

T O M A S S O



Melchior Barthel (1625-1682) (Attributed to)

34. River God Reclining on an Urn

In Greek mythology, river gods held significant cultural and religious importance. They were considered sons of Oceanus, the most ancient Titan who challenged Jupiter for world supremacy. Rivers were worshipped in local Greek cults as fertility gods because they irrigated the land, whereas fountains and springs were represented by nymphs, the female counterparts of river gods.

In classical times, river gods could be depicted in various forms and may appear as bulls or other animals, or as human-headed bulls in vase paintings. However, the predominant Hellenistic representation showed them as powerful bearded old men, either reclining or sitting up while leaning on a symbol of their country. This Hellenistic type became the favoured model during the Renaissance.

Three colossal statues of river gods survived from antiquity in Rome. The magnificent depiction of the Tiber was discovered in Rome in 1512 between the churches of S. Maria sopra Minerva and S. Stefano del Cacco. Pope Julius II immediately acquired it for display in his statuary court of the Belvedere at the Vatican. The Nile was most likely excavated at the same location about a year after the Tiber. By 1523, both the Tiber and Nile were reinstalled as fountains in the Vatican courtyard, remaining there until the 1770s when they were moved to dedicated rooms in the Museo Pio-Clementino.

The third statue, Marforio, was variously identified during the Renaissance as the Tiber's tributary Nera, the Rhine, the Danube, or even a salt-water god-like Neptune. By the 18th century, it was widely considered to represent Oceanus and according to Haskell and Penny, Marforio has 'always been more famous for the antiquarian controversies it stimulated than admired as a work of art.'

The Tiber statue gained immediate fame upon discovery due to its impressive size and beauty, as well as its remarkably intact condition, including the head and cornucopia. The Nile statue generated even more enthusiasm among Renaissance writers, including Giorgio Vasari, who admired it not just as an antiquarian curiosity but as a significant work of art.

The putti (small children) depicted fluttering around the Nile river god contributed to its popularity, though these were only fragmentarily preserved until restored by Gaspare Sibilla under Pope Clement XIV just before his death in 1774. Contrary to popular belief, the putti did not represent the 17 kingdoms of Egypt watered by the Nile. According to Pliny, the sixteen putti climbing over the god represented the sixteen cubits by which the river could rise during the rainy season.

The three antique river gods, especially the Tiber and the Nile, were reproduced full-size on several occasions, either as casts or hand-carved copies. These were commissioned by European royalty: in the 1540s for King François I, in the 1650s for King Philip IV, and in the 1680s for King Louis XIV. These faithful reproductions were either kept at court or displayed in royal gardens such as Marly and later the Tuileries.

Beyond direct copies, interpretations were created by various artists for garden features. At Vaux-le-Vicomte in 1659, Matthieu Lespagnandelle sculpted two colossal river gods, the Tiber and the Anqueil, placed symmetrically on either side of a grotto beneath the stairs. Both leaned on urns, with the Tiber accompanied by a she-wolf as in the antique model. Similarly, at Chantilly in 1682-84, Jean Hardy sculpted two undefined river gods, accompanied by children and fish, for placement under the grand staircase of the terrace.

On rare occasions, a river god was paired with a nymph, as in the bronzes by Jean Thierry for the Cascade Nouvelle of the gardens at Versailles. The Chateau contains the largest number of river god sculptures in its gardens, ranging from copies of antiquities to 1680s interpretations representing French rivers, mostly in the form of monumental bronze groups cast by the Swiss Keller brothers after models by contemporary sculptors.

Unlike most Italian representations of rivers, such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini's famous seated but 'active' personifications on the Piazza Navona in Rome, the reclining French river gods in the classical tradition were particularly appropriate for enlivening the regular geometric lines of formal gardens. This style was popular until the middle of the 18th century in France and at most fashionable European courts, from Germany to the Netherlands (e.g., at Het Loo, in front of the garden façade of the palace) and as far as Saint Petersburg.

Extremely few miniature sculptures of river gods seem to have survived. The boxwood work described here, exists at the intersection between court culture, exemplified by the garden sculptures discussed above, and the private sphere of *Kunstammer* objects. Boxwood and ivory were the premier materials for *Kunstammer* sculpture. The size of this work and its classical iconography point to an erudite context.

The sculptor who attempted to represent classical marble works in boxwood faced a technical challenge: boxwood grows in a straight shape, not in blocks. This work intelligently adapted the classical models, with a deeply reclining figure lying sideways on a water-spouting urn and holding a spade in his left hand. To maintain visual interest, the legs of the river god are crossed, similar to numerous classical examples. Though the cornucopia is absent, its contents flow downward toward the figure's feet, filling and enlivening the space. Stylistically, the carver focused on depicting powerful musculature reminiscent of the mighty Farnese Hercules.

Based on these characteristics, the artist is likely to be Melchior Barthel (1625-1682), who was active in Dresden, a centre of *Kunstammer* sculpture production. Barthel's versatility in carving both white and black marble (the latter particularly difficult due to its glass-like structure), as well as ivory and boxwood, makes him a fitting candidate for this unique boxwood sculpture.

Dr Léon E. Lock, 2025