PROTEUS, THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA: HOMERIC MERMAN OR SHAMAN?

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Herodotus had no definite information of the far reaches of northern Europe, western or eastern. He conceded that tin and amber came to the Greeks from the ends of the earth, but he did not believe that amber came from the north sea or, for that matter, that there was such a thing as the north sea, a θάλασσα ἐπέκεινα τῆς Εὐρώπης... πρὸς ἄρκτου τῆς Εὐρώπης (3.115-116). The great historian did not know either of the North Sea or of the Baltic Sea. Yet, Baltic amber has been found in Mycenaean shaft graves dating as far back as 1700 BC. In the early eighties the Ulu Burun shipwreck yielded both tin and the first Baltic amber to be found outside Greece proper. This very important shipwreck is dated to ca. 1400 BC, and its location to the southeast of modern Kas across from Rhodes, places it within the compass of the first Achaean settlements on the coast of Asia Minor. Professor George Bass who assessed all the evidence of the Ulu Burun shipwreck states «By the time the Ulu Burun ship sank in the 14th century B.C. a vast trade network was well established among various racial and linguistic groups centered on the Mediterranean, from subtropical Africa and the Near East to northern Europe»[1].

It should be mentioned here that both ancient Egyptian records and modern scientific techniques indicate that amber was brought to Egypt not from the north but from countries to the south of it[2]. Amber (ἤλεκτρον) does not appear in the *Iliad*, but it occurs three times in the *Odyssey*, once in book 4 in which the story of Proteus is related (4.73; cf. 15.460, 18.296). In Hesiodic fragment 150 ἤλεκτρον is to be found in the context of the mythical Hyperboreans[3]. There were indeed stories about a

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1 Bass, George F., «Oldest Known Shipwreck Reveals Splendors of the Bronze Age,» *National Geographic* 172, no. 6 (1987) 699.

2 Lucas, A. and Harris, J. A., *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (London 1962, rep. 1989) 234.

3 Merkelbach/West (London 1967) fr. 150.21. See also Hesiod, *Sc.* 142. The Hyperboreans are mentioned in the *Hymn to Dionysus* 7.29, in Alcaeus 307

people living beyond the north wind, to the North of the North, as it were. Most references suggest the furthest western expanses of Europe (so Pindar on the story of Perseus and Medusa in *Pythian* 10.30 ff.). Herodotus places the Hyperboreans somewhere to the north of the Scythians, but claims no direct knowledge of them. He reports that the Delians know more about the Hyperboreans than anyone else because they – the Delians – receive sacred offerings for Apollon wrapped in straw and carried to Delos all the way from the land of the Hyperboreans through Scythia and through a southwest route to the Adriatic Sea. From there they were transported to Dodona and thence by sea to Delos (Herod. 4.33-35).

In the first millennium A.D., especially between 500-1000, the Vikings extended ancient trade routes into Russia and into the Baltic Sea, and from there into the Arab world. Archaeological evidence shows that they brought valuable commodities from England, Greenland, and Lapland to Byzantium, to Baghdad, and to North Africa. Merchandise was also carried the opposite way to the distant north. They did travel overland, too, but great distances were covered by raft and boat. They sailed the Vistula into the Baltic Sea. They also came down the Rhine and then overland to the Danube. Somewhat more to the East, the Dvina, Lake Ladoga, the Dnieper and the Don – with some overland travel – carried the Vikings to the Black Sea and to Byzantium, places reached by Greek mariners twelve and fifteen hundred years earlier. Clearly then, there was commerce between lands far to the north and the Mediterranean. The Adriatic and the Black Sea, in a way, acted as great ports of entry for southbound trade at different times in history[4].

In our oldest epic sources (Homer, Hesiod) we have evidence either for one ἅλιος γέρων, an old man of the sea called by three different Names (Nereus, Phorkys, Proteus) or for three ἅλιοι γέροντες, originally similar yet distinct marine gods.

