

River Gods in Distress

Blue & white 'shipwreck' design, formerly thought to be a rough version of Achilles and Thetis, and before that thought to show survivors of the Wreck of the Grosvenor



This scene was at first known as *The Wreck of the Grosvenor* because it seemed to depict the famous incident where the *Grosvenor*, returning from India to London was lost off the coast of South Africa in 1782. Of the 123 survivors who were cast ashore only 18 made it to Cape Town.

The porcelain clearly dates to earlier than this, the design being known in blue and white from about 1745 onwards. A number of sets must have been made over a period, as the details and quality of reproduction varies.

Another theory, which seemed persuasive (to this author among others) was that the relative crudeness of the drawing showed a Chinese misinterpretation of another European composition and that this was a very rough rendering of an earlier design, *Thetis Dipping Achilles in the River Styx*, from a 1719 engraving by Edmé Jeurat after a painting by Nicolas Vleughels. This print is known painted in high quality grisaille on a large charger in the British Museum and on a plate with Cohen & Cohen (2014B).¹

However a new discovery shows that this composition is actually taken from a part of a colour print by Johannes Teyler of *The Fall of Phaethon*, the son of the Sun God Helios.

Phaethon had begged his father to prove his paternity to his friends, so Helios had sworn an oath on the River Styx to grant any wish that the youth wanted. Phaethon chose to ride the famous sun chariot and despite his father's warning that the steeds were too strong for him, the young man took the reins. His lack of control soon led to disasters when he flew too low.

The part of the Teyler print here shows a group of River Gods, who had petitioned Zeus to stop Phaethon's uncontrolled chariot ride which had caused their river to dry up. When Zeus kills Phaethon with a thunderbolt he falls into the River Eridanus where he is drowned.

There is a similarity to the composition of the Jeurat engraving especially as they both feature several River Gods. However the dark haired face in the upper right, which had been thought to be Vulcan is in fact a clump of vegetation that the Chinese artist has mistaken and rendered as a mop-headed face!



The Fall of Phaethon
Print, circa 1688-98, published by Johannes Teyler (1648-c.1709) from his *Opus Typochromaticum*.



Two Chinese export plates painted in underglaze blue with a scene known as the 'shipwreck'.
(Cohen & Cohen)

Top: Chinese plate circa 1740 (Cohen & Cohen)
Below: 1719 print by E Jeurat after N Vleughels (private collection)

¹ Cohen & Cohen 2014B, p85-87, a blue and white small plate and a grisaille Achilles plate.

