

The Sculptures of the Grotta Azzurra at Capri

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THE Grotta Azzurra is a notable sea cave on the coast of the island of Capri, at the Gulf of Naples, in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Nowadays it is famous for the effects of the light inside it. A striking blue colouring is created by sunlight which passes through an underwater cavity, shining through the water to illuminate the cavern. Another trick of the light in the Grotta Azzurra is that objects which are held in the water appear silver.¹ Each year, thousands of people come to the island to view the spectacle of the grotto's colouring. In all likelihood most visitors today have little to no idea that the Grotta Azzurra was known to the Romans, or that it was even decorated at that time.²

The cavity is approximately 60 m long, 25 m wide and around 20 m deep, but the roof of the entrance is only around a meter above sea-level; this means that visitors have to lie down in small boats when entering the cave.³ The charm of the grotto, which attracts the public to this day, was well known in antiquity. This can be proven by the remains of an ancient landing place, Roman steps, a plain mortar floor,⁴ and a huge window carved into the natural cavern inside the grotto.⁵ Even outside the cavern there are remains of Roman building, such as the marks of the *opus reticulatum* in the walls. However, over the centuries, knowledge about the Grotta Azzurra was lost and it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that it was finally rediscovered by the German travellers August Kopisch and Ernst Fries.

⁰I would like to thank Julia Döring, who helped draw and reconstruct my conceptions of the Grotta Azzurra and its sculptures.

¹Maiuri 1956, 80.

²This lack of awareness prompted me to collect together information about the Grotta Azzurra and its finds, in order to assemble and interpret them in my Master's thesis, which I completed in February 2014 at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. This article is based upon the conclusions of that thesis.

³Kyrle 1953, 18.

⁴Lavagne 1988, 565 describes it as *opus caementicium*.

⁵Kyrle 1953, 18–19; Federico and Miranda 1998, 215–216.

Kopisch was the first to provide a detailed description of the cavern and its appearance, in a work which retains utility to this day.⁶ However, despite the fact that Kopisch noticed Roman remains (both in and around the grotto) academic opinion remained divided about the Grotta Azzurra's actual use, and Kopisch's views regarding Roman activity inside the grotto were viewed as highly controversial – especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁷ But with a surprising find in 1964 any doubts of there being a Roman development were put to rest: two Roman marble statues were found on the bottom of the grotto.⁸

The difficult work of recovering the statues took place between June 19th and August 3rd. Though the visitors' entrance is too small to permit the entry of a large vessel, the submarine gate measures around 15 m and therefore permitted retrieval. Each statue was separately made fast by means of strong cables to a boat, the largest which could be passed through the aperture above sea level. It was then secured with other lines to points outside the cave, the cables from the boat cast off, and by pulling from the outside, the statue drawn through the large underwater opening. From there each was towed, still under water, to the Marina Grande.⁹ After the further discovery of sculptural elements on the bottom of the grotto a scientific research team was able to salvage even more sculptures and marble fragments ten years later.¹⁰ However, after their time underwater, all of the statues and fragments were recovered in less than perfect condition, having been eroded by many centuries of marine action and covered with a thick incrustation. Despite their damaged condition Alfonso De Franciscis, then director of the Soprintendenza alle Antichità delle Province di Napoli e Caserta, was able to discern in their elegance and vigorousness fine works of art.¹¹

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Function of the Grotta Azzurra

The display of statues as decorative elements was a normal feature of elegant villas in antiquity. But how did works of such fine quality come to lie at the bottom of a grotto? Grottos in antiquity were a popular aspect of Roman dwellings, especially amongst the Roman elite. One of the most well known is the Grotto of Tiberius in Sperlonga (fig. 1), situated between Rome and Naples, in which a large grotto formed part of the overall villa complex. This particular example is especially famous due to the outstanding sculptures which were found in the grotto during the 1970s, which can now be seen in the museum of Sperlonga.¹²

After examination of both archaeological and literary sources, it has become clear that the grotto was used as a *triclinium* (dining room) and that the sculptures formed part of the luxury decorations.¹³ The natural or artificial grottos of the emperors Claudius and Domitian also functioned as dining rooms in their villas, and these contained a number

⁶ August Kopisch wrote the book *Die Entdeckung der blauen Grotte und Der Träumer* (1925), which was widely disseminated in the 19th and 20th century and made the Grotta Azzurra famous.

