



HAL
open science

Review : Marie-Claire Beaulieu, The Sea in the Greek Imagination. Philadelphia (PE) : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016

Julie Sorba

► **To cite this version:**

Julie Sorba. Review : Marie-Claire Beaulieu, The Sea in the Greek Imagination. Philadelphia (PE) : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016 . The Ancient History Bulletin, Online Reviews, 2016, pp.81-84. hal-01843384

HAL Id: hal-01843384

<https://hal.science/hal-01843384>

Submitted on 18 Jul 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Marie-Claire Beaulieu, *The Sea in the Greek Imagination*. Philadelphia (PE) : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. x + 267. ISBN 978-0-8122-4765-7.

In this study, Marie-Claire Beaulieu explores the concept of the sea in Greek imagination. Her book is divided into six chapters, each respectively devoted to a particular case study involving humans, gods, and the sea. She actually demonstrates that the sea, because of its situation between the earth, the Underworld, and Olympus, mediates between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the gods. Her research is well documented examining evidence in literature as well as from archaeological material (kylix, oinochoe, dinos, lekythos, frieze principally).

In the introduction, the author explains her approach: the sea pervaded many aspects of Greek life because it was everywhere in the landscape and also held a large place in their religious life. As she has noted, Greek literature presents the sea as an ambiguous element: “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” (p.2). Her purpose is thus to understand how imaginary models interacted with Greek exploration of the sea. In order to do this, she first presents the question from the points of view of the ancient authors (Herodotus, Pindar, Polybius, Diodorus, Pliny the Elder among others) and then uses the recent geographical and historical studies which explore the Greeks’ relationships to the sea. As might be expected, these studies “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.” (p.16). Consequently, Marie-Claire Beaulieu advances the view that the sea is a mediating space in Greek mythology. In this way, each of the six chapters emphasizes the mediating role of the sea within a particular set of cosmological concepts or in a group of stories. Through a mixture of synchronic and diachronic approaches, the author has been able to methodically observe not only the immutable characteristics of a group of myths but also the variations which inevitably appear in each of them.

In Chapter 1, entitled “Hygra Keleutha: The Paths of the Sea”, the author analyzes where a journey by sea could lead sailors: they could reach neighbouring towns and regions, but could also cross to the farthest reaches of the sea. Firstly, she examines the Greek words for the ‘sea’ and their epithets, and explains their concrete meaning. This reveals the special position of the sea as a waterway to the invisible world beyond the Ocean, the encircling river at the edge of the world. In the following section, Marie-Claire Beaulieu explains the ambiguous status of the salt water of the sea which occupies an intermediary position in the hydrological network between the fresh water of the rivers, that sustain biological life on earth, and the fresh water of the Ocean, that sustains the supernatural life of the gods. The Old Men of the Sea embody these paradoxical characteristics of the sea, especially when they transform themselves into an animal, human, or inanimate form: this property illustrates, if one follows the naturalist interpretation, “the disorienting changes in shape and colour of the sea as well as its power to change objects by erosion” (p.36). Finally, the special

status of the Ocean is underlined due to the fact that the few living mortals who managed to cross into its stream (like Perseus or Hermes) had to accept divine help. In this chapter, many ancient authors (Hesiod, Solon, Pomponius Mela, Bacchylides, Pindar, Lycophron, Aeschylus, Euripide, Plutarch among others) are quoted very pertinently in order to show that these concepts of the sea endured throughout Antiquity.

Chapter 2 investigates the links between the “Heroic Coming-of-Age and the Sea”, with a special focus on the three heroes, Perseus, Theseus and Jason, who crossed the farthest reaches of the sea in their quest for paternal recognition and political leadership. The entire chapter is devoted to the study of the three odes in which these myths are mentioned: Pindar’s *Pythian* 10 for Perseus, Bacchylides’ *Ode* 17 for Theseus, and Pindar’s *Pythian* 4 for Jason. Therefore, the objective is clearly to identify “the broad cultural concepts attached to marine imagery as well as the context-specific uses of the theme.” (p.60). In fact, in the three odes, a bold and successful sea crossing (or diving to the bottom of the sea) is presented as a daring enterprise undertaken by a male protagonist who needs to prove himself as a hero and political leader. To pursue the analogy in the metaphorical terms of cult practice, when young heroes face death beyond or in the sea, they perform rites that symbolize such an experience and the renewal that follows (i.e. the reestablishment of order).

