

The Sea in the Greek Imagination

By Marie-Claire Beaulieu

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In *The Sea in the Greek Imagination*, Marie-Claire Beaulieu unifies the multifarious representations of the sea and sea crossings in Greek myth and imagery by positing the sea as a cosmological boundary between the mortal world, the underworld, and the realms of the immortal. Through six in-depth case studies, she shows how, more than a simple physical boundary, the sea represented the buffer zone between the imaginary and the real, the transitional space between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the gods. From dolphin riders to Dionysus, maidens to mermen, Beaulieu investigates the role of the sea in Greek myth in a broad-ranging and innovative study.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Marie-Claire Beaulieu's way of analyzing the Greek vision of the sea as a cosmological boundary opens an unexpected and marvelous perspective on the civilization that shaped Western culture. It is a wonderful method to get to the core of Ancient Greek culture: a fascinating dive into a magical sea of myths."—Emilio Suárez de la Torre, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

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Introduction

The sea is everywhere in the Greek landscape. From rugged mountaintops to low-lying plains, the Mediterranean is rarely out of sight. For islanders and coastal villagers the sea is more than a geographical reality, it is a way of life. This was even truer for the Greeks of Antiquity, who were excellent seafarers and sustained fisheries from the earliest times onward. In fact, the Greeks relied on the sea not only for sustenance and transportation, but also for news, warfare, commercial and political exchange, as well as scientific development. The sea also held a large place in the religious life of the Greeks. Seawater was used for various kinds of purification, many rituals were held on the seashore, and some festivals required throwing offerings to the gods into the sea. Seafaring was also the occasion for numerous rituals. In this way, the sea pervaded all aspects of ancient life.

Looking at the Mediterranean, bright blue in the Greek sunlight, one might expect to find the sea associated with positive concepts in Greek literature, especially nourishment, beauty, and divinity. Homer calls the sea "the bright sea, the divine sea" (e.g., *Il*. 1.141). Myths tell of beautiful Nereids living in the water and of lucky finds on the seashore. In part for these reasons, psychoanalysts have viewed the sea as a representation of the mother figure. For instance, in the *Iliad*, Achilles comes to the seashore to lament his trials and is comforted by his divine mother, Thetis, who comes out of the sea to help her son. In this episode, the sea provides a backdrop for maternal reassurance. Thetis, as a Nereid, can also be thought to represent the maternal aspects of the sea since she is a *kourotrophic* divinity, a goddess who helps rear the young. In the same line of thought, the sea has been put in parallel with the earth as a nurturing mother, particularly in view of the sea's role in the Greek cosmogony. In the *Theogony* 131, the sea (Pontus) is one of the children born out of Gaia's parthenogenesis. Thus, the sea is one of the primeval elements that help conceive and shape the world. Similarly, the Titan Oceanus, the river that encircles the world beyond the sea, is called the father of all things in the *Iliad*. Oceanus and his wife Tethys are remarkably fertile, giving rise to three thousand Oceanids, three thousand Naiads, and their brothers the three thousand rivers.

Yet for all its fertility and the nourishment it provides, the sea is not exclusively female in Greek mythology. The sea is personified as the Titans Pontus and Oceanus, who are male. Likewise, the Greek language includes many words for the sea, namely *pelagos* "the high sea," *hals/halmē* "the salt water," *thalassa* "the sea," and *pontos* "the sea." Of these words, *pelagos* and *pontos* are masculine while *hals*, *halmē*, and *thalassa* are feminine. Finally, the mythical creatures that inhabit the sea, such as Nereids, Oceanids, and Tritons, are either male or female. It is therefore difficult to understand the sea as a

mother figure in a Greek context, since it is not exclusively female.

Moreover, the sea's fertility is counterbalanced by a reputation for barrenness. Homer calls the sea "fruitless, unharvested." This curious epithet contrasts the sterility of salt water with the fertility of the fields on the earth and the fresh water that irrigates them. Even the numerous fish that inhabit the sea (cf. the Homeric epithet "the fish-filled sea") evoke death rather than sustenance, as sailors worry that their bodies will be mangled by fish in case of shipwreck.

Finally, the common view of the entrance to Hades as a chasm in the earth competes with a representation of Hades as located beyond the sea, on the shores of the Ocean. Odysseus, for instance, must sail westward all the way to the northwestern horizon to consult the seer Tiresias in Hades. Other entrances to Hades, while they are usually caves or crevices in the earth, are located by the sea. Examples include Cape Taenarum on the Peloponnesus and Heracleia on the Black Sea, two caverns from which Heracles was said to have dragged Cerberus out of Hades. Thus the sea has an ambivalent character in Greek culture. It is a source of food and a path of communication, but also a disquieting empty and barren space that evokes death and can even lead to Hades.