⁷ Kopisch 1925, 32–36.

⁸ Kesel 1971, 87.

⁹ De Franciscis 1967, 215–216.

¹⁰ Acampora 1991, 5.

¹¹ De Franciscis 1967, 216.

¹² For detailed information and discussions of the sculptures from Sperlonga, see Sauron 1991.

¹³ Andrae 1999, 220; Andrae gives an excellent overview of the famous grottos in antiquity.



Fig. 1: Inside the grotto in Sperlonga.
Photographer: Lydia Schallenberg

of statues. The advantages of having a secluded, cool and atmospheric space for diners were well known to the Roman elite.¹⁴ At the Gulf of Naples there are many examples of Roman villas in which two or even more dining rooms can be found.¹⁵ These were used in different seasons; one was arranged in the south part of the villa, and another in the north, one serving for the winter months and the other the summer. To refresh the diners we find fountains or water installations in or around some of the summer dining rooms.¹⁶ But decoration was always a very important part of Roman housing, particularly in socially important areas such as the *triclinium*. Imagery depicting legendary, Dionysian figures or marine gods were especially popular for dining rooms.¹⁷

Because of the location, the atmosphere and the Roman remains, I feel it is safe to suggest that the Grotta Azzurra was used as a summer grotto-*triclinium* in antiquity,¹⁸ and that the sculptures were an integral part of its decoration.

Examination of the statues found in the Grotta Azzurra shows they would have rested on narrow bases and had a number of leaden plates attached to their backs. Those plates were used as a means to attach the statues to the wall, through the use of supporting brackets.¹⁹ Underwater research by the Centro di Studi Subacquei di Napoli discovered niches in the walls of the cavern which now are submerged around 1.20 m below sea

¹⁴Neudecker 1988, 47–49.

¹⁵For further on maritime villas Lafon 2001.

¹⁶Mielsch 1987, 122–128.

¹⁷Neudecker 1988, 47–48.

¹⁸Andreas Grüner n.d. argues that the whole island should be seen as a villa complex. In accordance with his thesis I believe the Grotta Azzurra should be seen as specifically the summer *triclinium* of Capri. Rough weather conditions make it difficult – or even impossible – to enter the grotto in winter.

¹⁹De Franciscis 1964, 12.

level.²⁰ This would seem to suggest that the statues were placed against the wall at the same level as the sea, in order to give the powerful impression that they were emerging from the water.²¹ Fig. 2 shows a possible reconstruction of the installation in the Grotta Azzurra.

It is quite possible that the statues fell due to seismic activity in the Gulf of Naples. Kopisch noted that in the beginning of the 17th century two clergymen swam into the Grotta Azzurra and reported that it was filled with graven images around the walls.²² It is possible that these men saw the actual assembly of the statues in the grotto (which they retold in stories of there being ghosts in the cavern, leading to the Grotta Azzurra becoming mythologized as a haunted location) and that the statues fell subsequent to this event. Consultation of records of the seismological activities in the Gulf show that there were, indeed, several violent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in 1631/32.²³ These events could be the reason why the statues, which were probably already in a bad condition, sunk to the bottom of the grotto.

Post-recovery, scholars attempted to identify the finds. But is it actually possible to form an accurate impression of the statues, given their current state of preservation?

Four statues are currently on display in the Casa Rossa in Anacapri, having been previously restored in Naples (fig. 3). After the statues' discovery the community of Capri