Some details: Nereus is never named in the *Iliad* but his placid and sedentary presence is referred to indirectly. He is the old man of the sea, father of Thetis, and also father of all the Nereids, who are immortal sea

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(Lobel-Page), and in Bacchylides 3.59. On *electrum*, especially in Homer, see Heubeck, A., West, S., and Hainsworth, J.B., *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey Vol. I. Introduction and Books I-VIII.* (Oxford 1988) 197 and note on *Od.* 4.73.

[4] An excellent treatment of the many legends about Proteus, Nereus, and Phorkys is to be found in Gantz, Timothy, *Early Greek Myth,* Vol. 1 (Baltimore 1993) 19-25, 663-664, 404-406. For linguistic details see Foote, P. G. and Wilson, D. M. *The Viking Achievement* (London 1970) 191-231, esp. 220-229.

goddesses (e.g., *Il.* 18.140-41). In the twenty fourth book of the *Odyssey* there is mention of the daughters of the old man of the sea (24.58) and of the mother of Achilleus and her immortal sisters (24.55, 58). Agamemnon's soul is speaking to the soul of Achilleus about the death of Achilleus, a theme, properly speaking, extraneous to the *Odyssey*. Thus, Nereus does not occur in the *Odyssey*, and Thetis and the other Nereids receive indirect, periphrastic mention. Hesiod names Nereus, the son of Pontos and Gaia. Doris, the Oceanid, is his wife and mother of his countless daughters, the Nereids. He is just, truthful, and gentle and so «they call him the Old Man» (*Theog.* 233-42). A Nereid, Protô, is only a name. There is no Proteus in Hesiod. Phorkys, Nereus's brother, marries his sister Ketô (*Theog.* 237-239) and begets by her a brood of monstrosities, among them, the Graiai and Medusa (*Theog.* 270-79). Proteus does not show up in the *Iliad*. More exactly, his name does not appear anywhere. On the other hand, in the fourth book of the *Odyssey* the poet tells us a dramatic story about Proteus and creates an unforgettable portrait of him. Indeed the *Odyssey* is our primary source for Proteus. Phorkys, another old man of the sea, does not make a single appearance in the *Iliad*. The only Phorkys in the *Iliad* is a Phrygian leader (2.862, etc.) However, in the thirteenth book of the *Odyssey* we read twice of the harbor of Phorkys:

> Φόρκυνος δέ τίς ἐστι λιμήν, ἁλίοιο γέροντος
> ἐν δήμῳ Ἰθάκης... (13.96-97, 345)

This is not just any harbor. This is the harbor to which the Phaeacian ship brings Odysseus home. The poet devotes to it and to the nearby cave of the nymphs 26 lines of lavish lyrical description and returns to it later in the same book (13.344-50). In both passages Phorkys is an ἅλιος γέρων (13.96, 345). He is named and he is linked with Ithaca forever[5]. Etymological speculations about the names of the old man of the sea may yield only a modest, yet welcome gain. Phorkys and the Hesychian gloss φορκόν· λευκόν, πολιόν may be related. Indo-European cognates would include English *birch*, the adjective *bright* and L. *fraxinus* (Cf. Norse *björk*, Germanic *birke*). Thus Φόρκυς, 'The White One,' would be a semantic complement to γέρων, the old man. Italic *ner-* as reflected in *Nero* and *Nerio*, goddess of valor and wife of Mars, may owe its origin to Illyrian which shows *neri*, 'man,' (cf. Albanian *njeri*, 'man'). Greek ἀνήρ and Sanskrit *nârá* are cognate words. I note here that both Frisk and Chantraine look with some favor upon Fick's idea that Nereus and

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[5] For the topography of the harbor of Phorkys, see Stubbings, Frank H. in Wace/Stubbings *Companion to Homer* (New York 1963) 407 ff.

the Nereides may be derived from Lithuanian *ner-ti*, 'to submerge,' and *nerôve*, 'mermaid' respectively. Yet the Illyrian connection seems more tempting[6].

