

THE CULTS OF THE GREEK STATES

CHAPTER I

CULT OF POSEIDON

(References, pp. 73-97.)

THE study of the Poseidon-cult in Hellas is of more value for the Greek historian than for the student of the higher religions of mankind. It lacks the spiritual and ethical interest of some of the Olympian cults, and from the earliest to the latest period Poseidon remains comparatively a backward god, never intimately associated with the nation's intellectual advance. But the ritual presents us with certain facts of great interest. And early Greek ethnography and the history of the earliest migrations of Hellenic tribes can gather much from a minute inquiry into the diffusion of this worship. Modern historians have become accustomed to use the facts of Greek religion as a clue for their researches into the period that precedes recorded history. But the criterion is often misapplied, and the value of it is still occasionally ignored. Much has still to be done in this branch of inquiry, and much may be effected if the evidence is severely scrutinized according to some fixed principles of criticism, and at the outset of this chapter it may be well to state and consider some of these. The historian of the earliest period, if he believes that he can extract anything from the religion and the mythology, has to reckon with three sources of possible evidence: with cult and ritual, with myth pure and simple, and finally with genealogical tables. Now the value of these sources is by no means equal. There appears to be a growing tendency both in continental and in English

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historical scholarship to exaggerate the value of the last of these three. The unsupported argument from genealogies may be considered of all arguments the most inconclusive; the transmitters of these heroic family-trees were in most cases very late scribes who may have been drawing indeed from earlier authorities, but who were dealing with facts which were especially exposed to various influences making for falsification. And often the genealogies are so complex and contradictory^a that one can prove from them anything one wishes, and to inspect them is like looking through a kaleidoscope. On the other hand, when the genealogy is simple, clear, and well attested it has a certain value as a clue. It cannot yield proof unless it is fertilized by a prevailing stream of myth, or corroborated by definite cult-associations or by place-names. Again, the ethnographic value of mere mythology may easily be overstated, though the present reaction against the contemptuous scepticism of a former generation is wholesome and just. Myth is volatile and flies easily over a wide area; therefore the common possession of one or two myths will not prove tribal affinity or even the contiguity of tribes. A large store of common myths does indeed afford cumulative evidence, especially when the myths are peculiar, belonging rather to the by-paths of national legend. But here also it is only when the myth is associated with actual cult that the ethnographic argument arrives at proof. Cult is more stable than myth and not so easily transmitted by mere casual intercourse; and we are dealing with more solid fact here than in arguing from genealogies. But here also it is easy to be misled. If we accepted, for instance, the theory that has been held by recent writers^b of monotheistic totemism, and believed that every Greek tribe was in its earliest stage totemistic and worshipped one god only, the totem-god, then the possession by one community of various deities or the common possession by different communities of the same deity would prove some kind of tribal fusion, and it might

^a Pausanias (8. 53, 5) complains of
Ἑλλήνων λόγοι διάφοροι τὰ πλέονα καὶ
οὐχ ἥμισυ ἐπὶ τοῖς γένεσιν εἰσι.

^b By Dr. Jevons, for instance, in his
Introduction to the Study of Religion.

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become a fairly easy task to reconstruct in outline the aboriginal history of Hellas. But for many reasons that cannot be discussed here the theory is hard to accept. We have to reckon rather with the probability that the main Hellenic tribes, when they were beginning to break their way into the Greek peninsula, already worshipped certain leading divinities in common. Zeus-cult was certainly a joint-possession, probably the Apolline also. Nevertheless a particular community undoubtedly tended to give a particular deity a paramount position, for instance to regard him or her as the guardian of their political union or as the ancestor of their families and clans; and thence we can sometimes discover a clue in tracing migrations and early settlements. Again, the mere record that a certain community worshipped Poseidon or Athena may throw very little light on ethnic origins. But if the cult is specialized by some peculiar title, such as Poseidon Ἰππιος or Φράτριος, this may be a fact of considerable significance. Such titles are rarely broadcast throughout the Greek states, but are found sporadically and often seem to emanate from a particular centre. We cannot even in this case always assume that these special cults have been propagated by a particular community in the course of its migratory or colonizing movements. An Apollo Pythios or a Demeter Eleusinia may travel over a wide area of the Greek world merely through the force of the influence of Delphi or Eleusis. Imitation and direct borrowing by alien tribes are always possibilities. But as explanations they are less appropriate when the cult is highly specialized, has no marked intrinsic attractions, and appears at points widely removed from each other. And when at each of these points we find a migration-legend pointing to a particular tribe that is known to have possessed that cult, the ethnographic argument based on the cult and the legend combined may become convincing.