The two visions of Hades as located beyond the sea or under the earth are not antithetical. In Greek cosmology, the earth is surrounded by the encircling river Ocean, which can be accessed by sailing out of the Mediterranean through the Pillars of Heracles (the Strait of Gibraltar), or out of the Black Sea in the east. On the Ocean, the water meets the vault of the sky and the corresponding chasm of the Underworld, forming a sphere whose diameter is occupied by the Ocean. Islands pepper the surface of the Ocean, but no continent is imagined to exist beyond the encircling river, at least not in the Archaic or Classical period. Thus, when death is represented as a sea voyage to the Ocean, it can lead either to the Underworld or to the Islands of the Blessed. In the case of Heracles, who acquires immortality as a result of his exploits on the Ocean, he travels upward to Olympus. As this book demonstrates, the sea, because it is in between the earth, the Underworld, and Olympus, mediates between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the gods.

Exploration Versus Imagination

But how did these imaginary models interact with Greek exploration in the Atlantic? Did empirical knowledge subsume mythical constructs about the sea? Pindar and Euripides declare that sailing past the Pillars of Heracles is forbidden, since it is an encroachment upon divine territory. Yet, according to Herodotus 1.163, Phocaean sailors crossed the Pillars of Heracles as early as the seventh century. They landed in Tartessus on the Atlantic coast of Spain. There, the Phocaeans initiated a profitable trading relationship with the locals, which brought goods from Brittany and Cornwall, among other distant lands. About the same time, around 630 BC, a certain Colaeus of Samos also landed in Tartessus, albeit unintentionally. Colaeus was sailing to Egypt from his home in Samos, but he was driven off course to the small island of Platea on the coast of Libya. After landing there, Colaeus put to sea again, still trying to reach Egypt, but he was blown by a consistent easterly wind all the way through the Pillars of Heracles and finally arrived in Tartessus. Herodotus 4.152 describes his journey in the following way:

> They left the island trying to reach Egypt, and they sailed off course, blown away by an easterly wind; and the wind did not stop until they passed through the Pillars of Heracles and came to Tartessus under divine guidance.

Herodotus's claim that Colaeus benefited from divine guidance is revealing. While the journey itself exhibits nothing supernatural, Herodotus indicates that surviving such an adventure and putting in to safe harbor is extraordinary. Indeed, a strong contrary current runs through the Strait of Gibraltar and makes navigation

hazardous, which may have contributed to shaping the beliefs concerning the outer Ocean. Furthermore, Herodotus's comment about divine guidance may reflect the sacred and forbidden character of the Ocean in earlier Greek literature. Indeed, Oceanic journeys always require divine guidance, as in the cases of Odysseus and Perseus, who receive the help of Circe and Athena, respectively. In general, involuntary sea journeys in which the protagonist is taken away to a distant location are often seen as divinely guided, as in the story of the foundation of Delphi by the Cretan sailors or the shipwrecked hero Icadius, or again Arion's salvation from the sea by a dolphin. Thus, while Herodotus strongly denies the existence of the encircling Ocean against earlier geographers such as Hecataeus of Miletus, claiming that it cannot be proven, he seems to conserve some of the awe that was associated with journeys on the mythical river.

According to Pliny the Elder 7.197, another Phocaean named Midacritus traveled on the Ocean to the Cassiterides, or Tin Islands, in the sixth century. These islands are located on the southwestern coast of Great Britain. Although some authors such as Diodorus 5.38 place the islands off the coast of Spain and Strabo in the Ocean, roughly at the latitude of Britain, there is a relative consensus among scholars that the Cassiterides must refer to islands off the coast of Britain, such as the Scillies, or to the coast itself, since newly discovered coasts are often mistaken for islands. This journey not only opened a new sea route to Northern Europe, but it also gave the Phocaeans direct access to tin, previously available only through trade with Tartessus. Unfortunately for the Phocaeans, knowledge of this northern trade route was lost soon after Midacritus's journey, because in the fifth century the Carthaginians gained such power as to completely exclude the Greeks from the Atlantic Ocean. The Carthaginians held strong positions in Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily, as well as on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, which allowed them complete control of the Strait of Gibraltar.

The Carthaginians pursued their own exploration beyond the Pillars of Heracles. Around 500 BC, in the heyday of the Carthaginian Empire, the brothers Hanno and Himilco sailed into the Atlantic. On the one hand, Himilco sailed to the northwest, perhaps as far as Britain. The purpose of his voyage is unknown, but he was probably looking for tin deposits. On the other hand, Hanno sailed to the south along the West African coast. Hanno's own account of his journey is preserved through a Greek adaptation known as the *Periplus*. According to this text, the purpose of Hanno's voyage was to found Carthaginian colonies in West Africa. Such colonies, besides extending Carthaginian land holdings and resources, would have extended Carthaginian trade routes in the region. Scholars are still debating exactly what point of the African Coast Hanno reached. Most agree that he went as far as modern-day Ghana, or perhaps the Niger delta. Some even believe that he reached modern Cameroon. In any case, Hanno's voyage and his account were familiar to geographers all around the Mediterranean, particularly in Greece, where it was widely read.