Some etymologists, perhaps starting with Herodotus (2.112), have linked the name Πρωτεύς with Egyptian. Others have seen the root of πέπρωται in it, and yet others have settled for an abbreviated compound (e.g. Πρωτεσίλαος)[7]. None of these efforts seem either necessary or fruitful. *Odyssey* 8.111-14 alone shows us that Greek simply creates such nouns as Ναυτεύς, Ἐρετμεύς, Ποντεύς to show rank, profession, skill – real or imaginary. Πρωτεύς is the First One, but how can that be? In what sense is he the first one? After all he is Poseidon's ὑποδμώς, his underling or servant. I shall propose that Proteus did not come from the south, but rather – in many ways – from the extreme north.

Now to Homer's account of this versatile and aged sire of the sea. The story of Proteus in the *Odyssey* is part of the longer story of Menelaos' *nostos* (4.351-586). The hero and his men are stranded on the island of Pharos. Let us just say somewhere off the coast of Egypt. Some god has «bound» them. Eidothea, 'She of the Divine Looks' (cf. θεοειδής)[8] appears out of nowhere, meets secretly with Menelaos, and offers help. She is the daughter of mighty Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, Πρωτέως ἰφθίμου θυγάτηρ ἁλίοιο γέροντος (4.365). She tells Menelaos of her father who, in addition to being the old man of the sea, is truthful and immortal, an Egyptian god who knows the depths of the sea, and is Poseidon's ὑποδμώς (4.384-86)[9]. Menelaos is given precise instructions on how to waylay and catch her father, how to bind him, and then how to set him loose in exchange for precious information. Eidothea returns to

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[6] Frisk, *Griech. etymol. Wört.*; Chantraine, *Dict. étymol. de la langue grecque s.vv.* πολιός, φορκός, Φόρκυς, Νηρεύς. For *nero, nerio*, see Ernout-Meillet, *dict. étymol. de la langue lat. s.vv.* Albanian *nip*, 'grandson,' 'nephew,' is clearly related to L. *nepos* and, more importantly, to Neptunus whose more precise relationship to other marine divinities especially to Poseidon and to the Iranian *Apâm Napât* (Keeper of the Sacred Lake), has been elucidated by C. Scott Littleton in «Poseidon as a Reflex of the Indo-European 'Source of Waters' God,» *JIES* 1.4 (1973) 423-440.

[7] It is clear from the beginning lines of *Helen* that Euripides followed the tradition that linked Proteus with Egypt. Yet, all efforts to connect Proteus with Egypt and his name with the Egyptian language have been thoroughly reviewed and for the most part rejected by Allan B. Lloyd, *Herodotus II. Commentary* (Leiden 1993) 43-44. See also LSJ on πρῶτος and Frisk, *Griech. etymol. Wört., s.v.*

[8] Several reasonable hypotheses exist for the etymology of Eidothea's name. See Heubeck et al. (above, note 3) 216. Euripides calls her Εἰδώ (*Helen* 12).

[9] For νημερτής in line 384 cf. Nereus of Hesiod's *Theog.* 223 who is ἀψευδής καὶ ἀληθής.

the sea, and Menelaos and his men spend the night at a place indicated by their unexpected ally. When dawn comes, following Eidothea's instructions, Menelaos chooses three of his companions to help him accomplish his mission. At some point, Eidothea, who had obviously stayed close by, dives into the sea and brings out four seal skins, all of them newly flayed. Then she hollows out four lurking-places for the men who, by now, were very close to her. The men are made to lie down next to each other, and Eidothea places a seal skin on each one of them. A drop of ambrosia under the nose of each man offers protection against the stench of the skins. Much as the mermaid had told Menelaos, great flocks of seals come out of the sea, and at noon Proteus himself emerges from the water and comes ashore. As he counts his seals, he numbers the four men among them. The four men lock arms all around him and hold him bound. But the Old Man of the Sea possesses supernatural powers. In rapid succession, he turns into a lion, then into a serpent, then into a leopard, and then into a great boar. After this last transformation, he also turns into water, and then into a tree (4.456-458). The Old Man of the Sea does not refuse to answer the questions Menelaos put to him. He tells Menelaos that in order to 'unbind' himself, he should sail to Egypt and sacrifice to the gods of that land upon reaching the Nile (Aigyptos). He reveals how Ajax and Agamemnon died, and how he saw Odysseus on the island of Kalypso. He also reveals to Menelaos that his destiny would not be death but eternal life in the Elysian Field.

