

Alcman and Niobe's children

The question is one of quantity. How many did he say she had? And the source is Aelian, *Var. Hist.* 12. 36 (2. 132. 20 Hercher): *εὐόκασαν οἱ ἀρχαῖοι ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ τῶν τῆς Νιόβης παίδων μὴ συνάδειν ἀλλήλοισι.* "Ὀμηρος μὲν (II. 24. 603/4) ἐξ λέγει ἄρρενας καὶ τοσαύτας κόρας, Λᾶσος δὲ (fr. 5 Page) δις ἑπτὰ λέγει, Ἡσιόδος δὲ (fr. 183 Merkelbach-West) ἐννέα καὶ δέκα, εἰ μὴ ἄρα οὐκ εἰσὶν Ἡσιόδου τὰ ἔπη, ἀλλ' ὥς πολλὰ καὶ ἄλλα κατέψευστα αὐτοῦ. Ἀλκμῶν <δὲ> (fr. 75 Page) δέκα φησί, Μίμνεμος (fr. 19 West) εἴκοσι, καὶ Πίνδαρος (fr. 52 n Snell) τοσοῦτος¹). It is, admittedly, no big thing, but I have long disliked Alcman's little *δέκα*, and I want to emend it now into a decently larger number.

After Homer's 12, the Niobids multiply, poetically, to 18 (Sappho, fr. 205 Lobel-Page), 19 (Hesiod), and 20 (Mimnermus, Pindar, Bacchylides, fr. 52 Jebb²). Then, they decrease to 14 (Lasus), and remain at 14 for Aeschylus (fr. 275 Mette), Sophocles (fr. 446 Pearson), Euripides (fr. 455 Nauck³, and Aristophanes (fr. 284, I 465 Kock³). So, poets of the lyric age preferred the biggest numbers, superlative broods of children. You might compare Max Treu's note on Jaeger's remark (*Paideia* I 180) that every poem of Mimnermus betrays the age in which it was written, that age when the Greeks began to subject nature to logic: "Ein Satz wie fr. 8 ἀληθείη δὲ παρέστω σοὶ καὶ ἐμοί, πάντων χοῦμα δικαιοῦτατον zeigt, wie die aus den Gesprächen der Sieben Weisen bekannten superlativischen Fragen 'was ist das Älteste? Schönste? Gerechteste?' bereits im Schwange sind"⁴). Niobe's boasting and subsequent punishment become more credible if she has an exceptional number of children.

Alcman, alone of the lyric poets, failed to exceed Homer's count of the Niobids. If, of course, Aelian's text is to be trusted. Don't trust it, I say. Liénard conjectured Ἀλκμῶν <δὲς> δέκα φησί⁵). But that is a poor correction

1) For other references, see K.B. Stark, *Niobe und die Niobiden* (Leipzig 1863); Sauer's and Lesky's articles on Niobe, in Roscher's *Lexikon* and *RE*, respectively; E. Liénard, "Les Niobides" (*Latomus* 2 [1938] 21 ff.); R.M. Cook, *Niobe and her Children* (Cambridge 1964).

2) Ps. Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 3. 5. 6) reports 20 for Hesiod, but the passage was emended attractively by Sittl: Ἡσιόδος δὲ (υἱὸς μὲν ἐννέα, θυγατέρας δὲ δέκα, Μίμνεμος δὲ) δέκα μὲν υἱὸς δέκα δὲ θυγατέρας (Hesiod, fr. 183 [note] Merkelbach-West; Mimnermus, fr. 19 [note] West).

3) W. Headlam (*CR* 13 [1899] 3) wondered if the dramatists chose 14 as a number suitable for the tragic chorus. If so, what became of the chorus when Apollo and Artemis had done their work?

4) *Von Homer zur Lyrik. Wandlungen des griechischen Weltbildes im Spiegel der Sprache* (Munich 1955) 282, n. 2.

5) *Supra* n. 1.

when looked at in full context, for the following *εἴκοσι* clearly introduces a new number. Read, rather, *Ἀλκμὰν <δ' ἑκκαί>δεκα φησί*. The *δ' ἑκκαί-* of *δ' ἑκκαίδεκα* was sufficiently close to *-δεκα*, in spelling and pronunciation, to encourage lipography. Aelian's and Alcman's 16 was reduced to 10.