During this period, the Carthaginians discovered an island in the western Ocean, many days' sail from the Pillars of Heracles. According to the author of the *Mirabilium Auscultationes*, the island featured many species of trees, navigable rivers, and "a surprising variety of other crops." Due to this bountiful nature, Diodorus adds that the inhabitants of the island spend their days banqueting, a happy existence that mimics that of the gods. As can be expected, the island attracted settlers. According to the author of the *Mirabilium Auscultationes*, when numerous Carthaginians emigrated to the island, the Carthaginian leaders issued a prohibition against sailing there, and then proceeded to kill everyone who already lived on the island out of the fear that a colony might grow which could pose a threat to Carthage. By contrast, Diodorus suggests that the Carthaginian leaders prevented emigration to the island so that the Carthaginian people could take refuge there in case of an invasion of the mother city. Whatever the case may be, we note that the island was forbidden to ordinary people and that its description in both accounts closely resembles the Hesiodic Islands of the Blessed. This suggests that the Greek concept of paradisiacal islands beyond the Pillars of Heracles spurred the rise of the traditions concerning the island of the Carthaginians. Indeed, the account is firmly rooted within the popular tradition of "wonder" literature, alongside such other legendary lands as Atlantis, Ultima Thule, and the islands of the western Ocean, which are also forbidden to living mortals or lost in the

depths of the sea. The Greeks imagined lands in the western Ocean that transcended the ills of mortal existence, yet precisely for this reason had to remain inaccessible.

The end of the fourth century BC was without contest the most fertile period for Greek exploration because of Alexander's amazing journey to the East. The late fourth century also knew of another explorer, much less famous than Alexander, Pytheas of Massalia. Pytheas's exact itinerary has long been a contentious issue, but it is thought that he traveled from Massalia at least to the British Isles, and perhaps as far as Iceland. Pytheas published an account of his journey titled *On the Ocean*, which is unfortunately lost. The book was widely read in the Greek world. However, while Pytheas's work was read, it was not necessarily believed. Many accused Pytheas of falsehood and of compiling a series of tall tales in his book. Strabo 2.4.1, quoting Polybius, writes,

> Pytheas who has led many people into error by saying that he traversed the whole of Britain on foot, giving the island a circumference of forty thousand stades, and telling us also about Thule, those regions in which there was no longer any proper land nor sea nor air, but a sort of mixture of all three of the consistency of a jelly-fish in which one can neither walk nor sail, holding everything together, so to speak. He says he himself saw this jellyfish-like substance but the rest he derives from hearsay. . . . But Pytheas says that he personally visited the whole northern coast of Europe as far as the ends of the world, a thing we would not even believe of Hermes himself if he told us so. (trans. Paton)

Polybius is particularly indignant at Pytheas's claim that he visited the entire cosmos ("up to the boundaries of the world"), something that the god Hermes himself could not boast of. The introduction of Hermes in the passage is revealing. As the messenger god, Hermes is the patron of travelers (and liars and thieves!). Yet, these functions of Hermes overlap with his role as the messenger between different zones of the cosmos, namely between Olympus, the earth, and the Underworld. Hermes frequently carries messages from the gods to men. He also appears in funerary scenes as a psychopomp accompanying the souls of the deceased to Hades. Finally, Hermes also appears on two vases showing Heracles obtaining the fruit of immortality from the garden of the Hesperides. Thus, Hermes controls travel not only through space, but also through different states of existence. In Polybius's view, Pytheas's claims seem to have amounted to the same.

Pytheas may in fact have had such ideas in mind. His description of the northern seas as a mixture of earth, air, and water recalls archaic descriptions of the meeting point of the three elements in the Ocean. Pindar *Pythian* 10.27-29 uses a remarkably similar formulation when he describes Perseus's journey across the Ocean. In Pindar's account, Perseus visits the fabulous land of the Hyperboreans in the northernmost reaches of the sea:

> The brazen sky is forever impassable; whatever joys the race of mortals can attain, he reaches the end of that sailing course; for neither by ship nor foot could you find the extraordinary road that leads to the meeting place of the Hyperboreans.

Pindar describes Perseus's journey in terms of crossing the sky and insists on the ambiguous materiality of the locale, implying that it is neither solid nor liquid. Most importantly, according to Pindar, the Ocean is impassable by mortal means, an idea that matches the forbidden nature of the Ocean in some of Pindar's other poems. Similarly, while the gelatinous substance Pytheas describes is fully explainable as an ice floe, the fact that he describes it as impassable recalls mythical conceptions of the Ocean such as Pindar's. While Pytheas most likely witnessed an actual natural phenomenon, he interpreted it in mythical terms.

In the same manner, Pytheas blends empirical observations with mythical thought in two other surviving fragments of his book, fragments 8 and 9 in Roseman's edition. In these fragments, Pytheas claims to have seen the "bed-chamber of the Sun" in the confines of the Ocean. As is well known from ancient myths, the god Helios and other celestial bodies were thought to reside in the western Ocean and to bathe in its waters every day during their revolutions around the world. Yet, Pytheas is not simply retelling old stories: he carefully notes the discrepancies between sunlight hours in the northern Ocean and in Greece. Pytheas thus blends empirical geography with the geographies of the mind, the cultural constructs that shape men's perceptions of the world and of their own place in it.