There is only one kind of seal in the Mediterranean, the Monk Seal (*Stenorynchus albiventer*), of which there must have been greater numbers in antiquity. Except for the fourth book of the *Odyssey*, there is very little about seals in ancient Greek poetry[10]. However, in the account of Proteus, the *Odyssey* speaks of flocks of seals, of a marine divinity that shepherds them, and of a mermaid, Eidothea, that initiates Menelaos and his three stalwarts into a ritual that is calculated to attract them. Four, and not three, seal skins are used to cover four men, and to make them into

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[10] There is some lore in Aelian, *NA* 4.56, 3.19, 15.2, 11.37. Aelian (*NA* 9.9) refers to the way seals give birth and proceed to educate their young. He uses the fourth book of the *Odyssey* as a source (*NA* 10.50), but adds little to our knowledge of seals. His reference to seals in the Euxine is confusing (*NA* 9.59). References are taken from the 1971 Loeb edition of Aelian by Scholfield. Also, the many references to the seal in Aristotle's works, especially the *Historia Animalium*, are of a zoological and anatomical nature. See Bonitz, H. *Index Aristotelicus* (Graz 1955) *s.v.* φώκη. The name and great navigational skills of the Phocaeans, 'The Sealers' (Φωκῆες), tempt us to think of them in connection with the outlandish Proteus and his seals. After all, Herodotus tells us that «the Phocaeans were the first Greeks to make long sea voyages; it was they who showed the way to the Adriatic, Tyrrhenia, Iberia, and Tartessus» (Herod. 1.163).

seals, or to make them pass for seals. Seal skins can be very useful, and yet in our story seals are killed and skinned and their hides are thrown into the sea. Who had slaughtered the seals, and why had their skins been thrown into the sea? The use of ambrosia as an odor repellent shows more than Eidothea's resourcefulness. It shows that Hellenic warriors need protection against a foul and alien smell[11].

Proteus can see into the past, the present, and the future. In this, he is like other great seers, such as Calchas and Teiresias. But, unlike them, he is immortal. Yet, he is not like the immortal Olympian gods. He is not ageless. Further, he is an adjutant to Poseidon, which might mean that, however old he is, he does not go as far back as Poseidon, his lord. Despite these marks of rank or class distinction, Proteus is a potent god, an extraordinary *daimon*. His transformations are spectacular. From lion to serpent, to leopard, to great boar. Four animal shapes, and then, well, just nature: water, tree. This is the Old Man's δολίη τέχνη, his crafty skill (4.455). Here Proteus is not at all unlike Dionysus of *Homeric Hymn VII*, although Dionysus turns from young man (line 3: ἀνὴρ νεηνίης) to roaring lion and then to a bear (44-48). We recall here how Apollon appeared to the Cretan pirates δέμας δελφῖνι ἐοικὼς in the form of a dolphin (*Homeric Hymn* 3.400). We also must think about the implications of that most unusual fragment:

> ἤδη γάρ ποτ' ἐγὼ γενόμην κοῦρός τε κόρη τε
> θάμνος τ' οἰωνός τε καὶ ἔξαλος ἔλλοπος ἰχθύς.
>
> I have already been a young man and a maiden, a bush, a bird, a scaly fish [leaping] out of the sea.

Although this fragment and others like it are almost always presented in the context of *metempsychosis* – the transmigration of souls – I very much doubt that this notion and the notion of *metamorphosis* can easily be kept entirely distinct[12]. Worthy of note here is also the ability of Thetis to change into fire, lion, dragon and into other shapes to escape the advances of Peleus[13].

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[11] Aristophanes mentions the foul smell of seals once (*Pax* 758). Through hearsay Herodotus knows of primitive men who live on raw fish and are dressed in seal skins. They live in the marshlands into which the river Araxes drains near the northern coast of the Caspian Sea (Herod. 1.202).