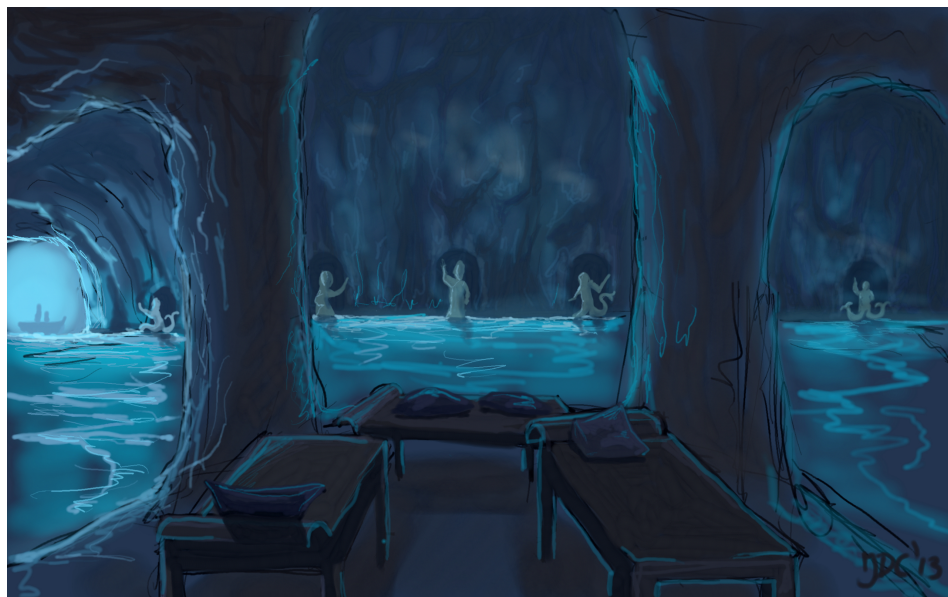


Fig. 2: A reconstruction of how the Grotta Azzurra could have looked like in the early Empire. Drawing by Julia Döring and Lydia Schallenberg.

²⁰Stärk 1993, 136. The water level today is higher than it would have been in antiquity; Schmiedt 1981, 28–45; Antonioli and Ferranti 1992, 349.

²¹The results of the current research by Paolo Caputo, Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei, in cooperation with other research teams, will probably give fresh insight into the situation.

²²Kopisch 1925, 17; “Nach der Aussage dieser Priester soll die Grotte inwendig aussehen wie ein sehr großer Tempel mit einem Hochaltar, rings herum aber alles von Götzenbildern sein, und das Wasser innen so wunderbar beschaffen, daß die Angst darin zu schwimmen ganz unbeschreiblich sei.”

²³Richter 2007, 51–57.

was unsure how to display their discoveries, because the island did not possess a dedicated Museum of Antiquity (and still does not), and for the first few decades they were actually on provisional display at the Certosa di San Giacomo in Capri.

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The statues and their interpretation

All of the statues are, unfortunately, in poor condition, and it is therefore rather challenging to make out finer details. Nevertheless, there are many interesting features which can still be discerned, especially through comparative analysis.²⁴ The physiognomy of the statues is rather alike, especially the lower extremities, and that they also display similar dimensions (though this must remain tentative due to the state of preservation).

The first statue is a figure of a young man reaching forwards in an impetuous motion (fig. 4, see also summary in table 1). His hair is curly, and he seems to be beardless. The body itself leans forward and seems to have been muscular. The arms were not detached from his body. The left leg is in front of the right leg and is raised up. The design of the legs deserves especial mention: they are not modelled right down to the feet, but appear simply to end at the knees.²⁵ This feature is characteristic for all the other statues as well.

The second statue is a heavily bearded male figure, with the left arm lowered and the right arm raised (fig. 5). This example seems to be straighter, and almost appears to lean backwards. Both these statues are nude. Because of his raised arm which might potentially have wielded a trident, this statue was originally identified as Neptune.²⁶ Due to this identification, the other statue was subsequently identified as Triton.²⁷

The best preserved sculpture was found ten years after the first discoveries were made (fig. 6). It is the only example where parts of the face remain visible. As with the second statue, we have a bearded male figure with curly hair, also with his right arm raised and the left arm lowered (similar to the second statue). The right arm makes it possible to get an idea of the arm's diameter as well as the actual marble's. Careful observation even reveals the inscribed nipples of the muscular breast. Detailed images have suggested to me the possibility that this figure wore a coat on the left shoulder, but the state of preservation means it is difficult to distinguish actual toolmarks from marine incrustations. My observations also showed that the sculpture was naked, which becomes clear from examining the rear of the sculpture, which plainly shows muscular buttocks.

²⁴For a better understanding of the comparison s. table 1 on page 97.

²⁵Federico, Belli, et al. 2000, 15; Esposito and Lucignano 2010, 12; Muscettola 1998, 263.

²⁶The submarine find context hardly discouraged this interpretation.

²⁷De Franciscis 1964, 12–24; De Franciscis 1967, 216. Kesel describes them as “Der Jüngling in dienender Geste nach vorne gebeugt, Poseidon würdig, als trüge er noch in der linken Hand den Dreizack nach Vorbild der berühmten Statue des Lysippos.” (Kesel 1971, 87.

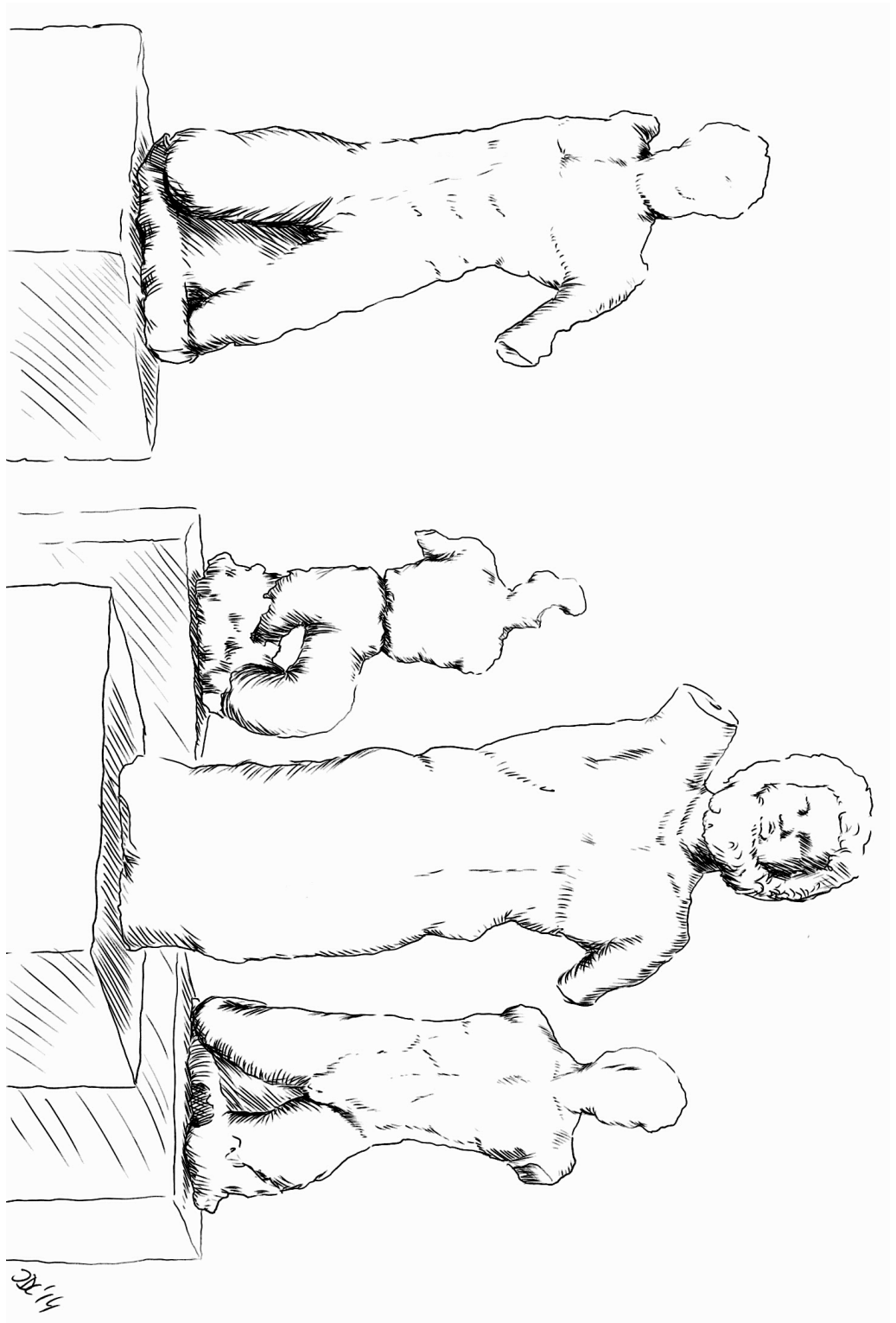


Fig. 3: The statues of the Grotta Azurra, now on exhibition in the Casa Rossa, Anacapri, Capri.
Drawing by Julia Döring and Lyda Schallenberg.