This digression concerning method may be excused if one can show that a rigid application of the tests which have been described to the diffusion of Poseidon-cult throws light on prehistoric migrations in Greece, especially of the Minyan and Ionic tribes. Before, however, venturing on this discus-

sion, one must examine the leading features of the Poseidon-worship as it is presented to us in the settled Hellenic period. Looking first at the earliest literature, we find in Homer an incomplete portrait of the god, drawn however in accordance with contemporary cult. He belongs to the Olympian dynasty, claiming equality with Zeus, having the sea allotted as his realm ; he is friendly to the Thessalian Achaeans, and especially to the Pylian family of Nestor, which took its origin from him ; he is the giver of famous horses and is learned in horsecraft ; he is the father of monsters like Polyphemus, of giants such as Otos and Ephialtes, a paternity which agrees with his wild and stormy character ; he is *ἐννοσίγαιος* and *ἐνοσίχθων*, the earthquake-god, the shaker of the land, the destroyer of the rampart on the shore ; he is worshipped with sacrifice of bulls, lambs, and boars, and even far inland an oar might be erected as an aniconic *ἄγαλμα* in his honour¹, 111 a. The legend mentioned by Homer that it was he who with Apollo built the walls of Troy for Laomedon may be a faint recognition of his character as a god of the city. As regards his local associations we find the poet connecting him specially with Aigai, the Euboean or 'Achaean' city^{66 a}, with Helike^{66 a}, and with Pylos the Neleid settlement ; finally the epithet *Ἐλικώνιος* is, as will be shown, of historic interest and importance^{66 b}. To these Homeric citations may be added a passage in the Homeric hymn², in which the god is addressed as the stirrer of earth and sea, the lord of Helikon and Aigai, charged by the gods with the two functions of taming horses and saving ships. In Pindar and Aeschylus we find him recognized as a deity, not only of the sea, but of the rivers also and fresh streams³. Lastly, the genial prayer of Aristophanes³ sums up most of the traits with which the popular imagination depicted the god : 'Hail, King Poseidon, thou god of horses, thou that lovest the tramp and neighing of the brazen-shod steeds, the swift triremes with their dark-blue beaks of onset, and the strife of youths who glory and suffer hardship in the chariot-race, lord of the golden trident, and fosterer of dolphins.'

The literature, however, here as in other cases, is not quite

a full reflection of the manifold nature of the cult, which must now be considered. The maritime character of the god is naturally the most prominent in the worship throughout the historic period. And it seems clear that wherever men prayed to Poseidon they associated him with the sea^a, whatever other functions they assigned to him. The cult-titles of the sea-god^{8b} are such as *Ἐπακταῖος* at Samos, *Πελάγιος* at Athens and Rhodes, *Πετραῖος* in Thessaly, *Πόντιος* at Elateia and Tainaron, *Πόρθμιος* in Karpathos, *Προσκλύστιος* in Argolis. At Antikyra his cult-image was carved with one foot on a dolphin³⁴; in his Isthmian temple at Corinth he was grouped with the sea-powers Thalassa, Amphitrite, and Palaïmon⁵⁵; the dolphin and the trident are his frequent emblems on coins, for instance in the Laconian towns of Boiai and Gythion^{62d, f}, in Kaphyai of Arcadia^{64b}, in Sybaris and Posidonia^{107, 108}. Occasionally a sea-monster or pistrix is added as on the coins of Posidonia: and the trident was borne by the men of Mantinea as an ensign on their shields^{64d}, whereby they put themselves under the protection of the chief god of their stock. In his ritual the victims are occasionally thrown into the sea^{111, 114c}. Numerous promontories and maritime cities are named after him, and the worship of the sea-god penetrated far inland^{64d, 97}. The salt-water spring or lake found sometimes far from the shore was naturally regarded as the gift of Poseidon and the sign of his presence, whereby he might claim the land as his own, as he claimed the Acropolis of Athens in the strife with Athena and marked the territory of Mantinea^b and Mylasa as his property^{64d}.

But he was also *Κρηνοῦχος* and *Νυμφαγέτης*, the leader of the Nymphs, the god of fresh water: though he was never able to absorb the special cults of the various rivers and springs, such as Alpheios, Acheloos, and Arethusa. A question, not perhaps of the first importance, arises here whether his function

^a Wide, *Lakonische Kulte*, pp. 40–43, finds little recognition of the sea-god in the Laconian cult of Poseidon, but vide my references R. 62^b, and cf. Paus. 3. 17, 3 (Poseidon and Amphitrite carved

in relief on the bronze figure of Athena Chalchioikos at Sparta by Gitiadas).

^b At Mantinea even a grove of oaks near the temple of Poseidon was called *πέλαγος*, R. 64^d.

as a fresh-water god arose later from his primitive maritime character, or whether we should regard him as originally a water-deity in the most general sense, whose department tended to become specialized when his worshippers became seafarers. This will be the natural view of his development for those who believe—as the most advanced etymology appears justified in believing—in the connexion of the god's name with the root that appears in *πόσις, ποτόν, ποταμός*. If this theory is sound^a, an important result follows: Poseidon was a fresh-water god imported into Greece by the earliest Hellenic tribes from the Balkan peninsula. In any case evidence of a pre-Hellenic or non-Aryan character, which some writers detect in him, appears to be lacking altogether, unless the female administration of his cult of which we have two instances is to be regarded as evidence.

Leaving these questions we can at least decide that the recognition of Poseidon as a god of fertilizing streams was early and general. It was thus that he became a god of vegetation, *φυτάλμιος*, a title which Plutarch attests was attached to him in most Greek cults, and which we find in the cults of Athens^{45 p}, Troezen^{58 d}, and Rhodes¹¹⁵. The firstfruits of the season were offered to him at Troezen^{58 a}; we hear of cereal offerings to Poseidon *Χαμαίζηλος* at Athens^{45 q}, and the people of Kyzikos were bidden by the Delphic oracle to associate him in sacrifice with *Γῆ καρποφόρος*⁸⁶. If we can trust Hesychius, Poseidon had his share in the Dionysiac festival of the *Προτρούγαια* in some communities^b. For the same reason we find him not infrequently united in legend and ritual with Demeter. At Mykonos a sacrifice of swine to the goddess^c was ordained on the same

^a Ahrens goes further and interprets *Ποσειδών* as the 'Water-Zeus,' *Philol.* 23. 1 &c. Mr. Cook, in an article in *Class. Rev.* 1903, p. 175, follows Sonne in explaining *Ποσει* as locative, and the name as = the god in the water; but this does not seem to agree with the usual laws of formation of Greek proper names. We have no means of check-

ing the statement in Herodotus that Poseidon was not a 'Pelasgic' name, but a Libyan. We may believe on his authority that there was a similar Libyan cult of a water-deity (2. 50, 4. 188).

^b Vide Dionysos, R. 45^l.

^c Vide Demeter, R. 9.

day of the month of Poseidon as that on which a white ram was offered to Poseidon *Τεμενίτης*, 'the god of the temenos,' and a white lamb to Poseidon *Φύκιος*^{113 a}. According to Eustathius, a *πομπή* in his honour was part of the Demeter-festival of the Haloa at Eleusis¹⁸, and he shared in the honours paid to the mother and the daughter at an altar on the sacred way from Athens⁴⁹. His temple at Troezen, where he was prominent as a deity of vegetation, was contiguous to that of Demeter Thesmophoros^a. The facts therefore attest to some extent the truth of Plutarch's statement that Poseidon was *Δήμητρος σύνναος*, the sharer of Demeter's temple^b. Finally, in Arcadian legend his close association with the corn-goddess gives rise to important questions of cult and ethnography which will be soon considered.

We must take note then of this vegetative function of Poseidon's, but must not press it into undue prominence; most Greek deities possessed it, and many in a far more marked degree. He acquires it solely as a water-god, and never attracts to himself the ordinary characteristics of a chthonian divinity^c.

We find other notions of some interest that are derived from this elemental conception of him. The earthquake was regarded as the operation of Poseidon, the water-god. That this was an ancient idea the poetical epithets of *ἐννοσίγαιος* and *ἐνοσίχθων*, stereotyped by the time of Homer, bear witness. The one cult-title that undoubtedly refers to this dangerous aspect of the god, was the euphemistic appellative *Ἀσφάλιος* or *Ἀσφάλειος*. Macrobius couples it with *ἐνοσίχθων*, and the 'deum terram stabilientem' with the 'deum terram moventem'⁶. The story told by Strabo proves that he was right; for the Rhodians, when they recovered from their terror at the maritime volcanic eruption, which threw up a new island between Thera and Therasia, ventured to land there and founded a temple to Poseidon *Ἀσφάλιος*^{82 a}. There was strong need for such a worship in the Mediterranean, as the submergence of Helike proved—a portentous calamity in the fourth century which was attributed to the wrath of Poseidon. We may find the same significance then in the same cult at

^a Vide Demeter, R. 80.^b Demeter, 42^a.^c Vide infra, p. 51.

Athens, Sparta^a, Tainaron, Syros, and Kyzikos, though in later Greek literature Poseidon Ἄσφάλιος might be invoked in general terms as the saviour-god, the brother of Zeus Σωτήρ. Even inland, where earthquakes were frequent, the phenomenon would be attributed to Poseidon, as at Apameia in Syria⁹⁸.

The familiar epithet Γαίηοχος, common in the earliest poetry, and attached to his cults at Onchestos, Athens, Thurca, Therapne in Laconia, Tainaron, and Gythion, may possibly have had originally the same connotation as Ἄσφάλιος, with which it is coupled by Plutarch^{6, 7}. But the seismic connotation of the term which Wide^b believes to attach to it is nowhere made clear. All that is clear is that it alludes to the power of the sea-god, as the fragment of Arion shows⁷; possibly, like Ἄσφάλιος, to the sea-god as the Lord of the earthquake, possibly to an ancient Hellenic belief in the ocean as the girdle and stay of the land. At least it is not a 'chthonian' epithet^c.

Had the earliest Greeks been as familiar with volcanoes as they afterwards became in the Western Hellas, they might have associated earthquakes more naturally with the fire-god. But in the Greek peninsula the violent convulsions that changed the face of the land would be reasonably attributed to water rather than to fire. They were well aware of the bursting force of subterranean waters, and the terrible phenomenon of the tidal wave on the shore in the hour of earthquake. Therefore they naturally believed that it was Poseidon who split through the rocks of Tempe²⁴, who destroyed the cities on the coast, and who hurled up islands to the surface of the sea. And it is interesting to note that Aristotle^d himself attributes much of the seismic force to the action of water.

^a The Lacedaemonian army, when invading Argolis, raised the Paean to Poseidon on the occasion of an earthquake (R. 621).

^b *Lakonische Kulte*, p. 38: the etymology of his explanation of Γαίηοχος as the god 'who drives in a chariot under the earth' violates a natural law of the

combination of words.

^c In later poetry it could certainly have contained no allusion to earthquakes; for Aeschylus and Sophocles apply it to Zeus and Artemis as guardians of the country.

^d 396, B. 16.