After the chapter entirely devoted to male protagonists, Chapter 3 concentrates on recounting the myths which involved women and the specific motif of the floating chest (“The Floating Chest : Maidens, Marriage, and the Sea”). The main part of the analysis focuses on Danae’s tribulation on the sea with her infant Perseus in a chest, cast out by her father, King Acrisius. In fact, the myth in its different versions (Simonides, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Hyginus among others) reveals Danae’s ambiguous status : she is a female, yet the sole heir to her father’s estate; she is nubile, yet prevented from marrying; she is a parthenos, yet a mother. This status places her, according to the author, “on the margins of society and prevents her from integrating a traditional social role.” (p.93). However, Marie-Claire Beaulieu notes an evolution in the interpretation of this myth, from that of Sophocles’ *Antigone* where fate is all-powerful and Danae its victim, to that of Apollonius who casts Danae as a passionate girl who actively betrayed her father for love. In spite of this, the myth is consistently interpreted as a subversion of marriage that results in the unsuccessful establishment of a woman in an oikos. Consequently, the passage at sea in a chest marks her final separation from Acrisius, but does not bring her a husband. A similar pattern can also be observed in the myths of Auge and Rhoeo which however have a happy ending. As a result, the author concludes that crossing the sea for a nubile girl has ambiguous significance: “On the one hand, the sea is an intermediary space in which girls who are rejected from their families are cast out and lose their status as they wander between life and death. On the other hand, the sea represents the difficult social boundary that must be overcome in order to reach a new life as an established woman.” (p.116).

In Chapter 4, the author explores accurately two other groups of myths about “Dolphin Riders Between Hades and Olympus” to answer the question why Greek myths of the sea include so many stories with dolphins. As might be expected, she first examines the story of Arion of Methymna, the best singer of his time, according to Herodotus, and divinely inspired, according to Plutarch, who is forced to leap into the sea where a dolphin fortunately takes him on his back and brings him safely to shore. In this account, the dolphin provides a safe crossing through the jaws of death and is the instrument of divine will. Afterwards, a comparison is made with the poet Hesiod, killed and thrown into the sea, yet carried back to shore by a dolphin in order to be buried. This story can easily be compared to that of Melicertes (despite the fact that he is a child) who is accompanied by a dolphin to his final resting place. At this stage, the author analyzes a second group of myths focusing on colonization under the auspices of the Delphian Apollo, in which dolphins rescue the courageous founders from shipwreck and drowning (Enalus and the foundation myth of Lesbos; Taras and Phalanthus and the foundation myths of Tarentum; Delphic foundation myths). As a conclusion, Marie-Claire Beaulieu confirms the fact that dolphins do not simply illustrate the marine context of a scene, but play a mediating role as a bridge between mortals, immortals, and the dead which parallels the mediating role of the sea itself.

In her fifth chapter on “Leaps of Faith? Diving into the Sea, Women, and Metamorphosis”, the author considers as a regular motif the leap into the sea which allows the protagonists to reach a “higher state of consciousness (...) as they are heroized, are divinized, or receive a divine revelation.” (p.145). Contrary to expectation, the situations involved and the results obtained are extremely diverse. Thus, the purpose of the author, who we should congratulate for her meticulous approach, is to define which characteristics of the sea operate such a transformation in the Greek imagination. First, she clarifies what a jump into the sea meant in Greek culture: “Diving represents a complete loss of mental control in the face of a reality that is beyond human understanding” (p.147). As a matter of fact, Hellenistic and later poets used this motif of a leap into the sea to illustrate the emotional turmoil, death, and renewal that accompany unsuccessful love chases : the girls escape their pursuer’s desire, yet at this stage, they end their mortal life (e.g. Ariadne, Boline, or Britomartis). Consequently, a leap into the sea shows a disappearance from the community for the protagonists who vanish without a trace or continue living in another form in an intermediary space (as a bird for instance, like Asteria, Alcione, Ino-Leucothea among others).

The sixth and final chapter questions how and why Dionysus is associated with the sea, and this not only in the story of the Tyrrhenian pirates who attack Dionysus to be transformed into dolphins. First of all, the author argues that Dionysus’ life and personality (he has a human parent, he experiences death when he is dismembered by the Titans for example) reflect a close parallel to the Greek conception of the sea: “Like the sea itself, Dionysus unites life, death, and the divine.” (p.169). Furthermore,

she examines the story of the Tyrrhenian pirates which appears in the Homeric Hymn and the frieze of the choragic monument of Lysicrates, but also in Seneca or Nonnus. In the subsequent sections, she focuses her attention on the sea as the setting for the encounter between Dionysus and his worshippers.

As the above summary should make clear, *The Sea in the Greek Imagination* shows that, in the six case-studies, the concepts underlying the narratives are consistent, despite the high degree of variation in the myths about crossing the sea and diving into it: “In the Greek worldview, the sea is not only an intermediary space between countries and continents, but also the boundary between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the gods.” (p.188). What gives this work its originality is relevant crossing of literature and archaeological material to explore this fascinating topic.

JULIE SORBA
UNIVERSITÉ GRENOBLE ALPES - LIDILEM
Julie.Sorba@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr