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Mermaids And Sirens

Written by M. R. Blackmoor | 👁 Hits: 7



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...when a storm was coming on, and they anticipated that a ship might sink, they swam before it, and sang most sweetly of the delight to be found beneath the water, begging the seafarers not to be afraid of coming down below.

Hans Christian Anderson, The Little Mermaid

The ship glided on the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, flax nets cast in a circle around the vessel while the sailors struck the surface of the sea with their oars. This maneuver was intended to attract the fish and prompt them to rush into the nets until enough fish were collected to merit hauling the nets ashore to sell the catch at the agora at Cissamus. Unfortunately, this torrid summer day the fish seemed too torpid to bother raising to the bait, so the nets remained half empty.

As hours passed, things became more uncomfortable for the six-men crew. It was hot and sticky, and their fresh water jars had been long emptied; their daily rations of whole-wheat bread, coarse wine, and olives were also gone. Night was approaching, but they were loath to return ashore empty-handed. They had lingered, too far from the shore to see the rugged outline of the mountains they called home. A violent storm had blown them off course, and now, after weeks at sea, the situation was becoming dire. Hunger cramped the sailors' bellies, and the long time away from the embraces of their women had made them excitable and quick to anger.

Suddenly, there was a violent crash on the side of the boat, followed by a series of mighty pulls on one of the nets. Homorphos leaned over the side of the boat and cried out: "There is something big caught in this net!" The captain's reaction was instantaneous: "Hurry! Let's get it on board, or it will make us go under!"

After a mighty struggle, the sailors were able to haul the net's contents onto the floor of the boat. It was a strange creature, with a massive cylindrical body covered in dark gray fur. It had a short, broad, and flat snout, with very pronounced, long nostrils that faced upwards, and was shrieking, whistling, and making clicking noises to manifest its discomfort.

"I've seen one of these before," said one of the sailors. "They are called monk seals. But they are usually much larger; this must be a calf, or perhaps a female."

"What are we going to do?" asked another. "It's too heavy for us to row it back to shore." "Plus, its weight may make the boat capsize" observed another. "And it is clearly sick or wounded" noted a third.

"This creature is sacred to Posiedon and must be protected. Let us keep it onboard and try to nurture it to health" ruled the captain.

As the seal lay on its side, its breathing labored, Homorphos stared at it with morbid fascination. Its large dark eyes resembled those of a Corinthian courtesan. Its fur was soft and smooth to the touch. He slowly made his way around the animal and raised its tail. In that moment, what he saw was more beautiful than the sight of Aphrodite emerging from her seashell. He studied each curve and fold of the creature's reproductive organs. He felt lightheaded for a moment and looked down to see the noticeable bulge in his tunic.

His visual fascination quickly changed to unquenchable desire. He looked around to make sure that no one was watching. He then pulled up the bottom of his tunic and stumbled forward until he had entered the beast, which let out a deep, sustained bellow, but did not resist. The sea started to churn and foam.

Homorphos did not want to leave the seal's side after he had finished, but eventually forced himself to go back to the far side of the deck, where he curled up into a ball and slept, a grin on his face.

"Imbecile!" bellowed the captain, who had spotted him performing the desecration. "Sea creatures are under the protection of Poseidon, and the lord of the trident is already making us pay for what you have done!" The wind around the craft had quickened, making the boat shudder as it was battered by the relentless waves.

"We have to get rid of this animal! Return it to the sea!" cried one of the sailors. "Do it!" ordered the captain. With great effort, the sailors picked up the violated seal and hoisted it overboard onto the frothing waters, where it sank, leaving a trail of fluid in its wake.

The storm, however, did not cease. It redoubled its fury, and the force of the wind gave rise to gigantic waves that sent the boat gyrating out of control.

