Peatland paintings from the past: A picture of a wetland described by Philostratus the Elder (ca. 190–230 CE)

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SUMMARY

Texts from ancient cultures provide valuable information on how past societies experienced peatlands and other wetlands. An ancient painting - which has not been preserved - displayed a mire within its landscape. Philostratus the Elder - who wrote a book on ancient Greek/Roman paintings - describes this piece of art with great admiration. This article presents and analyses the text in a wetland context.

KEY WORDS: ancient societies**,** Greek/Roman art, Greek writings, landscape, wetland appreciation

INTRODUCTION

Apart from sculptures, mosaics, ornamented pottery, murals, etc., Roman art also includes smaller images, and wooden panels frequently carried paintings (Ling 1996). Pliny the Elder ('*Natural History*' XXXV) provides a historical overview of ancient Greek and Roman paintings up to the late 1st century CE. He evidently had a great admiration for artists in the Roman society and mentions many of them by name. He writes about images on shields, wooden panels, linen, murals and wax plates. Pliny notes with regret that in his time there was an increasing tendency towards wall-paintings at the expense of smaller media ('*Natural History*' XXXV:1,3). He mentions a wide range of motifs including portraits and full-body depictions of people or deities, horse racing and sports (including gladiator fights), seaside-, battle-, mythological-, historical- and hunting-scenes, workshop and farm scenes, and animals. He also writes about landscape pictures (see Carroll 2015, Dietrich 2017).

Wetlands also featured in antique paintings (Figure 1). Pliny names Spurius Tadius (late 1st century BCE / early 1st century CE) as a painter of murals depicting landscapes, including pictures of splendid villas that had to be approached by roads crossing wetlands ('*Natural History*' XXXV: 37,116/117). Pausanias writes about paintings by Polygnotus (5th century BCE) in a museum near Delphi, which were obviously still accessible to the public in the 2nd century CE. One of these pictures displayed the underworld river Acheron fringed by reed thickets ('*Description of Greece*' X:28,1).

Two catalogues of ancient paintings - both called '*Images*' and also known in English as '*Imagines*' - were written by Philostratus the Elder and Philostratus the Younger. The ninth chapter of the work of the Elder Philostratus describes a painting of a wetland in a vivid way. This article aims to introduce the text to peatland scientists (most of whom will be unfamiliar with it) and analyse it within the context of how ancient cultures perceived peatlands and other wetlands (de Klerk & Joosten 2019).

THE AUTHOR AND THE WORK

It is initially confusing that several authors with the name Philostratus who lived in Greece in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries CE are written about by e.g. Gärtner (1979), Edwards *et al*. (1996) and Howatson (1997). According to these biographers, the works of Philostratus "son of Verus" are not preserved. His son Lucius Flavius Philostratus (latinised name, also known as Philostratus the Athenian) wrote '*Lives of the Sophists*', a biography of the wandering Pythagorean mystic '*Apollonius of Tyana*', and probably some shorter treatises that are not unambiguously attributable to him. The treatises on paintings are ascribed to a grandfather-grandson couple: Philostratus the Younger writes in the introduction of his work ('*Images*' Prooemium 2) that the earlier '*Images*' was compiled by his grandfather - which may refer to Lucius Flavius Philostratus and his grand-nephew/son-in-law Philostratus of Lemnos (i.e., not actually a grandchild), but according to Gärtner (1979) and Edwards *et al*. (1996) more probably to Philostratus of Lemnos and an otherwise unknown grandson (of Philostratus of Lemnos). New theories assume that Philostratus the Athenian and Philostratus of Lemnos were actually the same person (Bakke 2022).

