

**TAO T. MAKEEF, HOMERIC HIPSTERS: RELIGION AND RECEPTION IN THE MARKETING OF GREEK MALE GROOMING PRODUCTS**, in: F. Carlà-Uhink / M. García Morcillo / C. Walde (eds.), *Advertising Antiquity = thersites* 6 (2017), 351-364.

KEYWORDS

Antiquity, beards, Christianity, cosmetics, gender, identity play, male grooming, masculinity, reception studies, time travel

ABSTRACT (English)

This paper investigates how ancient Greek and Christian imagery is used in the marketing of male grooming products. After illustrating how this is a widespread phenomenon in advertising cosmetics, the author narrows in on a contemporary Greek male grooming brand, HOMMER. Through an analysis of texts and imagery, the author argues that the combination of historical and mythological narratives and sensory immersion may provide consumers the opportunity for identity play and “time travel.” Finally, through an analysis of the iconographic components of an advertisement, the use of history and myth in marketing is shown to reflect national narratives in Greece and the complex elements of the identities of the brand’s consumers.

ABSTRACT (Italiano)

L’articolo analizza la presenza di immagini dalla Grecia classica e dalla tradizione cristiana nel marketing di cosmetici per uomo. In particolare, l’analisi si concentra su un prodotto greco, HOMMER. La combinazione di narrative storiche e archeologiche e l’immersione sensoriale offerte dalla pubblicità di questo prodotto mirano a dare ai consumatori l’opportunità di “giocare” con la loro identità e di “viaggiare nel tempo”. Infine, attraverso un’analisi delle componenti iconografiche, si mostra come l’uso di storia e mito nel marketing rifletta da un lato le specifiche narrative nazionali greche, dall’altro si rivolga agli elementi costituenti l’identità dei consumatori-target del prodotto.



# Homeric Hipsters: Religion and Reception in the Marketing of Greek Male Grooming Products

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## I. The poetics of cosmetics

Greek mythology and the Greek gods have historically been, and are still being, used to market cosmetics, makeup and grooming products.<sup>1</sup> At least two international cosmetics companies are currently named after the goddess Aphrodite<sup>2</sup> and Greek antiquity is used to conjure up marketing imagery in product lines such as the *Greek Gods and Goddesses*<sup>3</sup> series by Hello Waffle Cosmetics or the *14 Myths* line from Myth Cosmetics that entice the buyer with the words “Immerse yourself in a world riddled with myths, legends, and a bit of makeup magic.”<sup>4</sup>

On a less explicit level, several contemporary Greek cosmetics companies make references to (ancient) Greek history. For example, in a text about the plants used in their products the Cretan company BIOSelect relates on its website how “many of the plants and herbs prosper only in the land of Crete, and are known since the ancient times for their exceptional medicinal as well as cosmetic qualities”<sup>5</sup>, whereas the company KORRES writes: “healing, calming, toning, seducing; the power of the plants has been an area of study from early on; the Greek physician Hippocrates, also known as the father of medicine, refers to a vast number of medicinal plants in his writings.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the KORRES product packaging contains small narratives about the principal herbs, such as this one, from the cardboard box of a bottle of eau de toilette:

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1 My thanks go to the following for their help in the preparation of this paper: Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Mikael Rothstein, Anne-Christine Hornborg and the anonymous reviewers who offered many excellent suggestions that have improved this paper immensely.

2 <http://www.aphroditeskincare.com> and <http://www.aphroditecosmetics.com.au/> [09/05/2018].

3 <http://hellowafflecosmetics.com/eyes/collections/greek-gods-and-goddesses/> [09/05/2018].

4 <http://www.mythcosmetics.com/#> [09/05/2018].

5 <https://www.bioselect.gr/about/bioselect/> [09/05/2018].

6 <https://www.korres.com/en/herbs/ingredients> [09/05/2018].