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If we now consider the relations of this deity to the social and political life of the Greek communities we can at once gather some facts that will prove important for Greek ethnography. The tribes among whom a certain worship was dominant tended to regard the divinity of that worship as in some sense their ancestor, or the ancestor of their leading families, or as the guardian of the unity of the clan and ultimately of the πόλις. We find this true of Zeus, Athena, Artemis, and Apollo. It is true also of Poseidon. We are told by Plutarch that the descendants of Hellen sacrificed to Poseidon Πατριγένειος. The phrase is vague and too comprehensive, and there is no other record of this particular cult-title. But in a general sense the statement holds good of many localities⁹. An important inscription found at Delphi, of which the date may be as early as 400 B.C., and which contains the rules regulating the clan of the Labyadai, preserves the oath of membership taken by the clansmen in the name of Poseidon Φράτριος and Zeus Πατρώος³³. At Eleusis the former was worshipped as Πατήρ⁴⁹, and it will be necessary soon to examine the meaning of this doubtful name. He appears at Athens so closely associated with the ancestral hero Erechtheus that the belief has arisen that the hero was originally himself the God⁴⁵ⁱ; the question which will be raised later^a concerning the truth of this view, is the most important ethnographic problem in the study of the Poseidon-cult. In Troezen¹⁰ he was worshipped as Βασιλεύς and Πολιοῦχος, 'the King,' 'the Holder of the City'; he was the reputed father of the Troezenian Ionic hero Theseus⁵⁸^a, and near the city was a sacred spot called τὸ γενέθλιον χωρίον, associated with a legend of the birth of Theseus, and in all probability consecrated to Poseidon^b. For in the territory of Lerna, near the sea, we find a place of the same name, τὸ γενέσιον χωρίον, with a temple of Poseidon Γενέσιος, the birth-god or the ancestor⁶⁰^c, and the title Γενέθλιος occurs also in his cult at Sparta⁶²^b. The national importance of the Troezenian worship was great, and much concerns the whole ethnographic question. The city itself was called Posidonia,

^a Vide infra, pp. 49-52.^b Vide infra, p. 18.

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according to Strabo and Pausanias^{58 a} and the famous Amphictyony, whose meeting-place was his temple in Kalaureia, the island off Troezen, and whose members were from Hermione, Epidauros, Aegina, Athens, Prasiai, Nauplia, and the Minyan Orchomenos, was a very early league^a, partly commercial, but mainly religious, from which we may gather much concerning primitive tribal affinities and migrations^{58 e}. Leaving this point for a while, we may finally trace the Troezenian cult passing over to the colony of Halikarnassos. An inscription from the latter city records that the colonization was carried out from Troezen under the guidance of Poseidon and Apollo, and that a list of priests had been kept from ancient times, who had administered the Poseidon-cult *κατὰ γένος*, probably as actual descendants of the god⁹¹. In Sparta he was not only *Γενέθλιος*, but *Δωμαρτίης* also, 'the Builder of the House,' a title which Apollo enjoyed in Aegina^{62 b}. Elis honoured him, as she honoured Zeus, with the name *Λαόίτας*, a word compounded of two distinct elements, and hard to explain, but containing probably in the first part of it the stem of *λαός*^b, and therefore designating the god of the people⁶⁵.

Finally, we have to reckon with Poseidon *Ἐλικώνιος*, the most important of all these titles for ethnography, whose worship held together the Pan-Ionic confederacy, a worship well known to Homer^{66 b}. The great temple, called the 'Pan-Ionion,' stood near Mykale in the time of Herodotus, but was afterwards removed to a site in Ephesian territory, near Priene. Its priest was always a youthful member of the latter city, but a group of twelve cities held the administration. According to Herodotus these were Miletos, Myus, Priene, Ephesos, Kolophon, Lebedos, Teos, Clazomenai, Phokaia, Samos, Chios, and Erythrai. These were the communities, as he informs us, which specially prided themselves on the

^a The excavations on the site of the temple have brought Mycenaean pottery to light, and show that the cult goes back to Mycenaean times.

^b With far less likelihood the word

has been connected with *λάας*, as if referring to the stone of Cronos; but Greek cult-names are not formed in this fantastic fashion.