The Legend, Lore and Spirit of the Water Horse

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From Ancient Myth to Celtic Folklore

By

Stephen Miller

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For Lucy and Eddie

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He towers high above the placid waves, urging his team forward with his three-pronged spear. They run at furious speed amid showers of foam, behind they swim and blot out their footprints with their tails.

~ *Achilleid*, bk. 1 (first century AD), Statius

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When thowes dissolve the snawy hoord,
An' float the jinglin icy-boord,
Then water-kelpies haunt the foord
By your direction,
An' nighted trav'lers are allur'd
To their destruction.

~ *Address to the Deil* [Devil] (pub. 1786), Robert Burns

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Of course mermaids exist. Or, to be more precise, *of course* water spirits and magical marine beings of every kind are real and numerous and, in certain circumstances, somewhat dangerous…

David Bentley Hart, *The Lamp*, May 2021

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Unless otherwise indicated the following images were photographed by the author, Stephen Miller.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book follows my four previous monographs connected with the history of belief and the visual arts. It sets out to explore the legends and traditions associated with the water horse, embracing the lore and mystery arising from such enigmatic and elusive aquatic spirits. This book is concerned with the meaning of such stories and with the identification and association of such phenomena with natural, supernatural and mythical presences, with lake and river spirits and with sea monsters.

The book began life as a paper I gave on the water horse at The Folklore Society's *Water in Legend and Tradition* two-day conference, appropriately enough at St. Peter's by the Waterfront, Ipswich, in 2024. I am grateful to Jeremy Harte for the organisation of that event—which proved an especially suitable platform for my paper—as I am to the folklore historian Simon Young (a speaker at that same conference) for his suggestion and subsequent encouragement that I develop my paper into a book on the subject.

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Finally, to my wife and family for their love and support without which the completion of this project simply would not have been possible.

London, Midsummer Day (St. John's Day), 24 June, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

This book will attempt to connect the various traditions of the water horse that have arisen over the centuries, in mythology, folklore, literature, poetry, and the visual arts. They have appeared in supporting roles as a vigorous means of conveyance for the ancient gods; in relatively benign roles, cavorting on maps of the oceans and great lakes; they are allegedly, on occasion, fleetingly spotted in the natural world as forgotten, or undiscovered, animals lost to time, and also as supernatural and metaphysical presences; as well as cast in menacing, even terrifying, roles as malevolent demons sent to cause havoc, harm and retribution. They also, on occasion, seem to embody nature itself, rising up to reclaim the planet from the damage inflicted upon it by its human occupation. Such water spirits may appear in the guise of the noble and courageous; at other times as unpredictable, dangerous, demonic. What then lies at the heart and root of their essence? Are such seeming incompatible manifestations linked? And what is their relationship with the human psyche and their place in the cosmological order of things?

Our exploration will take us from the sea monsters of Graeco-Roman tradition (and their more ancient origins) to the lochs, rivers and pools of the Scottish Highlands and Islands, Lowlands and Uplands—haunted by kelpies and other strange varieties of water horse. We will examine the water horse as a recurring motif in ancient religion, mythology, literature and art; in the medieval world of the bestiary and Christian moral teaching; the natural world of hybrid or cryptid animal appearances; and in folk tales of malevolent supernatural spirits. The many connected stories and legends of the creature that arose throughout medieval and later periods, commonly share an ambiguous moral teaching, prevalent in the bestiaries, of real and fantastical animals, conjuring with the romance and mystery of water as a sacred, cleansing and also untamed and disruptive natural and supernatural agent.

This book will endeavour to trace and capture something of what such water spirits are about. We will be diverted one way and the other in this adventure and often wrong-footed and misdirected on our journey, but emerge wiser and undoubtedly more enriched for the effort.

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CHAPTER ONE

HIPPOCAMPI—THE FISH-TAILED SEA-HORSES OF THE ANCIENT GODS

He towers high above the placid waves,
urging his team forward with his three-pronged spear.
They run at furious speed amid showers of foam,
behind they swim and blot out their footprints with their tails.

