty – and indeed this was a novelty on a par with the achievements of the greatest revolutionaries in the history of ancient art, such as Praxiteles or Lysippos – was the very undertaking of the theme of a swimming figure in statuary sculpture. Suffice it to say that before Eutychedes, neither monumental statues nor even small figurines of swimmers were made that would be characterized by a similar, equally suggestive dynamic. The only full-scale images of swimming figures created before the Hellenistic era – serving as the handles of Egyptian “swimmer” spoons – are posed stiffly, as if poised for a glide.<sup>12</sup>

If we assume that Eurotas in Eutychedes's depiction looked similar to the figure serving as the footstool of the Antiochian Tyche (see: **Fig. 2**), the allusions to flowing water used by the authors of the texts quoted at the beginning of this paper seem fully understandable. The arms of the youthful Orontes – similarly to the arms of all swimmers depicted using the same convention (compare: Figures 3, 4) – create a wavy line, and thus evoke in the viewer's eye the impression of a calm, free flow. It is much more difficult to fathom how Pliny and Philip could have considered the compositional formula in question as, respectively, “more fluid than the current of the river itself” or “more flowing than water”. This should probably be attributed to the tendency to use hyperbole, paradox, and similar means of literary



**3.** Swimming Amazon, fragment of a decoration on a red-figure amphora, ca. 520 B.C., Paris, Louvre (after Mayor)

**4.** Swimmer, floor mosaic, Ostia, Baths of Neptune, 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. (after Bekker)

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Ostrowski, *Personifications of Rivers*, p. 24; M. Flashar, *Eutychedes*, p. 244.

<sup>12</sup> P. Lacovara, *A swimming girl spoon from Sheikh Farag*, [in:] *Up and Down the Nile – ägyptologische Studien für Regine Schulz*, M. Ullmann, G. Pieke, F. Hoffmann, Ch. Bayer (Hrsg.), **Münster 2021**, pp. 237–239 (*Ägypten und Altes Testament* 97); *idem*, *The meaning and symbolism of swimming-girl spoons from Egypt*, “*The Ancient Near East Today*”, **11**, 2023, <<https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2023/04/swimming-girl-spoons-egypt>> (as of 6 March 2024).



5. Personification of a river (Orontes? Eurotas?), bronze, 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., Paris, Louvre, Wikimedia Commons

6. Píramos, reverse of the coin of Hierapolis-Castabala city, 2<sup>nd</sup>-1st century B.C., <<https://www.ma-shops.co.uk/vossen/item.php?id=6668>> (as of 8 March 2024)

manipulation characteristic of ancient authors who were writing about works of art.

Ultimately, the above conclusions necessarily incline us to suppose that antique figurines showing the body of a swimmer in a way that faithfully repeats the pose of Orontes – with the small bronze exhibited in the Louvre (see: Fig. 5) at the lead – are perhaps wrongly considered to be representations of the aforementioned. This misidentification, which has long been widely accepted in the subject literature,<sup>13</sup> is understandable. It is certainly possible to assume that at some point the discussed figure was extracted from Eutychedes' statue of Tyche, on the basis of which some *Adachtsbilder* were created in the Middle Ages, such as the *Pieta*, an iconographic “excerpt” from the scene

of Lamentation. This could have been related to the development of some form of cult of the Syrian river, but it could also have been dictated solely by aesthetic and practical considerations. The latter possibility is indicated by the addition of a flat rim at the height of the belly of the Parisian figurine. Freed from the formal and iconographic dependence on Tyche, the youth gliding on the surface of the water could have been an effective decoration and at the same time a fountain armature – albeit in a large-scale version, of course.

13 Compare, for example: A. de Ridder, *Collection De Clercq: catalogue*, vol. 3: *Les bronzes*, Paris 1905, pp. 232–233, inventory No. 327; T. Dohrn, *Die Tyche*, p. 37, note 70; J.Ch. Balty, *Antiochea*, p. 843, inventory No. 15; *Louvre: Collections* [online catalogue of the Louvre collections], inventory No. MNE 30; BR 4454, <<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010258307>> (as of 7 March 2024). The Louvre collections contain another, similarly dated (2nd century AD) bronze figurine of a swimmer identified with Orontes – A. de Ridder, *Les bronzes antiques du Louvre*, vol. 1: *Les figurines*, Paris 1913, p. 77; table 39.520; J. Ch. Balty, *Antiochea*, p. 843, inventory No. 16; W. Lamb, *Greek and Roman Bronzes*, London 1929, p. 206, inventory No. 3; T. Dohrn, *Antike Flussgötter*; *Louvre: Collections*, inventory No. MND 275; BR 520. The other figurines are mentioned by, among others: B. Tahberer, *Swimming river gods in ancient Cilician numismatics*, “The Celator”, 17 February 2003, pp. 24–25 (figures 1–2).

Two reservations could be raised against the aforementioned identification. Firstly, the isolated figure of the swimmer shown in a pose known from the representations of the Antiochian Tyche does not necessarily have to be Orontes at all. It could just as well be a personification of Chrysorrhoeas, Pyramos, or another Cilician river, which were often shown on coins as solitary swimmers (see: **Fig. 6**).<sup>14</sup> Secondly, Eutyichides' vision of Tyche was not the only possible source of inspiration for depicting the swimmer in the way that interests us. The bronze kept in the Louvre (see: **Fig. 5**) may well be a copy, and the aforementioned coins (see: **Fig. 6**) might have been a paraphrase of another work by the Antiochene artist: the lost personification of Eurotas, no less famous than Tyche of Antioch, and equally highly valued by the ancients, as indicated by the statements of Pliny and Philippus of Thessalonica.

## Abstract

### *A contribution to the study of the iconography of swimmers in Ancient art*

Pliny the Elder and Philippus of Thessalonica, when writing about a statue created by Eutyichides (4th/3rd century BCE) that depicted the personification of the Eurotas River, emphasized that in this work, which has not survived to our time, the sculptural art appeared “more fluid than the river's current” (*amne liquidior*) according to Pliny, and “more fluid than water” (ὑδατοσ ὑγρότερς) according to Philippus. Both ancient authors likely referred to the exceptional fluidity of movement that characterized the work, accurately reflecting the identity of the depicted figure. Philippus of Thessalonica additionally noted that the artist portrayed the figure as a swimmer traversing the river's current (ὡς [...] διάβροχος ἐν ῥέεθροις [...] ὑγροβατῶν). Since the personification of another river, the Orontes, is present in Eutyichides' most famous work – Tyche of Antioch, known from preserved sculptural copies – as a swimmer immersed in water with arms arranged in a wave-like shape (which, incidentally, creates an impression of fluidity), it can be assumed that Eutyichides' Eurotas was depicted using this very formula. The formula was innovative not only in the context of the iconography of river gods/personifications, as has been noted several times, but it also represented the earliest successful attempt to create a fully three-dimensional image of a swimming figure, which secures Eutyichides' prominent place in the history of ancient sculpture. Assuming that Eurotas, like Orontes placed at the feet of Tyche of Antioch, was depicted as a half-figure swimmer with arms arranged in a wave-like manner, it is plausible that preserved statuettes commonly interpreted as representations of Orontes inspired by the companion of Antioch's Tyche could just as well be copies or variations of another work by Eutyichides – the lost personification of Eurotas.

#### KEYWORDS:

Eurotas, Orontes, personifications, river, sculpture, Hellenistic art, Eutyichides, ancient descriptions of artworks, Pliny the Elder, Philippus of Thessalonica, depictions of swimmers, the art of swimming

14 O. Tekin, *River-gods in Cilicia in the light of numismatic evidence*, [in:] *La Cilicie: espaces et pouvoirs locaux (IIe millénaire av. J.-C. – IVe siècle ap. J.-C.)*. Actes de la Table Ronde d'Istanbul, 2-5 novembre 1999, E. Jean, A.M. Dinçol, S. Durugönül (éds.), Paris 2001, pp. 519–551 (*Varia Anatolica* 13); B. Tahberer, *Swimming river*, pp. 24–30.

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