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Warding off evil, expelling negative energies, cleansing sacred spaces, increasing erotic desire; sage, the king of herbs for ancient Greeks and Romans – Savior as per its Latin name, imparts wisdom and knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Here, as in most other cases, the intention of such small texts is not clearly stated. Although the text states that sage, such as used in the production of eau de toilette, “wards off evil”, we the readers might assume that this is not to be taken literally, but rather that its function is to add an element of myth and mystique to the story of the ingredients of the product. This open-ended type of narrative or marketing storytelling plays on the mythological and the fantastic, and in doing so, it adds an aspect of playfulness to being a consumer.

## II. Man and beard

Whereas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cosmetics were predominantly bought by women, recent years have seen the rise of a new and rapidly growing<sup>8</sup> male grooming phenomenon as well as the return of the beard as a marker of social capital.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, an array of male beauty products and beard care products have emerged, some of which, just like their feminine cosmetics counterparts, use Greek antiquity to create a narrative that will sell. One such contemporary company that markets beard care products by using ancient Greek religious imagery is OAK, who describe their German hometown Berlin as “the city with more men with beards than in Greek mythology”<sup>10</sup> and underline both the relationship, but also the contrasts, between male Greek gods and bearded German hipsters:

Then again, hardly anyone in Berlin, as opposed to Mount Olympus, knows how to properly take care of the beard. That is why together with barbers and bearded men, OAK developed care products to help men wear their facial hair with pride.

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7 Info text for KORRES *Blue Sage, Lime, Firwood Eau de Toilette*.

8 *Size of the global male grooming market from 2012 to 2024 (in billion U.S. dollars)* retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/287643/global-male-grooming-market-size/> [09/05/2018].

9 Whipp (2017).

10 <https://www.ofberlin.com/en/brands/oak/> [28/05/2018].

Although OAK mentions Greek antiquity briefly, it does not seem to play a central role in the brand design, which relies more on a visual profile inspired by British and North-American fin de siècle marketing. If we turn to Greece, a contemporary cosmetics company has created a marketing strategy and a brand design for male grooming products, in which the reception of antiquity plays a key role.

“HOMMER, Man and Beard”<sup>11</sup> is a contemporary Greek series of male grooming and beard products which, according to the HOMMER website, is “inspired by ancient Greek history and mythology”<sup>12</sup> References to antiquity are not only used as a narrative framework to tell the story of their products, but also serve as an argument for the long line of experience which makes their products particularly exquisite:

Refinement and glory in man have always occurred through experience. Experience is gained over time; so is experience in beard growing. Since ancient Greek times, how much experience is there? Enough to bottle and send out all over the world.<sup>13</sup>

Not only does the marketing strategy of HOMMER use mythology and references to Homer to tell the story of the company’s products, the products are also referred to as “crafted to offer a divine experience for the symbol of virility and wisdom: beard.”<sup>14</sup> Just like the inclusion of Greek gods by OAK or the apotropaic uses of sage mentioned by KORRES, there is a recurring element of playfulness<sup>15</sup> in the storytelling strategies of HOMMER. In the FAQ<sup>16</sup> section on their website HOMMER poses the (supposedly) frequently asked question “What if I turn into an ancient Greek

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11 The name HOMMER is a combination of “Homer” and “homme”, the French word for “man.”

12 <http://www.hommerworld.com> [09/05/2018].

13 <http://www.hommerworld.com/philosophy/> [09/05/2018].

14 “The Story” <http://www.hommerworld.com/philosophy/> [09/05/2018].

15 The notion of play and playfulness in advertising theory deviates somewhat from the classical ludic theory of Huizinga. In this paper, I am inspired by Caruana / Vella (2004) who describe playfulness as “the way individuals derive enjoyment during their interaction process with advertising.” Although Caruana & Vella focus on the consumer side, I believe that it is also possible to identify similar elements of playfulness in the texts and images produced by marketing departments, although the reasons of the two groups for being playful may differ.

