Sailing with the Gods: divine protection of seafaring depicted on red figured pottery of South Italy.

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I intend to deal with the question about benefits and limitations of a research on the iconographic representation of seafaring and on the religious dimension that this representation implicates.

The iconographic and iconological analysis must necessarily start from a data set and must consider on the one hand the general framework of ancient maritime religiosity and on the other the necessity to interpret the records based on conceptions and expressive modalities typical of different cultural contexts.

The analysis will focus on the uncommon iconographic documentation relating to Gods who exercise the role of protectors of seafaring, particularly on red-figure vases from Apulia and Campania, in Southern Italy.

More precisely, we will examine the recurrence of iconographic and epigraphic references to some of these Gods, namely Eros and Zeus, placed on the stern of ships painted in the context of narrative scenes to symbolize the moment of departure or return from a voyage by sea.

The peculiar field of investigation in which we move connects to the starting question in various aspects: such images must necessarily be read through the lens of the transposition from the ritual custom to the iconographic convention; they must also be understood taking into account, especially in the first manifestations, the close cultural interconnections between the motherland and the Greek colonies of the West, but also, in the subsequent representations, of the local reinterpretation of the themes both by the inhabitants of the Greek poleis of Southern Italy and especially by the Italics, who take on religious conceptions and iconographic models, adapting them in turn to express their own contents, linked to new needs and sometimes to specific historical situations; finally they must be decoded taking into account a further conceptual step, inherent in the ultimate destination of the Italian red-figure vases, largely used as elements of the funeral equipment and in any case loaded with a communicative function, evident in the choice itself to paint complex narrative themes on their surface.

As an introduction it will therefore be necessary to pay attention to the detailed chronological and distributive framework of the different ceramographic schools of Southern Italy and to the discussion on a particular point of interest: how it is possible to recognize, through the modest percentage of known proveniences, the function mainly assigned to vases painted with red figured narrative scenes in different contexts.

Then the most common modes of representation of maritime journeys will be introduced, both in the South Italian red-figure vase painting and in the Attic one, since the origins and developments of the former derive substantially from the tradition of the latter.

From this overall picture we will isolate the examples in which the bow or the stern of a ship are arranged in the figured field in a position that suggests that they are docking or sailing away.
Among these scenes, the few in which some iconic or epigraphic symbol of the divinities appear on the stern of the ships will be further explored, first explaining their meaning from the narrative point of view, by examining iconographic details and with the help of literary sources.

Finally, an iconological interpretation will be proposed: the iconographic choices, although connected by the symbolic reference to the danger of the seafaring and to the consequent need for divine protection, and although in most cases connected to each other by the usual funeral destination of the vases themselves, are however diversified among themselves and each time more precisely connected to their own geographical-chronological and therefore cultural context.