“Poseidon wants to punish us on YOUR ACCOUNT!” cried the captain. He and the other fishermen converged on Homorphos. “Wait, I didn’t do anything bad!” protested Homorphos and, as his companions converged on him, raised his curved knife protectively, threatening to stab anyone who came closer. Another burst of wind then shook the boat. The ship tilted and several boxes of supplies on the deck slid overboard and into the water. Homorphos himself lost his balance for a moment and was thrown towards the rim of the vessel. The captain jumped at him and, with a shove, cast him overboard.

Homorphos rose and fell with the violent thrashing of the waves. As he attempted to keep afloat, he swallowed one gulp after another of briny water and started writhing and retching haphazardly. Soon his energy drained away and he felt that his life was at an end. Further struggling was pointless; he should just close his eyes and let go...

He regained consciousness as his fingers met a yielding surface. He pinched it, and perceived a shudder in response. His vision was obstructed by the roiling seas, but after a few moments he perceived that he was holding onto the seal, whose body was bobbing up and down next to his. The creature somehow sensed from which direction the next wave was to come and was able to present less resistance to it, reducing the impact. The seal made no effort to dislodge Homorphos, who was now hanging onto its body for dear life.

Night fell, and the creature continued its progress under the light of Artemis’ chariot and the summer constellations. Homorphos was barely conscious, but noticed that there were new lights ahead in the distant, oscillating horizon. Not long afterwards, the dark outline of a land mass became visible.

The shore they were approaching consisted of a narrow, rocky beach that backed into a range of mountains. Human dwellings dotted the hillsides; they were the source of the lights. He uttered a deep sigh of relief: death had seemingly been averted.

The seal gently glided into the shallows and dislodged Homorphos, who had no strength left. As he lay against the pebbles of the beach, he glanced over to bid farewell to the animal, only to see a large, empty wooden box where he thought the seal would be. Confused and exhausted, he closed his eyes.

He opened his salt-encrusted eyes with difficulty, and sat up at the water’s edge. His stomach heaved and he threw up a vast quantity of sea water and sand. Feeling a little better, Homorphos looked up at the person who had shaken him out of unconsciousness. It was a man in hoplite attire, wearing a crested helmet, light linen breastplates with leather wings, and high brass leggings. “You are lucky I was on shore patrol” greeted the man. “You were lying on your stomach and would have choked to death if I had not pulled you out of the water.”

Homorphos spat more sand and muttered: “Thanks.” He started to ask “where am I” but, glancing up, he spotted a familiar sight: up on top of the high hill was a structure ringed by tall columns that gleamed in the early morning light. “Is that Poseidon’s temple above?” he asked instead.

“Yes,” replied the guard. “Welcome to Cape Sounion. You are in Attica, home of our leader, Solon, the lawgiver of Athens.”

“I have seen that temple many times in my trips” wondered Homorphos, “but always from onboard a boat.”

“I see” replied the hoplite. “Where are you from?”

“I am from what you call Krete, an island way south of here.”

“And how come you are here, so far from your home?”

There was a long pause. Homorphos was reluctant to relate how he had been thrown overboard his boat, why, and how he had managed to survive. At the end, he muttered: “It’s a long story. I fell overboard during a storm and ended up here.”

The guard looked at him suspiciously. “We could see from the temple a large storm at sea, a long distance away. How did you manage to come this far?”

Homorphos suddenly felt ashamed at having to admit that he had no clue. He thought first of the box, and then of what he was certain was his prolonged ride on the seal’s back. Before long, his thoughts focused on his tryst. “She was so beautiful,” he mumbled.

“What?” replied the hoplite.

In that moment, Homorphos felt ashamed to reveal that there was an animal with which he had intercourse. So, he made up a lie. “You are not going to believe this, for I can hardly believe it myself. I was I was I was rescued by a siren.”