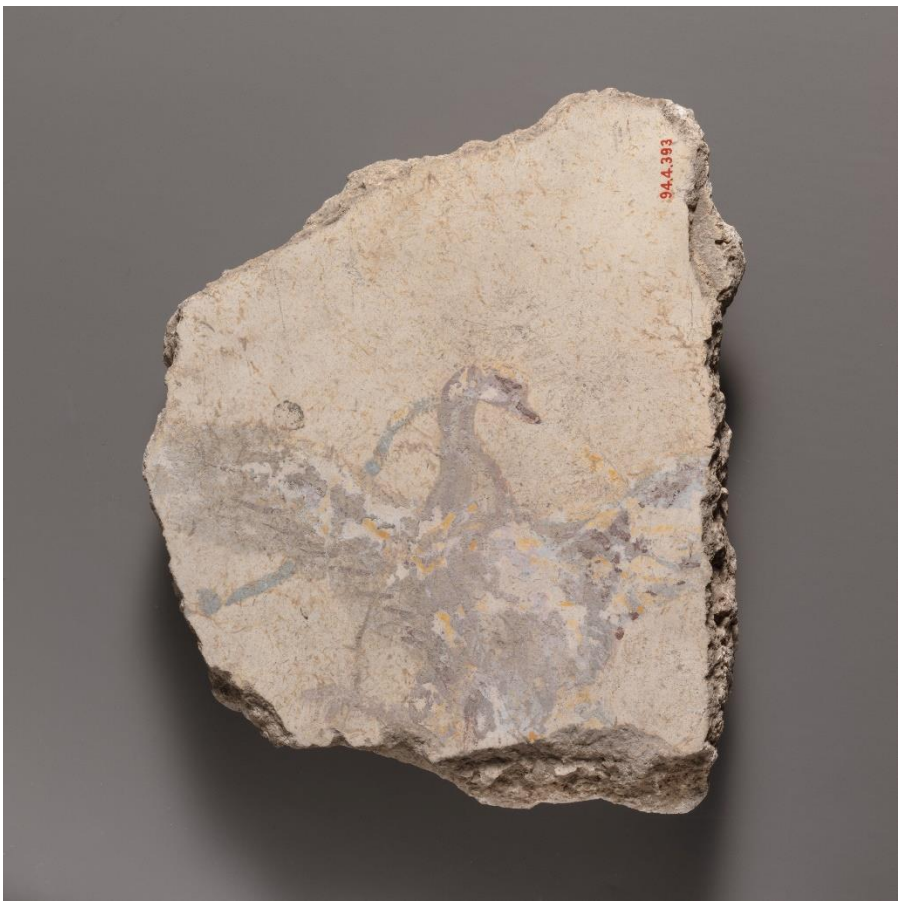

Figure 1. Fragment of a Roman wall-painting displaying a swan, a typical wetland bird. Date: ca. 14–68 CE, findspot unknown. Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, accession number 94.4.393. Link to the photograph: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/245849.

In the opening chapter of the earlier '*Images*', Philostratus the Elder explains that he did not write about painters and their lives, but that he wanted to give examples of how to interpret paintings. Allegedly, the paintings were exhibited in a stoa in Naples, and - on request of the ten-year-old son of his host in Naples - Philostratus started to explain the pictures to a group of young persons. He subsequently wrote down these explanations. The "you" that is addressed in the texts is the ten-year-old boy.

It is still a matter of debate whether the stoa and the paintings actually existed or whether they were fictional and written down as a didactical rhetorical exercise (Lehmann-Hartleben 1941, Gärtner 1979, Bryson 1995, Bakke 2022). If they were real, there are no available means to establish whether the paintings date from the time of Philostratus or from (considerably) earlier periods (Lehmann-Hartleben 1941).

European artists and scholars between the 16th and 19th century CE knew the work by Philostratus very well, and its descriptions influenced the creative art of that time (Lehmann-Hartleben 1941, Beall 1993, Bryson 1995). The pictures were even reconstructed in new paintings (Foerster 1904, Beall 1993), and a painting of the mire in question made by Giulio Romano (1499–1546 CE) was included in the richly decorated Villa Madama in Rome (Foerster 1904).