In this perspective, we must question the motivations of ancient explorers. What relationship did they see between their travels and the myths they heard told by poets? Barry Cunliffe writes,

> The myths upon which the Greeks were brought up, embedded in the poems of Hesiod and Homer and widely available in a rich oral tradition, helped the mind to come to terms with the extent and complexity of existence—they provided comfort and reassurance up to a point. But to the growing class of "new men"—city dwellers freed from the economic necessity of producing their own food and nurtured by an increasing flow of startling information about the world—these ancient folk tales were no longer intellectually satisfying.

Cunliffe adopts an evolutionary model to explain ancient science, suggesting that the Greeks progressed from mythical thought to empirical knowledge. Yet, no preserved ancient testimony identifies such a motivation for undertaking geographical exploration or any scientific activity. When they are stated, the motivations of ancient explorers are mainly commercial. They sailed in search of tin and other natural resources and sought to take control of trade routes for their cities. In their accounts, as discussed above, myths and empirical observations are in a constant and dynamic dialogue with one another. Even Herodotus, the so-called Father of Empiricism, blends factual knowledge and firsthand observations with mythical thought, as in his account of the Hyperboreans' relationship with Delos. For the ancients, the experience of the world overlapped with the imaginary and religious constructs attached to it. As is commonly recognized, no aspect of ancient life was devoid of religious significance, and sailing on the sea or on the outer Ocean is certainly no exception.

Comparative Perspectives

The Greek view of the sea as a point of contact between the imaginary world and everyday reality is paralleled in other cultures that preceded and followed. Ancient Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Near Eastern myths present remarkable points of comparison with the Greek materials, perhaps the most important of which is the cosmological organization depicted in these myths. As in the Greek conception of the world, Mesopotamian and Near Eastern myths divide the world either in three parts, namely earth, heaven, and underground water, or in four parts, namely earth, heaven, sea, and Underworld. Water, especially underground water, plays an important role in this worldview. On an eighth- or seventh-century Babylonian map preserved on a clay tablet, the world is encircled by a salty river, the *marratum*. Despite being salty, the marratum recalls the Greek Ocean, especially because it divides the different regions of the world according to light levels or sailing distance, which is reminiscent of the different regions visited by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Moreover, in Mesopotamian cosmology, Apsu, the underground river, is the point of origin of all the rivers of the earth. This role of Apsu can be compared to the role of Oceanus in the *Theogony* 337-62, since Oceanus is also the father of all rivers. While Apsu is located underground and Oceanus encircles the earth, we note that in the *Theogony*, Styx, the river of the Underworld, is the most important daughter of Oceanus, thereby showing the strong ties between the Ocean and the Underworld. In fact, according to West, the epithet *apsoroos* "back-flowing" echoes the name of Apsu, the Underworld water, and may therefore

show a close similarity between Greek and Mesopotamian cosmology on this point. Furthermore, in the Babylonian theogony *En?ma Eliš*, Apsu and his consort Tiamat are said to be the parents of all the gods, a role that parallels the Homeric assertion that Oceanus is the father of the gods and Tethys a cosmic mother (*Il.* 14.246; 14.201=14.302). In this way, water connects the different parts of the world, whether real or imaginary, in both Greek and Near Eastern traditions.

Another point of comparison between Greek cosmology and its Eastern counterparts is the description of the residence of the dead as located under the earth. Upon death, one must descend to the Underworld. Yet, to get there, one must cross a river, as does Odysseus in the *Nekyuia* by crossing the Ocean, or as others do by crossing the Acheron in a descent to Hades. Similarly, Gilgamesh must cross the waters of death to find the residence of Ut-napishtim and the plant of immortality. This "river of death" finds parallels in Babylonian literature as the "Hubur" and in the Old Testament as the "Watercourse" (šela?). Furthermore, in both Greek and Semitic tradition, dying is associated with the West, either the western Ocean or crossing a river in a westerly direction. In fact, as Martin L. West suggests, the Greek word *Acher?n* "the river Acheron" is almost identical in sound with the Hebrew word *'ahò?rôn*, which can mean "western." Thus, in both Greek and Near Eastern mythologies, a westerly body of water is the point of transition between life and death, and thus from the ordinary world to the imaginary lands that lie beyond the limitations of mortality.

Water is also a point of transition between life and death in the myth of the flood, which is shared across Near Eastern and Greek cultures. In Greco-Roman tradition, Zeus decides to exterminate the human race with a flood because of its wickedness at the end of the Bronze Age. Alternatively, Zeus concludes this because of Lycaon's practice of human sacrifice. According to Plato, this flood caused the destruction of Atlantis and the paradisiacal lifestyle it supported. Similarly, Enlil, the king of the gods in the Akkadian epic *Atrahasis* and in the epic of Gilgamesh, chooses to wipe humanity out. In these accounts, human beings have become numerous and noisy and disturb Enlil's rest. Finally, in the Old Testament, Yahweh decides to clear the earth of humanity because of its violence and wickedness. In all cases, one righteous man survives the flood, namely Deucalion, Ut-napishtim, and Noah, respectively. These men and their wives then start humanity afresh through their descendants, as in the case of Noah and his wife, through their fellow travelers, as in the case of Ut-napishtim and his wife, or through casting stones upon the earth, as in the case of Deucalion and Pyrrha. All these narratives are so closely related that few scholars doubt the derivation of the Greek version from a Semitic source. In all cases, we observe that water plays an ambiguous role in these stories. It is an agent of destruction and renewal, and therefore exhibits the same paradoxical qualities we noted earlier in Greek epic. In the flood stories, water is also an instrument of divine vengeance and serves to punish men for their wickedness. In this way, it is a medium of communication between humans and gods.