By the time Homorphos was escorted up the mountain and presented before Poleites, the high priest of the Poseidon temple, the sailor had been able to concoct a narrative he thought would sit well with the worshippers of the God of Earthquakes. Sirens were the subject of many folk tales and the works of poets, but there were no reliable accounts of the sighting of one of these creatures. Moreover, there were conflicting stories about the appearance and actions of the so-called sirens: some accounts described them as half-women, half-birds that inhabited shore cliffs, and their interactions with humans consisted of luring them into collisions with deadly reefs; other descriptions had them as half-women, half-fish who swam near vessels and, again, distracted mariners with their songs and caused shipwrecks; this latter type was referred to as mermaids.

Poleites escorted Homorphos through the colonnade to the large outdoors altar where offerings were made to Poseidon, the place where the god’s presence would be the strongest. There, the priest interrogated the sailor closely about his life-saving incident and the role played by the siren or mermaid. Homorphos’ heart was pounding with fright at committing perjury before the second most powerful god in Olympus, but felt he had no choice; the truth, if told, would cause him to be punished for abusing one of Poseidon’s creatures. “The storm hit our fishing boat with great force and the surge waves caused it to capsize. I don’t know what happened to the other sailors, but I found myself sinking beneath the sea when a firm hand lifted me to the surface. It was a beautiful woman, naked from the waist up, with long flowing golden hair and eyes that shone like diamonds. She began pulling me towards the shore, and I noticed that beneath the waist her body was that of a scaly fish, a bluefin tuna I believe. She sang a lovely melody to me that made me drowsy, and carried me while I slept to the shore near here, where she deposited me and swam away.”

Placing Homorphos’ hand on the sacrificial altar, the priest asked: “Do you solemnly swear by the inviolable waters of Styx, that what you have said to me about your ordeal and your deliverance by a mermaid is true?”

Homorphos’ heart skipped a beat, but he managed to utter firmly four words: “I do so swear.”

Poleites embraced the sailor and pronounced: “You have been blessed by Poseidon and from this day on you shall be an acolyte of this temple, serving the God under my command.”

Athens was abuzz. The annual festival of Poseidon was approaching, and all throughout the agora, its citizens were talking about the lavish preparations being made by Solon and the priests of Poseidon’s temple at Sounion. Like Solon, the priests were basking in a newfound popularity.

For decades, their pretensions of being able to commune with the divine had been questioned by an increasingly impoverished populace. Greedy Phoenicians had monopolized trade in the Mediterranean, forcing Solon to redirect the city's merchant vessels to the treacherous waters of the Black Sea. Many ships would set out from Athens' harbor, never to return. The peoples' thoughts turned to placating Poseidon, and the priests seized on the opportunity to sanctify offerings for the god ... for a price. As the priests lined the pockets of their tunics and ships kept going missing, the people came to regard them as charlatans.

But all this had changed three years ago. For the priests could finally point to evidence of Poseidon's favor: Homorphos, a young and awkward sailor, had survived a ghastly shipwreck, thanks to the intervention of one of the sea-god's courtesans. His ship had crashed into submerged rocks near a distant shore; all his shipmates had drowned or been devoured by sea monsters. He himself was flailing in the water and about to drown, when beautiful sea nymphs with long golden hair, supple breasts, and tails like fish had whisked him away. They took him to a remote island, where they nurtured him back to health with a steady diet of fish and passionate lovemaking. Eventually, they had taken the recuperated Homorphos to Cape Sounion and delivered him. This was more or less Homorphos' tale, refined over the course of numerous discussions with the priests before being spread across the countryside of Attica and eventually among the Athenian citizenry.

Poseidon's priests paraded the youth around as proof of their own ability to mediate with the great Triton. They even hired bards to recite epic poems of Homorphos' story at the local amphitheater. It did not hurt their cause that, soon after Homorphos' return, the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal had crushed the rival Phoenician city of Tyre. With that, the Mediterranean opened again, so Athens' merchants no longer had to make the dangerous run to the Black Sea, and riches from distant lands again flooded the harborside markets of the city.

To be sure, a few skeptical citizens questioned the role of Poseidon's priests in all this. For them, Homorphos' travails were entirely unrelated to the city's return to prosperity. Some observed that the dullard mariner had never been known as a bastion of truth, and pointed to the proprietary glances that the priests flashed toward Homorphos every now and then, not to mention the deference that he showed them and the obedience with which he carried out their orders.

But the vast majority of the city, as well as Solon, did not care. With their faith in Poseidon restored, they piously paid homage to Triton's sanctuary on Cape Sounion and filled its coffers with charitable donations. On Solon's orders, the priest spent part of this money on the annual celebrations surrounding the god's festival. This year, they planned to honor Poseidon with an offering that symbolized his command over the setting sun. They would yoke four white stallions to a chariot that they would set ablaze to recreate the flaming solar wagon of Phoebus Apollo as it plunged into the sea.

In the lead-up to Poseidon's festival, visitors from all the Greek city-states and colonies came to the cape, in a pilgrimage that was consistent with the pre-eminence of the sea-god in the Greek pantheon.

Among the worshipers that came to Cape Sounion to honor Poseidon was one Gennadios, a sailor. He wished to deliver to the temple a thanksgiving terracotta relief showing Perseus beheading Medusa and a plaque that read: "Thanks be given to Poseidon, from Gennadios, son of Hippolytus, a sailor, for his delivery from the sea." Gennadios arrived in Cape Sounion the night before the holiday and spent the night in a crowded guest house a short distance from the temple's location. The following morning, he went up the steep hill, in the company of many worshippers going the same way. Someone who met Gennadios on his way to the temple asked him the reason for his pilgrimage. Gennadios replied:

"It was luck and the intervention of Divine Poseidon that saved me. The boat in which I was traveling was overturned by a violent storm some distance from the coast of Krete. I was thrown into the roiling waters and landed within a few breaststrokes of a broken off section of the boat's prow. After a few exhausting minutes of swimming against the heaving sea, I was able to reach the floating timber. The wood was slippery but I embraced it like a long-lost lover and hung to it with all my strength. My mouth filled with sea water and I was forced to vomit it while at the same time uttering a prayer to Poseidon, seeking his assistance. Immediately, the broken piece of timber I was holding ceased tumbling and rushed, with me atop, right towards the shore of the island of Melos. Making a supreme last effort, I let go of the timber and dog paddled a few yards to the shore, got on wobbly feet, and tumbled ahead a short distance before collapsing again. I was rescued by one of the locals and stayed in Melos for some time, recovering and working on the obsidian mines. I finally earned enough to pay for this trip."

An old man who listened to Gennadios' tale remarked: "One of the acolytes to Poleites had a similar experience to yours, except that in his case he was saved by a mermaid dispatched by Poseidon. You should look for him to exchange miraculous survival stories."

Gennadios entered the temple and proceeded to the hall of worship. It was a windowless rectangular room located just beyond the colonnade, and served as the main sanctuary. In the center of the room was a magnificent bronze statue of Poseidon; the walls of the room had built-in shelves that held an assortment of worshipper dedications, similar to the objects Gennadios was bringing.

Gennadios' arrival interrupted an animated conversation between Poleites and Homorphos, the latter holding an exquisite pottery amphora decorated with a running man. The men were discussing the best placement for the amphora, but ceased their discourse as Poleites turned to the visitor and asked the nature of his business. Instead of replying, Gennadios fixed his eyes on Homorphos.

"You... Homorphos... are you alive?"

"Do you know each other?" inquired Poleites.

"Yes!" replied Gennadios. Then, addressing Homorphos, "I thought you were in Hades!"

Recovering, Homorphos shook his head in negation. "I don't know this man."

"But he seems to know you," retorted Poleites.

"Do I know him! He is the reason our boat sank and everyone but me drowned!! Curse you!!!" protested Gennadios.

Poleites frowned, suspicious. "Are you sure? Homorphos is a holy man, my main acolyte. You must be confused."