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTING

Chapter 9 of the first book of the '*Images*' by Philostratus the Elder is named ἑλος (helos, i.e. marsh). The text of the chapter in English and in ancient Greek is as follows:

The earth is wet and bears reeds and [wetland] *trees - which are triggered to grow unsown and untilled in the fertile marsh* [i.e. they grew spontaneously] - *as well as tamarisks and sedges, which are also marsh plants. The place is encircled by mountains high as the sky that are not all the same, since some are covered with pine trees that suggest a light soil, whereas others are luxuriantly grown-over with cypresses, which indicate clayey soils, and again*

others with firs - what else could that mean than that the mountain is storm-swept and rough? Firs do not like rich soil, nor do they need warmth, in accordance with their locations far from the plains in the mountains because of the wind. Springs are breaking forth from the mountain slopes and flow down and mingle their waters at the grounds below the mountains, and consequently the plain becomes a marsh that, however, is not disordered, but also not as if it was mixed: the course of its waters is directed in the painting just as nature, wise in all things, directed it, and the stream curves with many long-winded meanders that are luxuriously grown with celery and are suitable for travelling waterfowl. See how the ducks, I am sure, are gliding along the water and blow jets of water from their bills. And what about geese? Indeed, they too are painted in accordance with nature, resting and gliding on the water. And those long-legged birds with huge beaks that you doubtlessly recognise as foreign, are delicately coloured, each with different plumage. Their postures are also diverse: one stands on a rock resting first on one leg and then on the other, one dries its feathers, one preens them, another has snatched some prey from the water, and yet another has bent its head to the land eating something. No wonder that the swans are ridden by Erotes as these gods are mischievous and prone to play with birds, so let us not pass by without noticing their racing or the waters in which they are painted. Here indeed is the water the most beautiful part of the marsh, streaming directly from a spring and forming a swimming-pool of extraordinary beauty. In the midst of the pool, amaranth flowers are nodding back and forth: sweet clusters that cover the water with their blooms. It is among these bunches that the Erotes race on sacred birds with golden bridles, one is giving free rein, another is drawing tight, another turning, another driving around the turning-post. You can imagine hearing them arousing their swans and threatening and teasing each other - which can all be seen in their faces. One is trying to swoop down his neighbour, another already did this, another fell from his bird and swims along the racecourse. Musical swans stand around the pool and sing high-pitched songs that match the contestants. There is a winged youth, you see, who is an indication that a song is being sung: he is the wind Zephyrus [the god of the west wind] *and he sets the tone of the swans' song. He is painted as a tender and graceful boy to suggest the light breeze, and the wings of the swans are unfolded so that the breezes may strike them. Behold, a river flows out of the marsh, a broad rippling stream, and goatherds and shepherds cross it on a bridge. If you praise the painter for his goats that he painted jumping around and prone to mischief, or for his sheep because their gait is ponderous as if their fleeces are a burden, or if we want to describe the pipes or those who play them with wrinkled lips, we only praise mere insignificant features of the painting that relate to imitation, but do not praise the deeper meaning and the fortunate touch, which - to my opinion - are the most important elements of art. Where is the ingenuity* [of this painting]*? The painter has laid a bridge of date palms across the river and so includes a beautiful thought. He knew what is said about palms, that the ones are male, the others are female, and he has heard about their marriage in which the male trees marry by means of embracing brides by bending over towards them and holding them with their branches. Thus, he has painted a palm of one sex on one* [river] *bank, and of the other on the other bank. The male tree bends over in love and stretches out over the river, and as he cannot reach the female, which is too far away, the tree lies flat and provides basic service by bridging the water, and people can cross the bridge safely because of its rough bark.*