[12] Diels, Hermann/ Krantz, Walther, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* Vol. 1 (Berlin 1960) Empedokles 117, p. 359. W.C.K. Guthrie speaks of transmigration of souls. See his *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge 1969) 249-51. For valuable information on reincarnation and Orphic beliefs, see also Guthrie's *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton 1993) 171 ff.

[13] See Pindar, *Nemean* 4.61-65. See Bury, J. B., *Nemean Odes* (Amsterdam 1965) 75-76.

Let us now turn our attention to the north, especially to the Arctic zone. All the way from Alaska to eastern Siberia seals and seal hunting are extremely important. Their skins are used for shoes, clothing, tent material, thongs, etc., and their blubber is eaten and reduced to fat used as burning oil for light and heat. In all Arctic societies balance in nature is of the utmost importance. Thus, through propitiation involving the return of some portion of an animal to its source or habitat, Alaskan Eskimos are able to harvest the physical bodies without destroying the souls of the animals. One of the chief duties of a shaman is to gain power over the spirits, and to attract edible species[14]. Coats made of sealskins are also used to attain oneness with the seal world, to appease, and attract the seals[15]. In the *Old Kalevala* singing by those who have power can produce everything from trees to animals, to boats, and to storms. More remarkably, the hero of this epic Väinamöinen can take the next step and transform himself into a reptile or a snake[16]. Incidentally, for the Yupik Eskimos of Alaska the number four seems to be very significant, especially during the performance of the rituals that are proper to the annual Bladder Festival in honor of the dead. Four corners and four sets of hunting and boating gear feature frequently during these rituals[17]. I owe a great debt to French anthropologist Jean Malaurie for introducing me to

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[14] Oswalt, Wendell H. *Bashful No Longer. An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988* (Norman, Oklahoma 1990) 35-39.

[15] For this information I thank Kanagluk, George Charles, now of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Kanagluk is a native Yupik Eskimo, whose father was a medicine man. In his written account of his father's medicine song, Kanagluk explains that his father specialized in «the procurement of game» and that the idea of transformation is inherent in the medicine song. With his kind permission, I excerpt here the following lines:

By way of the big ocean, I cross over,
Putting on the big spotted seal.
Those who want to hunt,
I make them thankful.
My human-like beings, I approach you
By way of the big land, I come down
Putting on the big caribou.

Fuller details can be found in Mr. Charles's MA thesis, *Yut Quyalingnaqluksi: An Analysis of a Yup'iaq Medicine Song. A Yup'iaq Family's Interpretation* (University of California, Santa Barbara 1997), esp. 27-31.

[16] See Lönnrot, Elias, *The Old Kalevala and Certain Antecedents,* trans. Magoun Jr., Francis Peabody (Cambridge, Mass. 1969). Poems 5 and 9 are representative of the many examples. In poem 27 (p. 158), the Mistress of the North Farm becomes a bird.

[17] Number four may stand for the four corners of the world. For more precise and fundamental information, see Fienup-Riordan, Ann, «The Mask: The Eye of the Dance,» *Arctic Anthropology* 24,2 (1987) 47, 53, esp. note 13.

the eskimo culture of Greenland. In his book, *The Last Kings of Thule,* there are many references to seals and seal hunting. In one case, he describes how, after six winter months, seals come out of their breathing holes in threes and fours, and how along gleaming crevasses there would be whole colonies of them, «ten, fifteen, sometimes thirty or forty»[18]. Malaurie relates accounts of how an *angakok*, a shaman, would hide behind a sealskin and begin to talk. He would fall into a trance from which he would recover to report that he had visited the world of the dead and had seen Nerrivik, the great goddess of the waters. The message from Nerrivik was that there would be an abundance of seals[19].