"I am not confused! This man is Homorphos, son of Hypatos! He was a sailor in my boat and made it capsize!"

"How did he make your boat capsize?"

"He committed a terrible crime that angered Poseidon, and brought about the storm that overturned us!"

"A crime? I cannot possibly believe that!" rejected Poleites.

"Do not listen to this raving maniac!" cut in Homorphos. There was a tinge of desperation in his voice that caused Poleites to do a double take.

"Explain yourself" ordered Poleites to Gennaios, now in a calmer tone.

"This man forcibly copulated with a live seal, making the poor animal shriek with pain. Poseidon listened to the cry of the creature and sent out the storm that sank all of us!"

"So, the god was angry at Homorphos, but ended up punishing all of you, is that it?"

“Yes,” replied Gennadios.

“But that cannot be” countered Poleites. “Poseidon sent a mermaid to assist Homorphos and escort him to safety.”

“I doubt that. Not after what he did to the seal.”

“He swore a sacred oath.”

“I will swear one myself!”

Poleites was baffled. “There is only one thing we can do. Let us go out to the altar. I will have you both swear oaths, and let the Furies punish whoever lies.”

By this time, other people had entered the hall of worship and were listening to the exchanges with growing interest. Poleites called out: “Everyone, let us go to the altar. I want you all to be witnesses.”

It had been a cool, sunny winter morning when Gennadios entered the hall of worship and encountered Homorphos. Now, as they walked out towards the altar, the sky had turned gloomy and a tempest seemed to be building up at sea, down from the cape. It was an inauspicious omen, and Poleites urged the two men to get the unpleasant business done quickly. The priest made each man stand by the black marble offering slab and asked each in turn to swear to the truth of the contradictory stories they were telling. Gennadios’ swearing of his version of the seal story went on without incident; however, when it became Homorphos’ turn, his denial of having forced himself on the sacred animal was followed by a rumble and a noticeable shaking of the earth, as if an earthquake was about to start.

Poleites became alarmed. “Homorphos, your vow does not seem to have been well received. Do you want to risk the ire of the gods by continuing to assert the matters to which you referred in your oath?”

Homorphos turned deathly pale. Shaken, he whispered: “I did not tell the truth about not abusing one of Poseidon’s creatures. However, my act was not driven by malice but by a desire that demanded satisfaction.”

Poleites faced Homorphos sternly: “You have perjured yourself and made a mockery of the sacred oaths that men must honor out of respect for the Gods. Your life is forfeited. Begone, now!”

Puzzled, Gennadios asked the priest: “I noticed that he did not disown the part of his tale about being rescued by a mermaid, and you did not take him to task for it. Why?”

Poleites shrugged. “The claim that a mermaid saved him and his description of the properties of such beings are now public knowledge and have captured people’s imagination. My disavowing Homorphos’ story after I formally sanctioned it would diminish the respect people feel for me and the office I represent. Better have everyone go on believing a harmless myth than undercutting my authority. Let the Gods clear matters up if they choose to do so. For now, I shall ensure that lord Poseidon receives a proper sacrifice.”

The ensuing festival to Poseidon was the best in recent memory. At sunset, the temple slaves hitched four white stallions to an ornate chariot. After they had finished slathering the car with flammable oil, Poleitos turned to his attendants and gave them a nod. This was the signal to march out the bound Homorphos, mount him on the car, and strap his hands to the crossbar that ran the length of the front of the carriage. He began sobbing and shaking his head, pleading for mercy. Poleitos nudged the youth who had been standing by his side, carrying a torch with which he had fetched fire from a silver altar carried by two other priests. As the youth approached the chariot, Homorphos began shrieking; soon, both he and the chariot were ablaze. The horses went charging toward the end of the cliff, and Homorphos’ desperate screams sounded increasingly distant. The crowd then broke out in applause as the chariot went hurtling off the cliff, into the sea.

Some spectators reported hearing a splash in the distance, and maybe a welcoming, non-human cry.

THE END



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