In the Roman period, the sea continues to represent an ambiguous force that brings both chaos and renewal. As Evans notes, Pliny the Elder describes the encircling river Ocean as a terrifying expanse of water that violently invades the *mare interiora* (i.e., the Mediterranean) and constantly reshapes the coastline by eroding entire regions. Yet, the Ocean, especially understood as the Atlantic, is also a vehicle to extend Roman power to distant regions. According to Florus 2.13, Caesar paraded a representation of the Ocean as a defeated captive in his Gallic triumph in order to show that he conquered farther-off lands than any other Roman general. In the same line of thought, Vergil thinks of the Ocean as a new world where Augustus's power can be extended. In contrast to the ambition attached to the Ocean in these texts, Cicero, caught in the midst of the Civil War a generation earlier, imagines the Ocean as a place of retreat from tyranny where philosophers are free to devote themselves to their studies. Cicero pictures this paradise as located on the Islands of the Blessed, similar to the islands of the Ocean later imagined by Plutarch and Avienus, where Cronus reigns over a Golden Age. In political terms, the Romans thought of the sea, and especially the outer Ocean, as a geographical pathway to new lands. However, under the pressure of severe crisis, they also considered the outer sea as a point of contact with another reality and another time, so far away as to escape the miseries of their world.

The Christian Middle Ages inherited these notions in a blend of traditions from Antiquity and Celtic lore. This fusion of cultures and beliefs is nowhere more evident than in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. The *Navigatio* belongs to the broader Irish genre of *Imrama*, or tales of fantastic navigation inherited in part from Antiquity and in part from Celtic folklore. Saint Brendan of Clonfert was a fifth-century Irish abbot whose travels in the North Atlantic attained legendary status in the Middle Ages. By the ninth century, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* circulated widely across Europe and was translated in multiple languages. In the narrative, Brendan and his monks leave Ireland in search of a paradisiacal island called the Promised Land of the Saints. In the course of their journey, they visit a variety of islands and locales, many of which recall biblical episodes. For instance, the monks visit an island where repenting fallen angels spend time away from Purgatory and a rock where the traitor Judas is released from the torments of Hell on Sundays. Other locations recall Odyssean episodes, such as the island of Hell, from which uncouth smiths throw molten metal at the monks. The lumps of metal cause great waves in the sea that threaten to capsize the monks' ship, much in the way the boulder thrown by Polyphemus almost capsizes Odysseus's ship. Finally, Brendan's Island of Paradise recalls the ancient legends of the western Ocean. The island has a mild climate, food grows of its own accord, and the sun never sets, exactly as Pindar, Pliny, and Mela, among many others, describe the Islands of the Blessed.

This concept of paradise is further blended with Celtic legends in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (908-40). Geoffrey relates that at the Battle of Camlann, King Arthur is gravely wounded and taken to Avalon, more or less the Celtic equivalent of the Islands of the Blessed. It is fertile, without the need for toil, is sunny, and sees two summer seasons and two harvests every year. In Geoffrey's narrative, Arthur is taken to Avalon to recover from his wounds. He is not dead, but rather in between life and death. In this state, Arthur comes to Avalon guided by Merlin and Barinthus, the same Barinthus who, in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, has already been to the Promised Land of the Saints and encourages Brendan to sail for paradise. In this way, Geoffrey blends the *Navigatio* with other Celtic medieval narratives and equates Avalon to the Promised Land of the Saints, which is none other than the ancient Island(s) of the Blessed. In all these tales, we note that the sea plays the same role as a point of escape from reality into another world. In particular, it is a point of escape from mortality, as Brendan finds a paradise reserved for the afterlife and Arthur recovers from devastating wounds. Some even believed that Arthur would one day return from Avalon to his kingdom.

This imaginary geography was adopted and integrated to the medieval picture of the world. The paradisiacal islands imagined to lie in the Atlantic became known as the Island(s) of Saint Brendan. The Hereford map (ca. 1300) depicts six Islands of the Blessed in the western Ocean near which a legend reads, "Fortunatae insulee sex sunt insule Sancti Brendani" ("The six Fortunate islands are the islands of Saint Brendan"). The same connection occurs on the contemporary Ebstorf map, which reads, "Insula Perdita. Hanc invenit Scs. Brandanus, a qua cum navigasset, a nullo hominum postea est inventa" ("The Lost Island. Saint Brendan discovered it, and after he sailed away from it, no one ever found it again"). In this way, the Hereford and Ebstorf mapmakers not only blend ancient and medieval traditions, but also emphasize the inaccessibility that is attached to the paradisiacal places beyond the sea. Brendan's island is a place of divine revelation, which must therefore remain inaccessible to ordinary men in the same way as ancient myths present the Ocean as inaccessible to all living mortals.

This notion was tested in the Age of Discovery, when sailors attempted to find the paradisiacal island of Saint Brendan. The Canaries (whose modern name is derived from the ancient name of one of the Fortunate Islands, Canaria) were explored in successive waves starting in 1312. From there, sailors launched expeditions to the elusive island of Saint Brendan, which was rumored to contain an abundance of precious stones and other marvels. Pedro Vello, a Portuguese pilot, even claimed that he landed on the island in the sixteenth century. However, after exploring the island, Vello and his comrades had to return to their ship in a hurry because a hurricane was threatening the island. The ship was blown away, and Vello could never find

the island again. Similarly, at about the same time, a Franciscan monk claimed to have seen the island of Saint Brendan from Tenerife through a telescope. However, when he tried to show it to his friend, a cloud obscured the horizon and the marvelous sight disappeared forever. In both cases, the marvelous island remains inaccessible by boat or even by sight, as if to prove that divine blessings cannot be attained during the course of mortal life. In this way, the sea marks the frontier that separates men from their most unattainable yearnings and thus defines the human condition.

State of the Question

Many broad-ranging studies have addressed the topic of the sea in Greek literature and culture, whether as a specialized monograph or as part of an inquiry into ancient geography and the techniques of sailing. Duane Roller's recent book *Through the Pillars of Herakles* has now become the preferred reference on the history of geographical exploration in Antiquity, adding to the wealth of knowledge already collected in John B. Harley and David Woodward's *History of Cartography*. More recently still, Jean-Nicolas Corvisier offers a survey of Greek attitudes to the sea in *Les Grecs et la mer*. Corvisier takes a chronological approach to describe the Greeks' uneasy relationship to the sea, from Hesiod and Homer's anguish to the mastery of the sea displayed in the Classical period. Throughout the book, Corvisier pays particular attention to commercial interests, food production, and military conquest, three powerful motivations that drove the Greeks toward the sea and thus fueled the rise of artistic and religious manifestations in relation to the sea.

These geographical and historical studies are aptly complemented by inquiries into the mentalities that informed Greek geography and cosmology. Albin Lesky was the first to attempt such a study with his book *Thalatta: Der Weg der Griechen zum Meer*. Lesky explores the Greeks' relationship to the sea and attributes their changing attitude, from the fear of the Archaic age to the mastery of the sea in the Classical period, to the Greeks' adaptation from their landlocked Indo-European homeland to their new coastal settlements on the Greek peninsula. Despite the highly speculative nature of these claims, Lesky provides a useful, wide-ranging survey of Greek literary and artistic depictions of the sea and seafaring.

Much more recently, James Romm published his influential book *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*. Romm foregrounds geographical literature as a genre and analyzes the influence of geographical narratives on other literary productions. As Romm demonstrates, the sea is a boundless space that captivates the Greeks' imagination and thus plays an important part in geographical narratives. Writers utilize the sea as a setting to talk about the farthest reaches of the cosmos and the infinite numbers of uncanny characters and landscapes that can be created in these inaccessible regions. In this way, the sea allows writers to discuss not only the shape of the world, but also and especially all the humans—and nonhumans—who inhabit this world. Empirical geography thus overlaps with imaginary geography and ethnography.

Heinz-Günther Nesselrath takes up these issues in an important article published in 2005, "Where the Lord of the Sea Grants Passage to Sailors through the Deep-Blue Mere No More: The Greeks and the Western Seas." Nesselrath systematically explores the literary traditions attached to the western Ocean, in particular the relationship between mythical journeys on the Ocean and actual voyages of exploration. Nesselrath demonstrates that despite considerable evolution from the Archaic to the Roman period, the notions attached to the western Ocean, especially paradisiacal islands outside the reach of mortal time, remained remarkably consistent in Greek literature.

When reading these studies, one inevitably grapples with the question of water. How did the Greeks think about water? Was seawater special? Why do so many myths speak of mortals who achieved immortality by diving into the sea? René Ginouvès pioneered the question in his book *Balaneutikè: Recherches sur le bain dans l'antiquité grecque*. By focusing on bathing, Ginouvès explores not only cleansing and purification rituals, but also the religious significance of bathing. Indeed, for the Greeks, cleansing the body can also, in

certain circumstances, cleanse the soul. Thus, Ginouvès proposes that when the initiates in the Great Eleusinian Mysteries rush into the sea, shouting, "Into the sea, initiates!," they cleanse themselves in preparation for the revelations of the mystery cult by symbolically drowning in the water. This ritual death prepares the initiates to attain a new level of consciousness. In this way, Ginouvès emphasizes the ambivalent nature of water as a pure, life-sustaining element and a symbol for death. This question is crucial to the present study of the sea as an intermediary between life, death, and immortality.

The ambivalence of the sea with respect to life and death was explored in fuller detail by Jean Rudhardt in *Le thème de l'eau primordiale dans la mythologie grecque*. Rudhardt proposes that water, in particular that of the outer Ocean, was the primordial element from which all else sprung in Greek thought. Thus, Oceanic water was the life-giving element par excellence. It even sustained the eternal life of the gods beyond the borders of the mortal world by entering in the composition of ambrosia, the magical drink of the gods. Yet this life-giving force remained on the margins of the world, inaccessible to mortals except after death. The Ocean thus marks the boundary between the mortal and immortal worlds, or visible and invisible realities.

