

## **Under Legends' Aura**

While Apollo was walking on the Pelion mountain, a truly green heaven, he met a maiden of incredible beauty, her name was Cyrene, whom he immediately fell in love with, and who followed him in Libya. As soon as they got to that country, the god built a fortress in honor of his wife, even giving it her name. In this true nest of love, Cyrene gave birth to a son, Aristeus.

As gods' habit was, Apollo trusted his precious son with the Nymphs, who had the duty to raise him with care, and they did try their best. Ever since he was little, the Nymphs taught him the secrets of agriculture, especially beekeeping, so that when he was a grown-up man, he felt it his duty to share a great part of what he knew with the people.

His first descent he made to the island Kea, on the Aegean Sea, where he enriched the locals' knowledge with the secrets and art of beekeeping. It seems that his stay on the island lasted long enough, among the heirs of the islanders being later a few direct line heirs of his – the legend has it – and upon departure, he was overwhelmed with honors. Later on the island, a coin with his face on one side was discovered.

As the ancient poet Pindar (61 BC) exclaims, from Kea Aristeus left for Arcadia of the Peloponnesus with the same purpose, and where he was received well and hosted a semi-god that he was.

One day, after a class of beekeeping, in a paradisiacal landscape, Aristeus met the Nymph Euridice, wife of Orpheus. Charmed by her beauty, he immediately fell totally in love. But Euridice rejected him and then he had the idea to rape her. But slender as she was, she escaped. However, she did not escape a snake as she hurriedly stepped on it and thus she perished. This story stirred Nymphs' hatred and they held him responsible for their sister's death. The vengeance consisted in killing all Aristeus's bees, and this happened despite the fact that the Nymphs themselves were the protectors of the bees.

(As it remained written starting the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, with the Greek author, Apian, the Nymphs were also called beekeeper Nymphs). Following his mother's advice (as received from Proteus, who guarded Neptun's cattle), in order to pacify the Nymphs, Aristeus sacrificed four oxen and four cows, and the pacified Nymphs made it so that there were new bees flying in the sky, rising of course from the dead bodies of the sacrificed animals. These bees were even blessed by their protectors to produce even richer crops of honey.

After making up with the Nymphs, Aristeus continued to travel – still as a teacher – to Sardinia, Sicily and Thracia, where he was received with the high honors reserved to gods, according to Diodorus of Sicily.

It is now the time to remember that in 1854, in a tomb in Sardinia, a bronze statue was found, with a chest full of bees. As Aristeus had visited the place, it is believed that the statue represents him.

We think it is only natural to wonder whether the myth of Aristeus is based on real events of ancient Greece. The possibility cannot be excluded. Indeed, one must take into account that the legends that circulated in those times told about people who had lived a long time before and often reflected the ideas and knowledge of the era. IT is possible that the story of Aristeus should be a myth that suffered changes, of course, throughout centuries. As a matter of fact, ancient poets, amongst whom Pindar in his "Odes", or Virgil in his "Georgics" added very little to the historical tradition of the hero's origin as they imagined it, to give it more glamour and to make him an idol to human weakness.

Actually, on beekeeping in the prehistoric and historic periods of Greek world, archeological discoveries speak for themselves.

From before the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Italian archeology school brought to light in Crete hives of clay dated the Minoan era (3400 BC), next to other objects that prove the existence of a flourishing beekeeping, like a piece of jewelry representing a bee – found in a

tomb in Cnossus, a small medallion with a bee engraved having the head of a woman, dated 700-600 BC – on the Rhodes island. This item of precious art probably represents a bee-nymph, protector of these wonderful beings. In Cnossus, geometrical-shaped pots were discovered dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC and decorated with drawings of bees.

Moreover, a coin was made representing a bee, as in fortresses in the island of Kea (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) and Annaphae, both in the Cyclades. The coin in Annaphae had a bee on the front side and a clay pot on the backside, of course to keep the honey in. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, fortresses Praisos and Hirtakina of Crete also had the coins with the bee. Shortly, the same thing happened in the Ionian cities, like for instance in Ephesus, Smyrna, Eritrea. About the impressing circulation of these coins, we find a lot of details in the book by Ballore, published in Rome in 1685 and entitled: “Representations of bees on the coins in Ephesus and other cities”.

Recent digging in Attica confirmed also the data on the flourishing beekeeping of those times. According to archaeological data, Attica used to produce in antiquity the best honey that could compete with the honey in Calymnos. The American archaeology school, while digging at the foot of the Acropolis, discovered ten years ago six hives of 32 cm in diameter and 65 cm in length, respectively 35/45 cm. The American archeologist A. Graham, while digging in Vari, in the South-East of the Hymetus mountain, found similar hives to the ones in Agora and Trachones, in the South-West of Hymetus mountain. In a tomb in Marathon area, two hives stuck together were discovered, provided with wide openings, in which the skeleton of a child was found. The two hives were in perfect condition, except for the top part that was destroyed during digging.

The first direct information on beekeeping are provided by Homer. In the *Odyssey*, we find a libation mentioning honey and milk, and the *Iliad* compares the people coming forth to a swarm of bees flying in tight rows. Hesiod makes in his turn a picturesque description of the drones that live without doing anything in “simbles” (hives) depending on the workers. The “simble” is believed to have been an osier basket; the clay hives appeared somewhat later in Attica, according to Aristophanes in his dialog about “Wasps” (241), in which the poverty of Lacheos is mentioned, and those present doubt it as he possesses a “simble” full of silver (of course a clay “simble”, rather than an osier one).

A law by Solon (640-558 BC) points out to beekeeping as an important field. The law established the distance between apiaries (to avoid losses and litigation between neighbors; “bee swarms must be placed in a given space at three hundred feet from those that are already there”).

Biology, one of the main concerns of ancient Greek authors, had a special chapter dedicated to bees.

About the same time, Hecate (560-480 BC), Anaxagoras (428 BC), Xenophon (427 BC), Aristotle and his contemporary and disciple Theophrastus (322 BC), Antigonus of Karystos (in his book “Collection of strange histories” – end of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), Democritus (not the philosopher Democritus) (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), Nicandrus of Colophon (who wrote “Problems of beekeeping” – of which we learn from other ancient authors for, unfortunately, the book was lost) are concerned in their turn with beekeeping.

So far, we discover that the enormous privilege of being in communion with the bees cause a feeling of well being, the sharing of their harmony secures balance to people, as well as a show of incredible beauty. About Aristotle’s observations on bees we shall talk in the future issue.