16 Frequently asked questions

God?” to which they answer: “It’s in your nature.”<sup>17</sup> A similarly playful reference to religion is found in the mention that “cleanliness is next to godliness.”<sup>18</sup>

### III. Playing, selling and buying

There are a number of possible interpretations of the playfulness of advertising language and the role of play in consumer culture. In the academic study of advertising play was first emphasized as a social aspect of consuming by Holbrook et. al. (1984) and subsequently developed by Holt (1995) who, building on the work of Simmel, Bateson and Goffman stated that “playing practices capture the autotelic dimension: consumer-object-consumer interaction that has no ulterior end, interaction for interaction's sake.” Holt was primarily interested in the social and interactional aspects of metacommunication in consuming:

Spectators, when they play, adopt a metacommunicational frame that defines the content of their talk and actions as meaningless except for its role in enhancing interaction with others (Bateson1955; Goffman1974). This frame also defines the roles and rules that those who participate in play assume. The consumption object is essential for playing because it provides the materials through which playful interaction is enjoined.<sup>19</sup>

Building on Levitas (2010), recent work on advertising by scholars such as Manca / Manca / Pieper (2012) and Boronat (2016) has turned focus towards the advertiser and the advertising strategies rather than the consumer, developing the idea of utopianism as a psychological strategy with which advertisers construct playful historical, political and geographic fantasies in order to sell consumer goods. However, neither the role of the individual identity construction as consumer play, nor the various mythologising claims that are obviously not meant to be taken literally (but which are still offered as a potential building block in the consumer’s identity play) seem to be of interest to scholars of advertising and consumer

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17 <http://www.hommerworld.com/faq/#topic7> [09/05/2018].

18 <http://www.hommerworld.com/faq/#topic2> [09/05/2018].

19 Holt (1995) 9.

culture. I suggest that a combination of the notion of “identity play”, suggested by Ibarra / Petriglieri (2010) building on the seminal text *Possible Selves* by Markus / Nurius (1986) and the recent archaeological theory of “time travel”<sup>20</sup> might shed new light on how playful advertising and consumer culture uses anachronistic combinations of pasts to cast new amalgamated identities that may be worn and shed again as easily as one sprays one’s body with perfume only to wash it off in the shower hours later. Regarding the notion of “identity play” Ibarra and Petriglieri distinguish between identity work and identity play, suggesting that:

To date, conceptualization of identity’s multiplicity and dynamism has focused on identity work as the process by which individuals adapt, tailor, maintain, and change their identities. This focus, while providing much insight into the process of change, has largely overlooked the multiple, often incoherent and variable nature of the self as well as the process of exploration and discovery necessary for creating new identities.<sup>21</sup>

Ibarra and Petriglieri are primarily interested in the complementarity of work and play in the context of identity formation. However, I argue that their basic definition of identity play seems congruent with the mechanisms at work in the individual-centered consumer culture and the advertising directed towards individuals constructing a bricolage identity, rather than the larger social contexts of the major brands tempting buyers with membership in a community of consumers. As Ibarra and Petriglieri state, identity play is all about reinventing oneself:

Whereas identity work fundamentally seeks the preservation of existing identities or compliance with externally imposed image requirements, we propose that identity play is concerned with inventing and reinventing oneself.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas the notion of a process of reinventing the self (however briefly such an reinvented self-image may linger in the consumer’s life) sheds some

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20 Petersson / Holtorf (2017).

21 Ibarra / Petriglieri (2010) 21.

22 Ibarra / Petriglieri (2010) 14.

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light on the motivation for consuming specific products or being attracted to specific marketing campaigns, I suggest that, in the case of Antiquity in advertisement in general, and in the case of HOMMER in particular, the archaeological concept of “time travel” may be a way of understanding the specific method being employed by advertisers and consumers. Recent developments in archaeological and museological theory have introduced the term “time travel” to refer to the experiential dimension of understanding and engaging with the past:

Time travel can be defined as an embodied experience and social practice in the present that brings to life a past or future reality. What is most characteristic of time travel is therefore the possibility in contemporary society to experience the presence of another time period.<sup>23</sup>

Such perspectives may also shed some light on the mechanisms at work in the playful storytelling of marketing strategies that use antiquity. What products such as the HOMMER line provide could be viewed as a way of being in the present, while also experiencing a loosely defined fantasy of the past, whenever one opens a jar of wax or a bottle of beard oil. Similar to the developments in historical re-enactment as an experientially based means of communicating the past to audiences at museums or historical sites, buying a product not only enables one to be part of a brand based community of consumers, or construct and signal an identity shared with other buyers. It also entails an engagement of the senses, which one might argue provides an element of time travel. Sensory immersion seems to be a shared key element of both the archaeological time travel theory and the marketing strategy of cosmetics companies:

Time travel arguably represents an alternative way to approach the past in current society in general. Whereas the most common approaches to the past have been foregrounding either knowledge and insight or critique and politics, now credible experience and **sensual immersion** feature large.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Petersson / Holtorf (2017) 1.

24 Petersson / Holtorf (2017) 4 (emphasis added).

The HOMMER product line certainly employs a multisensory strategy of storytelling with Homeric references both in its product names, its olfactory profile and its uses of materials. All products are referred to as being infused with the “original HOMMER scent, a sophisticated mix of woody, bitter chocolate and vetiver tones, distilled essences and travel memories.”<sup>25</sup> Individual products have names referring to travelling and homecoming that serve to conjure forth associations to *the Odyssey*, such as the anti-aging after shave balms entitled *Long Journey* and *Home Island*. Even in the choice of materials, certain products, such as castor oil, seem to refer to ancient Greek beard care practices, whereas the choice of manufacturing a beard comb from boar bristle might make the Homer-savvy consumer think of the boar’s tusk helmet given to Odysseus by Meriones (*Il.* 10,260) or the recurring porcine terminology which Levaniouk (2011) has referred to as clinging to Odysseus. Although the sensory immersion present when applying a scented oil may not seem as all-encompassing as being present in a multisensory environment designed to provide “time travel”, I would argue that the particular sense targeted by scents is of paramount importance in adding a dimension of “time travel” to using a cosmetic product. The sensory immersion of olfaction has repeatedly been shown in clinical studies to be tied to the activation of memories.<sup>26</sup> Hence, every time a customer smells a signature scent, this will not only activate personal memories of previous times the scent was applied, but is likely to activate memories of the other sensory aspects of the brand, such as textual and iconographic narratives about both materials and mythology.

#### IV. The politics of beard wipes

Beyond the written, material and multisensory strategies of storytelling, the HOMMER brand also has a distinct visual profile which employs references to both ancient mythological and contemporary social contexts and thus seems to tie modern hipsters to ancient Greek gods and heroes, and even to the history of Christianity. A large part of the visual profile of HOMMER is photographs of nude men with beards and tattoos, but apart from these

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25 <http://www.hommerworld.com/philosophy/> [09/05/2018].

26 Herz et al. (2004) and Arshamian et al. (2013). For a list of studies on olfaction and memory see: <https://www.macalester.edu/projects/UBNRP/Smell/references.html> [10/05/2018].

photographic images, the HOMMER brand also uses a graphic iconography in advertisement and on product packaging – a series of black and white, single line drawings with a recurring feature; a hybrid between a man and a sea-creature (see image).

This iconographic motif is highly complex and draws on a number of references which, I argue, not only serve to refer to the type of identity narrative that HOMMER offers its clientele, but also to a much more deeply embedded national narrative in modern Greek society; the notion that there is a continuity from Ancient Greece to Modern Greece,<sup>27</sup> and that (Byzantine) Christianity was instrumental in this continuity.<sup>28</sup> The central element of the picture is a hybrid creature with the (muscular)<sup>29</sup> upper body of a man and the lower body of a fish or sea monster. This hybrid creature holds a trident in its left hand - a reference to Poseidon and thus also to the Odyssey, the central, recurring element of the texts and imagery used to sell the HOMMER brand. However, the lower body of the creature seems to be a reference to Proteus, Triton or Nereus. Irrespective of which of these have inspired the HOMMER hybrid creature, both the choice of a hybrid fish-man and a trident are clear references to Ancient Greek mythology. Stylistically the hybrid creature seems to have elements of Archaic features (in particular the almond shaped eyes) as well as some features reminiscent of the depiction of humans in Minoan and Thera murals, such as the body posture with the face in profile. In its right hand, the hybrid creature holds a book, in a strikingly inconvenient angle for itself to read it, but conveniently turned so that we the spectators may see its cover. The book carries the two Greek letters Α and Ω. This is a reference to the *Book of Revelation* (1:8, 21:6, and 22:13), where Jesus refers to himself as “the Alpha and the Omega.”