Rudhardt's study mostly omits the fact that myths present this boundary as permeable, either through the Ocean or through the sea. This question was addressed by Clara Gallini in her article "Katapontismos," in which she proposes that immersions warrant initiation, either into a new age group, as in the case of Theseus, or into the company of the gods, as in the cases of Ino and Glaucus. However, despite her important insights, Gallini's attempt at a systematic analysis of immersion through categorization fails to account for an important group of myths and images where transcendence is achieved not by immersion, but by sailing or flying over the Ocean, as in the cases of Perseus and Heracles. In fact, Gallini admits that the myths and imagery of sea crossings are so diverse that any attempt at a broad-ranging interpretation would be like fitting the materials onto a Procrustean bed.

For this reason, scholars have mostly dealt with the transcendent role of the sea in small-scale studies that address only one aspect of the question. For instance, in her book *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, Emily Vermeule emphasizes the important role of the sea in funerary poetry and iconography, where the dead are portrayed as sailing or flying above the sea to reach the afterlife. Maria Daraki, in "Oinops Pontos: La mer dionysiaque," proposes that in Dionysiac contexts, the sea is a two-way passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead. An important instance of this concept is found in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where Dionysus himself descends to the Underworld through a marsh. Finally, Jean-Paul Descoeudres studies dolphins in Dionysiac iconography in his article "Les dauphins de Dionysos." Descoeudres proposes that in Dionysiac contexts, dolphins represent the transition experienced by Dionysus's worshippers when coming into contact with the god.

All these studies offer important insights but fail to tie their findings together by asking broad-ranging questions concerning the role of the sea in Greek myths, especially within the dynamic relationship between real and imaginary geography. This book takes up the issue by proposing that the sea is a mediating space in Greek mythology. It separates the visible and the invisible worlds and marks the difference between men, gods, and the dead. As an intermediary space, the sea integrates elements of all the areas it separates. For this reason, the Greeks characterize the sea as both fertile and barren, as a directionless path, and as a deadly force that can nonetheless lead to immortal life. The tension felt in these ambiguous images is emphasized in a variety of myths and artistic depictions that is so vast as to render any attempt at comprehensiveness ineffective. For this reason, the present book consists of six case studies, all of which address the role of the sea as a boundary between the visible and invisible world, or between the world of humans, the gods, and the dead. Each chapter emphasizes the mediating role of the sea in a particular set of cosmological concepts or in a group of stories, such as stories of male and female coming-of-age, divinization by diving into the sea, or Dionysiac revelation. In this way, wide-ranging questions about the role of the sea in the Greek worldview can be explored without the need for (or impediment) of a comprehensive account.

Method

To be effective, such a study must consider each of the selected myths or documents in its own context and then show the connections and differences between them. This process reveals the internal consistency of the culture while also highlighting the variations within it, such as chronological evolution. The study of the myth of Danae presented in Chapter 3 exemplifies this method. Danae was first understood as a tragic figure, which is why Sophocles compares her to Antigone. In the Hellenistic period, Apollonius of Rhodes compares Medea to Danae, Antiope, and Metope, who betrayed their fathers' authority to have an affair with a stranger. In typical Hellenistic fashion, the comparison emphasizes individuality and passion, unlike the earlier portrayal of Danae. Finally, Ovid and Propertius mockingly accuse Danae of selling herself, which, for these poets, explains Zeus's appearance as a shower of gold. This interpretation recalls Roman myths such as that of Tarpeia, who betrayed Rome for golden jewelry. Thus, Danae's journey first evokes pity in the Classical period, while in later times it is interpreted as a punishment for her actions, cast in the specific cultural context of each work.

Despite this evolution, the myth consistently remains attached to marriage, and Danae's tribulations reflect the anguish associated with this difficult transition. In the Classical period, Aeschylus portrays Danae's landing on Seriphos after her sea crossing as a wedding to Silenus—a nightmare of a marriage. In Apollonius of Rhodes, the story of Danae is presented as an argument to let Medea marry Jason, a union that will have dreadful consequences. Finally, in the Roman period, Danae represents the opposite of a married woman, namely, a prostitute. In each case, writers use the figure of Danae for specific purposes within their work and their society. Yet the myth carries consistent associations through the centuries, and Danae's encounter with Zeus and her sea crossing are always tied to a failed marriage.