Ὑπόμβρος μὲν ἡ γῆ, φέρει δὲ κάλαμον καὶ φλοιόν, ἃ δὴ ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα δίδωσιν ἡ τῶν ἑλῶν εὐφυία, καὶ μυρίκη γέγραπται καὶ κύπειρον· καὶ γὰρ ταῦτά ἐστι τῶν ἑλῶν. ὄρη δὲ οὐρανομήκη περιβέβληται φύσεως οὐ μιᾶς· τὰ μὲν γὰρ τὴν πίτυν παρεχόμενα λεπτόγεων τιθεῖ, τὰ δὲ κυπαρίττῳ κομῶντα τῆς ἀργιλώδους λέγει, ἐλάται δὲ ἐκεῖναι τί ἄλλο γε ἢ δυσχείμερον καὶ τραχὺ τὸ ὄρος; οὐ γὰρ ἀσπάζονται βῶλον οὐδὲ ἀγαπῶσι θάλπεσθαι· ταῦτά τοι καὶ ἀποικοῦσι τῶν πεδίων ὡς ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι ῥᾷον αὐξόμεναι τῷ ἄνέμῳ. πηγαὶ δὲ ἀποβλύζουσι τῶν ὀρῶν, αἳ δὴ ῥέουσαι κάτω καὶ κοινούμεναι τὸ ὕδωρ ἕλος ὑπ' αὐτῶν τὸ πεδίον, οὐ μὴν ἄτακτόν γε οὐδὲ οἷον πεφύρθαι· διῆκται δὲ αὐτοῦ τὸ νᾶμα ὑπὸ τῆς γραφῆς, ὡς ἂν καὶ ἡ φύσις αὐτὸ διήγαγεν ἡ σοφὴ πάντων, μαιάνδρους δὲ πολλοὺς ἐλίττει σελίνου βρύοντας ἀγαθοὺς ναυτίλλεσθαι τοῖς ὄρνισι τοῖς ὑγροῖς. ὁρᾷς γάρ που τὰς νήττας, ὡς ἔφυδροι διολισθάνουσιν ἀναφυσῶσαί τινας οἷον αὐλοὺς τοῦ ὕδατος. τί δὴ τὸ τῶν χηνῶν ἔθνος; καὶ γὰρ δὴ κἀκεῖνοι γεγράφαται κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν ἐπιπόλαιοί τε καὶ πλωτῆρες. τοὺς δὲ ἐπὶ μακροῖν τοῖν σκελοῖν, τοὺς περιττοὺς τὸ ῥάμφος ξένους οἶμαι αἰσθάνῃ καὶ ἀβροὺς ἄλλον ἄλλου πτεροῦ. καὶ τὰ σχήματα δὲ αὐτῶν ποικίλα· ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ πέτρας ἀναπαύει τὸ πόδε κατὰ ἕνα, ὁ δὲ ψύχει τὸ πτερόν, ὁ δὲ ἐκκαθαίρει, ὁ δὲ ἥρηκέ τι ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος, ὁ δὲ εἰς τὴν γῆν ἀπονένευκεν ἐπισιτίσασθαί τι ἐκεῖθεν. ἡνιοχεῖσθαι δὲ τοὺς κύκνους ὑπὸ τῶν Ἐρώτων θαῦμα οὐδέν· ἀγέρωχοι γὰρ οἱ θεοὶ καὶ δεινοὶ παίζειν ἐς τοὺς ὄρνιθας, ὅθεν μηδὲ τὴν ἡνιόχησιν ἀργῶς παρέλθωμεν μηδὲ αὐτὸ τὸ ὕδωρ, ἐν ᾧ ταῦτα. τὸ μὲν γὰρ δὴ ὕδωρ τοῦτο κάλλιστον τοῦ