There is a great deal to be learned about seals and seal hunting in Iceland and from the coastlands of Scandinavia, Finland, Siberia, and Alaska. It would be most interesting to study seal lore from both arctic and subarctic coastlands. Especially relevant would be practices and beliefs from coastlands touched by the North Sea and by the Baltic Sea[20]. For the moment, I want to draw attention not only to the detail of a shaman covering himself with a sealskin as part of a ritual, but also to some significant information given by Malaurie on shamans and shamanic practices in Greenland. The information I am quoting here, ever so spottily, comes from Malaurie's companion and informant, Pualuna: «On certain special occasions they [the shamans] change themselves into birds or seals... They become wandering spirits and are reborn as animals: foxes, seals, birds, walruses, bears.»[21] I am now quoting word for word. «The *angakkog*, the shaman, was the most important person among us. He was the *anga*, the elder, the one who is first, who precedes[22] ...» A shaman is immortal...what I mean is, he can come back to life if need be»[23]. I am not suggesting here that Proteus, the First One, an ἀθάνατος, an immortal god, that is, came to Greece from Greenland. Yet, the concepts and the words almost tempt us to remember all this. I

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[18] Malaurie, Jean *The Last Kings of Thule* (original title: *Les derniers rois de Thulé*), trans. Adrienne Foulke (Chicago 1985) 320. See also pp. 99, 108, 122-23 *et passim*.

[19] *Ibid.* 57-58. For the importance of sealskins in Greenland, see also Millman, Lawrence, *Last Places* (Boston 1990) 138 (cargo of sealskins), 139 (seal meat as gift), 158 (hermit dressed in sealskins), 195 (hunters and seals; neutralizing the fear of seals by playing seal).

[20] For some information on the hair seal, which is the common seal of Iceland, see Sherman, Katharine, *Daughter of Fire. A Portrait of Iceland* (Boston-Toronto 1976) 92-93.

[21] Above, note 18, pp. 61-62.

[22] *Ibid.* 57.

[23] *Ibid.* 59.

must also mention that in the Irish Book of Invasions, the *Leabhar Gabhála Eireann*, Fintan, one of the heroes, survives – through the Flood and many other calamities, as a salmon, an eagle, and a hawk[24]. Another Irish hero, Tuan, undergoes very impressive transformations over a long period of time, actually over several lifetimes. He becomes a wild boar, a great sea-eagle, and a salmon. As a salmon, he is eaten by a woman, he passes into her womb, and he proceeds to be reborn[25].

The north is rich in tales about the sea and its denizens[26]. H.C. Andersen's *Den Lille Havfrue* with its Old King of the Sea, the little mermaid and her beautiful sisters, deserves special attention[27]. Swedish and especially Norwegian myths and legends about such matters cannot be negligible. I bypass them only for now to take you further East to Finland and to Siberia. Professor Juha Pentikäinen of the University of Helsinki has done a great deal to show how the shamans of the Sami tradition became the heroes of the Kalevala epic[28]. He has also done valuable studies of shamanism in Siberia. His work shows abundantly that journeying to the other world and transformation in the form of an animal are essential features of shamanism that may cross from oral into literate culture[29]. Relevant here are also the *Sieidde* the guardian spirits of the indigenous peoples of northern Norway, of Sweden, of Finland, and of the Russian Kola Peninsula who are referred to as «The Old Man, Old Woman, Grandfather, or Grandmother»[30]. Worthy of attention is the importance, both above and below the Arctic Circle, of the Old Man, and by extension,

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24 MacCana, Proinsias, *Celtic Mythology* (Hamlyn Publishing Group 1970) 57.

25 For the interesting concept of *Fintan The Salmon of Knowledge*, see Rolleston, T.W., *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (London 1911) 254; and *Celtic* (London 1994) 99-100 by the same author.

26 Very interesting and perhaps relevant here is the Norse *Saekonungr*, 'Sea King,' originally a mythic sea king, a lord of the sea. See Hollander, Lee M., «The Lay of Hyndla 17,» in *The Poetic Edda* (Austin 1962) 132, note 26. See Beck, Horace, *Folklore and the Sea* (Middleton, Conn. 1973) *passim.*

27 For parallels between Homeric and Scandinavian legends about prophetic marine deities see Hansen, William, «Homer and the Folktale,» 442-62 and references on 453-54 in *New Companion to Homer,* edd. Ian Morris and Barry Powell (Leiden 1997). H.C. Andersen's *havkongen*, 'king of the sea' may represent a blend of sources. His is prominent in the *Little Mermaid.*

28 The Kalevala epic was composed by Elias Lönnrot. For the purposes of the present inquiry I have limited myself to the *Old Kalevala* (above, note 16).