Theoretical frameworks are useful in such a study, but only to a certain extent. For instance, Burkert's well-known model of "the girl's tragedy" can help discern an important group of myths that reflect the same cultural preoccupations as the myth of Danae, such as the myths of Callisto, Auge, Io, Tyro, Melanippe, and Antiope. Burkert identifies five stages within these narratives: (1) departure from home, (2) period of retirement, (3) first intercourse, (4) period of suffering, and (5) birth of a child and rescue. Burkert argues that these stories reflect biological facts associated with a girl's transformation into a woman, such as the first menstruation, first intercourse, and pregnancy. In his view, the stories are tragic because they are part of the larger complex of sacrifice to which rites of initiation such as the Arrhephoria also belong. Thus, by ritually and symbolically sacrificing young girls, the community comes to grips with their transformation into adult women, and the girls, by going through a symbolic death, accomplish their transition to adulthood. Burkert's scheme is attractive because it explains the inherently tragic nature of all Greek stories of girls' coming-of-age. According to him, a girl must endure hardships and be "sacrificed" to attain the fullness of womanhood. In turn, this also explains the particular attention that poets such as Simonides, Pindar, and the Tragics paid to these myths, as the stories were particularly appropriate for odes, dithyrambs, and tragedies. Yet, relying solely on Burkert's model—or any other model that focuses strictly on the narrative scheme—tends to obscure the treatment of the myth in individual documents, which are each motivated by their own local and chronological context, authorial intent, and performative circumstances.

Furthermore, such narrative models obscure the differences between myths that share the same basic structure. For instance, the story of Auge, on the surface, is all but identical to the story of Danae. Both girls are prevented from marrying by their fathers, both are imprisoned in a secluded location, both are raped by gods, and both are cast out to sea in chests with their infant sons. For this reason, it is tempting, and indeed instructive, to follow Burkert and interpret the myths as instances of the "girl's tragedy." Yet a close examination of the sources reveals important differences in the myths. Danae is the sole heiress of her father's estate, while Auge has brothers. Both their sons, Perseus and Telephus, are destined to kill the legitimate holders of the estates, namely Acrisius (Danae's father) and the Aleads, Auge's brothers. The

inheritance crisis is resolved in widely different ways. Danae is cast out and never marries, while Auge marries the king of Mysia, Teuthras, after landing on his shores. Eventually, Perseus returns to Argos and claims his grandfather's throne, while Telephus remains in Mysia and becomes Teuthras's heir. Thus, while the two myths are "girl's tragedies" and discuss issues of marriage and succession, the myth of Danae speaks of a failed marriage and the myth of Auge presents a successful transition. In both cases, a passage at sea underscores the girls' final separation from home, but in one case it is disastrous, while in the other it is ultimately positive, marking the necessity of such a separation to ensure the peaceful succession of generations. Accordingly, a mixed approach to myth and cultural constructs, which takes overall narrative structures into account but also gives a large place to the specifics of each story and each retelling, is beneficial.

For the same reason, a mixture of synchronic and diachronic approaches is also desirable. Synchronic approaches offer a way to delve deep into a single concept or myth by comparing documents from the same time and/or place. For this reason, such an approach is employed throughout the book, as for instance in Chapter 2 to explore Pindar and Bacchylides' use of sea crossings to illustrate the political and social consequences of male coming-of-age. The poets present the figures of Perseus, Theseus, and Jason as models for political leadership. The young men's sea crossings and exploits on the other side of the world are presented as a victory over death that affirms the young men's identity and allows them to take the political leadership of a kingdom. These myths are put in direct parallel with the political situations Pindar and Bacchylides are celebrating in their poems. *Pythian* 10 glorifies inherited excellence and the peaceful succession of generations in the Thessalian ruling dynasty. Bacchylides Ode 17 emphasizes the rise of Athenian hegemony at the time of the formation of the Delian League. Finally, *Pythian* 4 uses the Argonautic myth to justify aristocratic rule at Cyrene and promote social concord. In all three cases, the heroes' sea crossings are placed in relation with nautical metaphors that express political ideas, such as the image of the "ship of state" in which aristocrats are the pilots of government in the sea of communal life.

By contrast, diachronic approaches allow for a multidirectional look at a concept or myth through the centuries. Such an approach is taken in Chapter 5 in exploring the conceptions attached to diving into the sea in Greek mythology. In the Archaic and Classical periods, diving is used as a metaphor to illustrate a complete loss of mental control, as when someone falls in love, tackles a bewildering problem, or even dies. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, diving remains connected to a loss of mental control, but is mainly used in stories of unrequited love where—with typical Hellenistic pathos—a rejected or abandoned lover throws himself or herself into the sea in a frenzy of passion. In many of these stories, the lovers are transformed into aquatic birds by the mercy of the gods, who thus resolve the crisis at hand. A diachronic approach allows observing the constants in the concept through the centuries while highlighting the specifics of each instance and the tastes of each era. Furthermore, a diachronic approach allows for a retrospective understanding of the concept of diving as a whole. The metamorphoses into aquatic birds of the Hellenistic period emphasize the mental transformation that is attached to diving into the sea throughout Antiquity. By diving into the sea, one symbolically resolves a psychological tension that the mortal mind cannot comprehend or assuage, such as falling in love, solving a moral problem, or, the most incomprehensible of all, passing from life to death.

Overall, as Buxton argues, a middle or mixed course between chronology and narrative structure allows for an in-depth look at Greek mythological language, images, and conventions. Sometimes, due to the fragmentary nature of our sources, such a middle course is our only option. Other times, a rich dossier of documents can be approached in multiple ways and thus yields a multifaceted view of a multifaceted question. Like the sea itself, Greek myths changed and evolved, yet conserved immutable characteristics. The space between these opposites is fertile ground for scholarship.

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