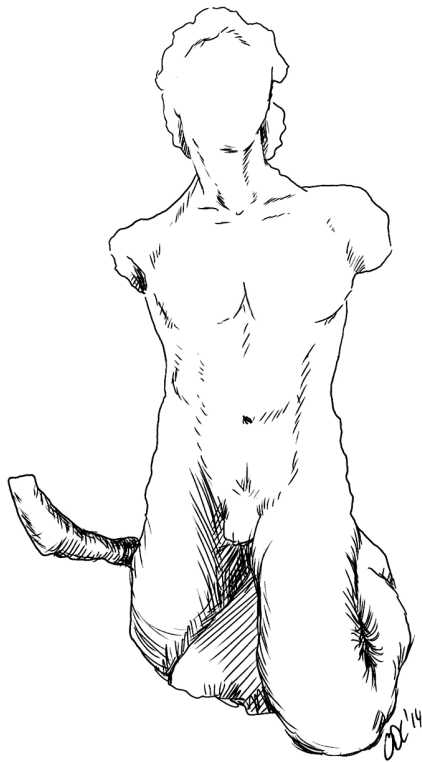


Fig. 4: 'Statue 1' found in 1964.
Drawing by Julia Döring and Lydia Schallenberg.



Fig. 5: 'Statue 2' found in 1964.
Drawing by Julia Döring and Lydia Schallenberg.



Fig. 6: 'Statue 3' found in 1974.
Drawing by Julia Döring and Lydia Schallenberg.

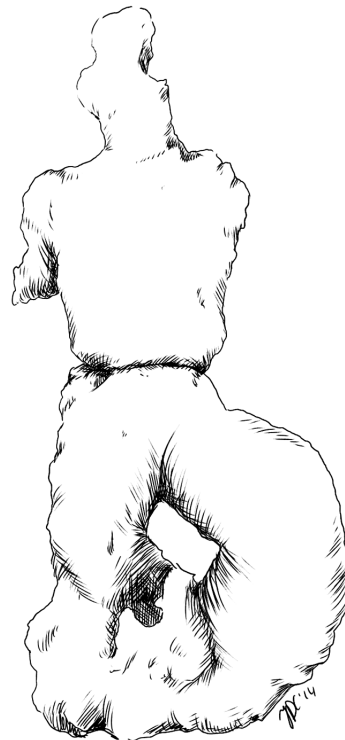


Fig. 7: 'Statue 4' found in 1974.
Drawing by Julia Döring and Lydia Schallenberg.



Fig. 8: Triton at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Inv. I.N. 522.
Photographer: Lydia Schallenberg.

De Franciscis describes the marble itself as being of high quality, from an Italian quarry. It might be the same type of marble used for several other decorative elements within the villas of Capri.²⁸ Due to its relatively good state of preservation this statue was identified as Neptune and in consequence all of the other pieces thus became Tritons.

The final statue was brought to the museum in 2012 (fig. 7). It has been fully restored and reassembled from two individual pieces, but its condition remains less than exemplary. But even in this state it is still possible to see certain similarities with the other statues. The body is strong and depicted in action. The lower extremity bears the aforementioned characteristic composition, only being modelled down to the knees. But if you compare them with other Tritons this kind of design might be the norm. Sascha Kansteiner reports that depictions of Tritons in Roman art show a number of adaptations from Greek art.²⁹

The torso is human, but the lower extremity is comparable to a *hippocampus* with one, or perhaps two fishtails. Occasional animalistic elements also appear, such as legs from horses or crabs.³⁰ There are many great examples of Tritons which display the same position of their legs (or rather, of their fishtails) as the statue.

There is one particularly well-known example of a life-sized Triton, now housed in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (fig. 8. 9), which would have originally adorned the Aqua Marcia, close to the Santa Croce in Rome. It displays the same features as the sculptures from the Grotta Azzurra. He stands on his two fishtails and his left arm is raised up, holding a trumpet. Like the first statue of the Grotta Azzurra, a counter-torsion is visible. Another well-known example was discovered in Ephesos and was part of a great fountain-house of C. Laecanius Bassus, dated to the reign of Titus, around 79/80 AD. Here we find also a Triton standing upon two fishtails. The torsion in the body is clearly visible here, and his arms are not detached from the body.

²⁸“Esse sono in marmo, non direi greco, ma una buona qualità di marmo italico a grana molto fine, dello stesso tipo di quel marmo usato a Capri, nelle ville imperiali, per le colonne, per i capitelli, per gli elementi decorativi che sono a nostra conoscenza, ma queste statue, stando sotto mare per tanti secoli, sono state ricoperte da una incrostazione di grande spessore e di particolare durezza e solidità.” (De Franciscis 1964, 10).

²⁹Kansteiner 2002, 17.

³⁰“Das Hinterteil des Triton gleicht, den Darstellungen der Hippokampen entsprechend, einem oder seit spätantiker Zeit gelegentlich auch zwei Fischschwänzen, während die Wiedergabe des Vorderteils variiert worden ist: der menschliche Rumpf (samt Armen und Kopf) kann Pferde- oder Krebsbeine, gelegentlich auch um ein Pferdebein bereichert sein.“ (Kansteiner 2002, 13).

This motif appears quite normal for Tritons in antiquity.³¹ Thus I urge that it should not be said that the statues of the Grotta Azzurra are ‘only’ sculpted from their knees up. Such a design was in fact a conscious decision by the artist. But is it possible to name the 1970s ‘Neptune’ as Neptune? All photos of this statue have been taken from the front, which does not expose further details of the sculpture. It is only by viewing the statue from the side or rear that we observe an interesting feature. The figure has not been sculpted with legs, but with a fishtail. Moreover, unlike the others he possesses only a single fishtail. We cannot identify the statue as Neptune, because there is no evidence reflecting a fishtailed Neptune in ancient iconography.³² Because of the identification of the statues as an ensemble of Neptune and Tritons it has been called a marine *thiasos*. But is this actually the case in the Grotta Azzurra? In the following discussion I will try to give a short introduction to the development of the marine *thiasos*.

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Sed in maxima dignatione delubro Cn. Domitii in circo Flaminio Neptunus ipse et Thetis atque Achilles, Nereides supra delphinos et cetera aut hippocampus sedentes, item Tritones chorosque Phorci et pistrices ac multae aliae marinae, omnia eiusdem manu, praeclarum opus, etiam si totius vitae fuisset.³³



Fig. 9: Triton at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Inv. I.N. 522. Photographer: Lydia Schallenberg.

With these words Pliny gives us the only ancient reference to one of the first monumental marine *thiasoi*. Skopas was sculptor of this group, which was taken from an unknown location and brought to Rome in the 2nd century BC to form part of the decoration of a temple. While it included many figures, we are not told the medium in which it was executed. Pliny’s admiration suggests large-scale, free-standing or virtually free-standing figures (probably part of a pediment).³⁴ Other artists besides Skopas chose the motif of the marine *thiasos* for their creations. Many of the individual components appear in archaic art, chiefly in vase painting. During the Hellenistic period the *thiasos* seems to have acquired the character it retained throughout the rest of antiquity. The development of the motif during the intervening years is still relatively unknown, but was analysed by Steven Lattimore in the 1970s. He argues that “the marine *thiasos* is borrowed, both in detail and atmosphere, from the Dionysiac *thiasos* [...]”.³⁵ The term ‘marine *thiasos*’ might perhaps be defined in several ways. First and foremost, however, it refers to a marine

³¹ For a general overview of Triton, see LIMC VIII 1 (1981), 68–85; LIMC VIII 2 (1981), Fig. 42–59.

³² “Denn anders als der Meergeris (Halios Geron), Nereus, Glaukos oder Triton wird Poseidon nie mit einem Fisch- oder Schlangengeiß dargestellt.” (Knauf 2012, 117).

³³ Plin. HN XXXVI 26.

³⁴ Lattimore 1976, 13 still gives the best overview of the development of the marine *thiasos* in Greek art.

³⁵ Lattimore 1976, 1.

group of male, female and fantasy figures, resembling the Dionysiac *thiasos* and attending the marine gods. Poseidon, however – like Dionysos – need not always be depicted. Importantly, Lattimore reserves the term for compositions combining Nereids and Tritons. The real development of the marine *thiasos* can be said to begin when Nereid riders were joined by Tritons as their male counterparts.³⁶

The marine *thiasos* by Skopas exerted great influence on later representations of marine themes and marine creatures in Greek and Roman art. Marine motifs were a popular part of the decoration of Roman baths, fountains, private villas, funerary objects and so on in the imperial period, but the theme was also employed earlier by South Italian Greeks (Taranto) and Etruscans. It seems that they first focused on mythological themes which involved Nereids³⁷ and later combined these with other sea creatures and even later with Tritons. An interesting feature is that there is no duplication of a Triton in Greek art before the 4th century BC, nor combinations with Nereids and Tritons.³⁸ A specific myth was the basis of the representation, and depictions without one were not established before the 2nd century AD.

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Conclusions

Compared with other grottos, it could be said that the Grotta Azzurra should be recorded as one of the famous grotto-*triclinia* of the early Roman Empire. The location, the atmosphere, and sculptural decoration are well-known in villas of the Roman elite, and are still to be seen in the remains of Roman villas nowadays. But what kind of conclusions can be drawn from comparison of the marine *thiasoi* with sculptures from the Grotta Azzurra?

On the basis of the style and location of the sculptures it is possible that we could call them an assembly of marine creatures. The best preserved, the so-called Neptune, cannot be identified with that deity because of his fishtail. Consequently it is hard to say that the others, the Tritons, surround the god and create a marine *thiasos*. But, as Lattimore observes, Neptune or Poseidon may not always have been depicted. Unfortunately the whole argumentation built in former studies dealt with the combination of Triton and Neptune as a marine *thiasos*. Whether or not we can identify the ‘Neptune’ as Neptune, there are no doubts about the identification of the others as Tritons or similar sea creatures, such as Nereus, Glaukus or Proteus. Their posture and the lively movements of the figures could be compared with other sculptural Tritons. Nevertheless it is hard to tell if we just have to deal with a group of Tritons or if there are other sea creatures involved. ‘Neptune’ especially, with his fishtail, should probably more profitably be compared more with the figure of Nereus. It seems that until the 2nd century AD a specific myth was important for a marine *thiasos*. But it is very difficult to precisely date elements of the Grotta Azzurra. The development of the marine *thiasos* is connected with the representation of the Nereids and Tritons.

³⁶For the evolution of the marine *thiasos* see Lattimore 1976, 28–49.

³⁷Perhaps inspired by Homer’s *Iliad*, where Thetis and the Nereids conveyed new weapons to Achilles, the rape of Europa or the voyage of Achilles to the island of the Blessed, or the marriage of Poseidon and Amphitrite.

³⁸Lattimore 1976, 28–30.

A marine *thiasos* in the Grotta Azzurra cannot be proven unless other sculptural finds are discovered which represent the female part of the marine *thiasos*, the Nereids. In this way we can say the sculptures of the Grotta Azzurra should simply be seen as a composition of different marine creatures and I would like to depart from the term ‘marine *thiasos*’ in connection with the sculptures of the Grotta Azzurra.

Tab. 1: Overview over the different statues found in the Grotta Azzurra

<i>Label</i>	<i>Figure</i>	<i>Inventory no.</i>	<i>See</i>	<i>Short description</i>
‘Statue 1’	fig. 4	153624 ex 3	De Franciscis 1964	Young male, no beard, curly hair, two fish-tails. Arms are missing.
‘Statue 2’	fig. 5	153625	De Franciscis 1964	Bearded male, left arm lowered, right arm raised, two fishtails.
‘Statue 3’	fig. 6	N/A	Muscettola 1998	Bearded male, curly hair, right arm raised, left arm lowered, one fishtail (best preserved statue).
‘Statue 4’	fig. 7	N/A	N/A	Probably young male without a beard, curly hair, two fishtails. Assembled from two individual pieces.

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