29 See Pentikäinen, Juha, *Kalevala Mythology* trans. Poom, Ritva (Bloomington 1989). See esp. chapters 9, 10, and 11 (p. 177 ff.). See also Pentikäinen, Juha, *Shamanism and Culture* 3rd rev. ed. (Helsinki 1998) 60 ff.

30 See Madden, Kristin (author Ipmen Atti), «Passevara, The Sacred Earth,» *Parabola* (Spring 1999) 67-71.

of the Old Woman. Shamanism is so widespread in the north that the place of its origin is hard to trace. The Norse god Odin is a great shape-changer, one skilled in magic, a seer[31]. The Finnish god Ukko, god of all elements, bears a name which means «Old Man»[32]. The shamans and shamanic practices Mircea Eliade describes in his highly influential book, *Shamanism*, which was originally published in French and dedicated to his French masters and colleagues, present us with highly provocative ideas. Among the people of the Altaic regions, he tells us, «the shaman invites the attendance of Jayyk (Yaik) Kan (the Lord of the Sea).» Eliade also tells us that the helping spirits of the shamans have animal forms, and that, «among the Siberians and the Altaians they can appear in the form of bears, wolves, stags, hares, [and] all kinds of birds»[33].

It is time to leave the cold waters of the extreme north and the vast expanses of northern and northeastern Asia to return to the Mediterranean, to Proteus, to Phorkys, and to Nereus. In the fourth book of the *Odyssey* Proteus is linked with Egypt (Πρωτεύς Αἰγύπτιος, *Od.* 4.385). Herodotus thinks that Homer knew of an Egyptian king whose name in Greek was Proteus, a contemporary of Helen and Menelaos. To the historian's mind, Homer took stories about Helen's and Menelaos' sojourn in Egypt and changed them to make them suitable for epic (Herod. 2.112-19). Diodorus follows Herodotus but adds an explanation of Proteus's transformations. He attributes them to the use of προτομαί (foreparts/masks) by the Egyptian kings. The Egyptians kings, Diodorus reports, «would wear upon their heads the forepart of a lion, or bull, or snake as symbols of their rule[34]. In one remarkable Egyptian text Arnon speaks to King Tutmose as one who, thanks to divine favor, is looked upon by the

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[31] See Davidson, Ellis H.R., *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age* (New York 1981) 141-42. In the poem *Locasena* of the Edda we find the god Loki first transforming himself into a salmon and then caught and being bound by the other gods (see above, note 26) 90 ff., and esp. 103. See also Branston, Brian *Gods of the North* (New York 1955) 275-276.

[32] For Ukko, see index of *The Old Kalevala* (above, note 16) 303. See also Salo, Unto, «Ukko, The God of Thunder,» *Studia Historica Fenno-Ugrica* 2 (1997) 223-24.

[33] Eliade, Mircea, *Shamanism* (Princeton 1964) 88-89. This book was originally published in French under the title *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris 1951). Burkert calls Proteus «master of animals, master of the fish of the sea.» Burkert, Walter, *Structures and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 96.

[34] See Diod. Sic. 1.62. In the same chapter Diodorus mentions also transformations into trees or fire. See *Diodorus of Sicily* trans. C.H. Oldfather, (Cambridge, Mass. 1948) 213.

enemies of Egypt as a bull...a crocodile, a lion, a hawk, a jackal[35]. Ideas and images, such as implied by Diodorus' statement and by this text, even if they involved mere poetic similes rather than rituals of transformation, may have reached the Greek world by Homer's time. From very early times to behave like an Egyptian (αἰγυπτιάζω) and to speak like an Egyptian (αἰγυπτιστί) were both connected with deception and trickery[36]. It was in Egypt that Helen learned about the potent drug – the φάρμακον νηπενθές – which could magically fend off deadly sorrow[37]. Yet despite all this, the collective weight of available evidence would have us believe that the Old Man of the Sea somehow came down to Greece from the north rather than the other way around. We should also bear in mind that beliefs and practices associated with Orpheus and Dionysus point north and east not south to Egypt. I mention this because the transformations of Proteus would not be out of place in the Orphic and Dionysiac religious traditions. It seems to me that shamanism is at the root of both.