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27 See, among many others, Hamilakis (2007).

28 This theory of continuity is commonly known as the Hellenic-Christian Synthesis and was first proposed by Spyridon Zambelios and developed further by Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as a reaction to the theories of the German J. P. Fallmerayer who had criticized the notion of a historical or ethnic continuity between the populations of Ancient and Modern Greece, Grigoriadis (2013) 25-31.

29 The fact that the hybrid creature is muscular reflects another implied connection between the gods and heroes of Antiquity and the modern hipster consumers of the HOMMER product line. The Hybrid creature has wide shoulders and over-developed abs, mirroring both the bodily representations of Classical sculptures and the male models posing in the photographic material of HOMMER.

The choice of the *Book of Revelation* is somewhat surprising, considering that other texts in the *New Testament* might be more central to (Greek) Christianity, but one might suspect that the choice was based solely on the letters Α and Ω, which function as a short but clear reference to Christianity, short enough to fit within the book cover in the image.<sup>30</sup>

Curiously, the letters Α and Ω are not placed side by side, as it has been the standard practice in the history of Christian iconography, where they would often be placed on either side of Christ's head instead of a Christogram. In the HOMMER iconography, the letters are placed one above the other. However, I believe the best explanation for this is also the simplest one. Placing the letters next to one another would render them too small to read properly. This deviation from the established practice tells us a number of things; That it has been important to the design department and the graphic artist to include a reference to Christianity, that it was important enough to reference a text which, apart from containing a short hand version of the name of Jesus, is perhaps not entirely central to the kind of Christianity intended for reference in the marketing strategy of HOMMER products and finally, that the reference to Christianity was not so important that it was deemed necessary to adhere strictly to the historical iconographic standards of the use of the Α and Ω symbolism. The fact that the encoded name of Jesus does not seem to be sacralized, since it has been reordered despite the rules of the Christian iconographic tradition would imply that the reason why Christianity is a part of the imagery of the brand is not strictly confessional but rather socio-political, historical and identity-oriented. HOMMER is not trying to sell Christian beard products, but rather beard products which will give the buyer access to play with his identity by time travelling through an anachronistic multisensory Greek history – a history which is dominated by a national narrative that stands on two legs: Antiquity and Christianity (Herzfeld 1989).

The picture also contains references to Anglo-Saxon sailor iconography, and implicitly to the target group of the HOMMER beard products: Neo-

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30 The fact that the hybrid sea-creature seems to be rising from the sea (or floating on the surface) could also be interpreted as a reference to the *Book of Revelation* (13:4) where the first beast is described as “rising from the sea.” However, in all other respects, the HOMMER hybrid creature does not share the same features as the beast described in the *Book of Revelation*.

hipsters<sup>31</sup>. The hybrid creature has an anchor tattooed of its left arm and is flanked by two swallows. In maritime culture sailors would have a barn swallow tattooed on their body when embarking on a journey, and a second one tattooed upon returning home – another reference to Odysseus and the motif of homecoming. The swallows and the anchor tattoo are both references to the traditional British sailor tattoos which have come back in style in recent years, particularly in the Neo-hipster scene where the full beard has also had a recent renaissance. The hybrid creature's coiffure, a so-called disconnected undercut with shaved sides and medium long locks on top, tamed by copious amounts of wax, is also reminiscent of the Neo-hipster, and perhaps even more, of the specifically Greek version of the Neo-hipster.

## V. Homercoming

When Antiquity is used in advertising, it is often presented in a playful and at times even humorous way. Similarly, mythology and religion are often presented playfully. This enables the use of utopian language and the freedom for the advertiser to conjure up fantasies that, although they are not presented as entirely true, also leave an avenue open for the consumer to use and mold them in individual ways, for individual and fleeting purposes. Consumers buy not only a scent, a lotion or an oil for their beards, but a potpourri of images and associations that they may use freely to time travel. A scent paired with a snippet of a story and an image grants access to a thousand worlds in the buyer's imagination – worlds which may be far removed from what the advertising agent imagined but fueled by the raw material of product and advertisement. One such image, a small part of the fuel for time travel offered by HOMMER is the image of the hybrid sea-creature wielding a trident, reading the *Book of Revelation*. This image of an Ancient Greek mythological being reading a Christian text should be interpreted as an indirect reference to the Hellenic-Christian Synthesis, arguing continuity from Ancient Greece through the Byzantine period and Christianity, to modern Greece. However, it is also much more (or much less) than that. It is possible that the notion of the Hellenic-Christian Synthesis as a historical product of nineteenth century disputes between

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31 For a discussion of the Hipster/Neo-hipster phenomena and terminology see: Greif / Ross / Tortorici (2010).

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German and Greek intellectuals was never in the mind of the graphic designer who designed the HOMMER hybrid, but that this version of the Greek national narrative is so strongly embedded in the minds of many Greeks, that it was taken for granted and slipped into a beard wipe marketing campaign, just like it has slipped into so many other texts and images in Modern Greece. Irrespective of the motives of the artist, the hybrid creature is at the same time a mythological being from Ancient Greece, a sailor like Odysseus, a Christian (or at least a reader of Christian texts) and a contemporary Greek Neo-hipster. In many ways this sums up the many parts which make up the bricolage of identity of many bearded young Greeks, and in this light, the hybrid creature represents a homecoming of Homeric dimensions. The consumer of a simple product such as a beard wipe or an aftershave finds represented in the combination of scent, story and image, all the seemingly conflicting pieces of the hybrid that is Modern Greek, urban, male identity. It is a homecoming to a Greece both ancient, modern, pagan, Christian, bearded, hip and scented.

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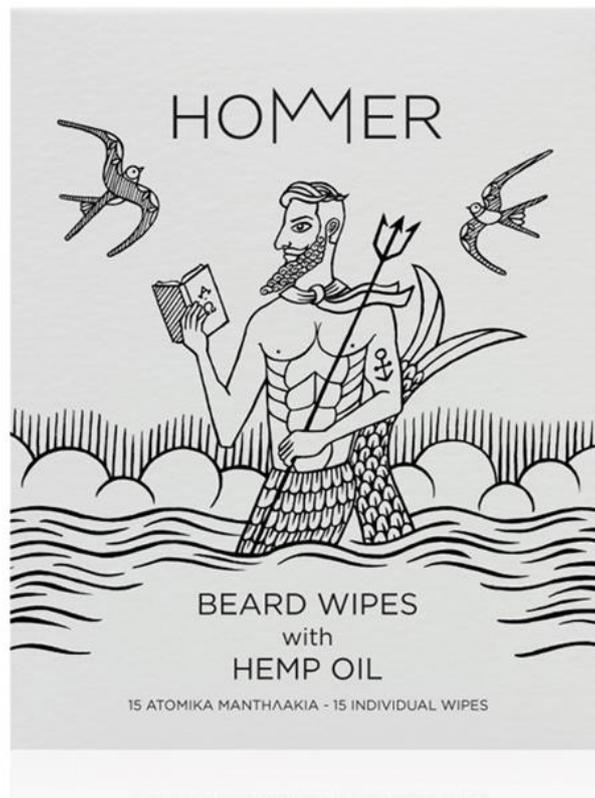
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## Illustrations



**Fig. 1:** Image reprinted with permission from CALYNDIA P.C.