ἕλους πηγῆς αὐτὸ διδούσης αὐτόθεν, συνίσταται δὲ εἰς κολυμβήθραν παγκάλην. διὰ μέσου γὰρ τοῦ ὕδατος ἀμάραντα νεύει τὰ μὲν ἔνθεν, τὰ δὲ ἐκεῖθεν, ἡδεῖς ἀστάχυες καὶ βάλλοντες ἄνθει τὸ ὕδωρ. περὶ τούτους ἡνιοχοῦσιν Ἔρωτες ἱεροὺς καὶ χρυσοχαλίνους ὄρνις ὁ μὲν πᾶσαν ἡνίαν ἐνδιδούς, ὁ δὲ ἀνακόπτων, ὁ δὲ ἐπιστρέφων, ὁ δὲ περὶ τὴν νύσσαν ἐλαύνων — καὶ παρακελευομένων τοῖς κύκνοις ἀκούειν δόκει καὶ ἀπειλούντων ἀλλήλοις καὶ τωθαζόντων· ταῦτα γὰρ τοῖς προσώποις ἔπεστιν — ὁ δὲ καταβάλλει τὸν πέλας, ὁ δὲ καταβέβληκεν, ὁ δὲ ἠγάπησεν ἐκπεσεῖν τοῦ ὄρνιθος, ὡς λούσαιτο ἐν τῷ ἱπποδρόμῳ. κύκλῳ δὲ ταῖς ὄχθαις ἐφεστᾶσιν οἱ μουσικώτεροι τῶν κύκνων ἐπάδοντες οἶμαι τὸν ὄρθιον ὡς πρὸς τρόπου τοῖς ἀμιλλωμένοις. σημεῖον τῆς ᾠδῆς ὁρᾷς τὸ πτηνὸν μειράκιον· ἄνεμος τοῦτο Ζέφυρος τὴν ᾠδὴν τοῖς κύκνοις ἐνδιδούς. γέγραπται δὲ ἁπαλὸν καὶ χαρίεν εἰς αἴνιγμα τοῦ πνεύματος, καὶ αἱ πτέρυγες ἥπλωνται τοῖς κύκνοις πρὸς τὸ πλήττεσθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀνέμου. ἰδοὺ καὶ ποταμὸς ὑπεξέρχεται τοῦ ἕλους εὐρὺς καὶ ὑποκυμαίνων, διαβαίνουσι δ' αὐτὸν αἰπόλοι καὶ νομεῖς ἐπὶ ζεύγματος. εἰ δὲ τῶν αἰγῶν ἐπαινοίης τὸν ζωγράφον, ὅτι αὐτὰς ὑποσκιρτώσας καὶ ἀγερώχους γέγραφεν, ἢ τῶν προβάτων, ὅτι σχολαῖον αὐτοῖς τὸ βάδισμα καὶ οἷον ἄχθος οἱ μᾶλλοί, τάς τε σύριγγας εἰ διεξίοιμεν ἢ τοὺς χρωμένους αὐταῖς, ὡς ὑπεσταλμένῳ τῷ στόματι αὐλοῦσι, σμικρὸν ἐπαινεσόμεθα τῆς γραφῆς καὶ ὅσον εἰς μίμησιν ἥκει, σοφίαν δὲ οὐκ ἐπαινεσόμεθα οὐδὲ καιρόν, ἃ δὴ κράτιστα δοκεῖ τῆς τέχνης. τίς οὖν ἡ σοφία; ζεῦγμα φοινίκων ἐπιβέβληκε τῷ ποταμῷ καὶ μάλα ἡδὺν ἐπ' αὐτῷ λόγον· εἰδὼς γὰρ τὸ περὶ τῶν φοινίκων λεγόμενον, ὅτι αὐτῶν ὁ μὲν ἄρσην τις, ἡ δὲ θήλεια, καὶ περὶ τοῦ γάμου σφῶν διακηκοὼς, ὅτι ἄγονται τὰς θηλείας περιβάλλοντες αὐτὰς τοῖς κλάδοις καὶ ἐπιτείνοντες αὐτοὺς ἐπ' αὐτάς, ἀφ' ἑκατέρου τοῦ γένους ἕνα κατὰ μίαν ὄχθην γέγραφεν. εἶτα ὁ μὲν ἐρᾷ καὶ ἐπικλίνεται καὶ ὑπεράλλεται τοῦ ποταμοῦ, τῆς δὲ θηλείας ἔτι ἀφεστώσης οὐκ ἔχων ἐπιλαβέσθαι κεῖται καὶ δουλεύει ζεύξας τὸ ὕδωρ, καὶ ἔστι τοῖς διαβαίνουσιν ἀσφαλὴς ὑπὸ τὴς τοῦ φλοιοῦ τραχύτητος.

(Philostratus the Elder, '*Images*' I:9; English text paraphrased after the consulted translations; Greek text from the edition of the Loeb Classical Library).

COMMENTS ON THE TEXT

The text appears to be self-explanatory. It depicts a remarkably idyllic wetland that Philostratus perceives as beautiful. The text reads as if he swallows in fantasies, and he brings motion and personal thoughts into the inherently static scene.

The wetland, as the text indicates, consisted of a lake or pond fringed by reeds. Philostratus states that the marsh was fed by streams of water and was not disordered or mixed. It is unclear what he may mean by a "not-disordered marsh", but apparently the Greek word ἕλος (hélos) was used in his time to broadly designate various types of wetlands including "ordered" and "disordered" ones. It is also feasible that Philostratus wants to stress that an actual mire is different from what his readers - who may never have seen wetlands themselves - may have envisaged.

Furthermore, the description of vegetation elements both in the wetland and on the surrounding mountains has some palaeoecological value, regardless of whether the painting really existed or is entirely fictious, and whether an existing painting depicted an actual mire or was based solely on the fantasy of the artist. But, as it is unknown in which geographical region the mire may have been located, this palaeoecological value is restricted.

According to Liddell & Scott (1961), the Greek word κάλαμος (kálamos) - which Philostratus uses - designates reed, while φλοιός (phloiós) literally means bark and will have been used as a poetical device to designate (wetland) trees. Whereas κύπειρον (kýpeiron), etymologically related to the genus name *Cyperus* (Genaust 2017), refers to sedge plants (Liddell & Scott 1961), Μυρίκη (muríke) - which resembles the name of the present-day taxon *Myrica* - actually designates *Tamarix* (Liddell & Scott 1961). Σέλινον (sélinon) is celery, i.e. the marsh plant *Apium graveolens* (Liddell & Scott 1961) and not the present-day taxon *Selinum* (see Genaust 2017). It is unknown which present-day taxa Philostratus names ἀμάραντα (amáranta) (Genaust 2017), but it has been proposed that it was *Helichrysum* (see Costea & Tardiff 2003). In the text by Philostratus the word clearly designates aquatic plants.

It is unknown which birds Philostratus describes as foreign. O. Schönberger writes in the comments to his German translation (published by Ernst Heimeran Verlag, München) that these were possibly cranes or herons. In the German edition of the work published by Marixverlag, Wiesbaden, C. Bachmann uses the label "migratory birds". However, flamingos would also fit the description of long-legged, large-beaked, colourful birds that regularly stand on one leg.

The Ἔρωτες (Erotes) were a collective of childlike winged versions of the god Eros and in art were visualised in plural to illustrate the many different kinds of passion represented by this god (Grant & Hazel 2002; Figure 2).

Figure 2. Erotes displayed on a sarcophagus from ca. 130–150 CE that was found along the road between Capranica and Vetrella (Italy). Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, accession number 90.12a, b. Link to the photograph: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/245585. See also Bazzichelly (1889) and Frothingham (1890).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The text by Philostratus is one of the most vivid portrayals of a wetland from Antiquity. In his description, he perceives the beauty of nature in its connection to the supernatural, while the beautiful landscape portrayed simultaneously inspires the author to drift in his own imagination. If the painting really did exist, it would be a great asset for palaeoecologists, peatland scientists and botanists, but the chances of rediscovery seem slim.

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