I now return to the names of the three old men of the sea. I do so in full awareness of the perils of seeking the linguistic and even geographic origins of mythic names. That Φόρκυς means the «White One» is a view also supported by the fact that he is the father of the *Graiai* who are πολιαὶ ἐκ γενετῆς, 'white from birth' (Hesiod, *Theog.* 270-71). Hesiod does not tell us where Phorkys is. The Germanic cognates of his name (*Björk, birke, birch*, etc.) point toward the Indo-European north, toward lands where the birch tree is known. The *Odyssey* places his haunts in Ithaca, just off the coast of the Greek northwest. The linguistic affinities of Nereus, namely the relationship of his name to L. *Nero*, *Nerio*, and Illyrian *neri*, also point to lands that are to the west and to the north of Greece[38].

Out of the north, the far north, came the legendary Abaris, riding an arrow. He, it seems, introduced the Hyperborean Apollon to the Greeks. Aristeas of Proconnesus most likely traveled out of his native Propontis to Scythia, and perhaps even beyond. Stories about the Thracian magician Zalmoxis bespeak the ways of distant northern regions. The magicians and wonder-workers of such regions did not remain within the twilight zone. Such revered forerunners of Greek philosophy and spirituality as Pythagoras, Epimenides, and Empedokles may indeed have been

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35 The text is quoted by Breasted, Henry James in his *A History of Egypt* (New York 1905) 318-19.

36 LSJ *s.vv.*

37 *Od.* 4.219-34.

38 Cf. Thetis in *Il.* 18.59-60. Also Thetis and Alb./Ill. *Teta*.

influenced by beliefs and practices that originated in remote northern lands they themselves had never seen. Orpheus, poet, prophet, and divine musician, was a Thracian. His ability to charm animals and his visit to the underworld to recover the soul of his beloved bear witness to powers that are at home in the world of a shaman. All this has been very beautifully presented by E.R. Dodds in his path-breaking book, *The Greeks and the Irrational*[39]. It does concern Proteus in so far as he, too, behaves like a shaman.

At this point, I wish to pose a question. Is it possible that the most remarkable of the Old Men of the Sea, Proteus, that is, originated somewhere in the Baltic area? Is it possible that the name Πρωτεύς is the Hellenized version of the Lithuanian word *protas*: 'mind,' 'spirit,' 'intelligence'? Element for element Lithuanian *prot-as* is a cognate of Norse *fródr*, 'wise' (cf. Goth. *fraþjan*: 'to understand'). Many Germanic and Balto-Slavic words travelled north to Finland proper and beyond into the hinterland, where the Sami lived[40]. Others, I dare suggest, might have followed the amber routes that led to the Adriatic and to the Black Sea. Proteus may owe his name to one of these northern words. Exactly how wisdom and being the first one blended to produce Πρωτεύς we shall never know. The moment we think we hold his secret captive, the Old Man will be the bear we thought was a lion. This is his skill, a skill that belongs more properly to the ways of a shaman.

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[39] Dodds, E.R., *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1966) 135-156.

[40] The very word for 'sea' in Finnish reflects OHG *meri*; cf. Norse *marr*, both cognates of L. *mare*. For the Sami people of Finland, see *Cultural Minorities in Finland*, edd. Pentikäinen, Juha and Hiltunen, Marja (Helsinki 1995) 101-145. See also Aikio, Pekka/Linkola, Martti/Nuorgam-Poutasuo, Helvi, «The Sami People in Finland,» *Cultural Pluralism and Cultural Identity The Experience of Canada, Finland, and Yugoslavia* (UNESCO 1985) 89-119.