~ *Achilleid*, bk. 1 (first century AD), Statius

The name *hippocamp* is derived from the late-Latin *hippocampus*, which in turn comes from the Greek *ἱππόκαμπος* (*hippokampus*)—i.e. *ἵππος* (*hippos*), meaning horse and *κάμπος* (*kampos*), sea-monster. Hence, hippocampus, literally means 'horse-like sea-monster' (it is also the term used for the genus of the small bony fish called the seahorse of the natural world). The *hippocampi* of this study are the mythological fish- or dolphin-tailed water horses of ancient Greece and Etruria (the region of Italy that now comprises Tuscany and part of Umbria), depicted on Graeco-Roman ornaments, monuments and mosaics. They are typically described and illustrated with the head and foreparts of a horse and the serpentine-tail of a fish or dolphin. The hippocampi were the mounts of nereid sea-nymphs and sea-gods. The titan Oceanus and the Olympian god Poseidon drove chariots drawn by them. Other fish-tailed animals appearing in ancient decorative work and manuscripts, include the *leocampus* (incorporating the lion), *taurocampus* (bull), *pardalocampus* (leopard), and *aigicampus* (goat). The *ketos* (Latinized as *cetus*) is another less specific term to denote almost any sea monster, but often indicates one with elements of a dog, or wolf, or wild boar. This association is largely to do with the man-eating monster Scylla often being referred to as a *ketos*—depicted as a fearsome sea-creature with the foreparts of a dog attached to her body. Such 'marine dragons', with dog or wolf parts, are thought to have derived from Bronze Age Minoan or

Mycenaean prototypes.[1] These are commonly found in harbour towns and appear to be favoured in Corinth.[2] The other main type of fish-tailed 'monster' in Greek and Etruscan art and mythology is the merman. All these marine types (merman, hippocamp and ketos) appear on Greek monuments of the 'Orientalizing period', suggesting that they are derived, either fully or in part, from the East.[3]

The Orientalizing period began in the latter part of the eighth-century BC, when the art of the Eastern Mediterranean and Ancient Near East (notably Syria, Assyria, Phoenicia and Egypt) came to influence Mediterranean culture, notably the ancient Greeks and the early-ancient Romans of the Italian peninsula. The Babylonians had worshipped the sea-god Ea—the Mesopotamian god of water (the Akkadian counterpart of Enki, the Sumerian god of water). In Mesopotamian mythology, Ea (also known as Oannes) was an amphibious being who taught mankind wisdom. Fragments preserved by Josephus and Polyhistor, among others, of the Chaldean priest Berossus, offer an account of Oannes and his interaction with humans. Polyhistor's version tells us:[4]

> In the first year [of Babylonia], there made its appearance from a part of the Erythræan sea, an animal endowed with reason, who was called *Oannes*. The whole body of the animal was like that of a fish; and had under a fish's head another head, and also feet below, similar to those of a man, subjoined to the fish's tail. His voice, too, and language were articulate and human […] This Being in the daytime used to converse with men […] and he gave them an insight into letters and sciences, and every kind of art. He taught them to construct houses, to found temples, to compile laws, and explained to them the principles of geometrical knowledge. He made them distinguish the seeds of the earth, and showed them how to collect fruits; in short, he instructed them in everything which could tend to soften manners and humanize mankind. From that time, so universal were his instructions, nothing has been added by way of improvement. When the sun set, it was the custom of this Being to plunge again into the sea and abide all night in the deep; for he was amphibious.

Oannes had a fish-tailed wife and fish-tailed descendants. In his presidential address to the Folklore Society (in 1960), Sir Arthur Waugh surmised that Dagon, the fish-tailed god of the Philistines, numbered among such descendants, 'and, probably, Derceto or Atargatis, the fish-tailed

goddess of the Syrians'.[5] Waugh notes that merman come into their own again in classical mythology with the likes of Triton, son of the Olympian god Poseidon. He tells us that Triton was 'at times amorous, at times bellicose, but he was generally well disposed to the human race'.[6]

The prototype *ἅλιος γέρων*—the nameless Old Man of the Sea—was the generic equivalent of the ancient sea-god Romanized as Hálios Gérōn, identified with any of several sea deities such as Pontos, Nereus, Proteus, Phorcys, Glaucus/Glaûkos and Triton. In a paper written for the *American Journal of Archaeology*,[7] Ruth Glynn states that there had been no complete analysis of the iconography of Herakles (Hercules) struggling with sea-deities, and consequently there is, 'much confusion even in the most recent books [of that time] between Hálios Gérōn, the Old Man of the Sea, Nereus and Triton'.[8] The ensuing discussion centres on the seemingly inexplicable change from representations of Nereus, as a mutating sea-god struggling with Herakles, to the younger Triton, sometime in the 560s BC. In the *Iliad* the epithet *ἅλιος γέρων*, with overtones of gentility and wisdom, is applied exclusively to the father of the nereids, who, although he remains anonymous, Glynn argues can only be Nereus.[9] It is in the *Odyssey* (and then in later authors) that the epithet is shared with other sea-deities: not only Nereus, but others such as Proteus and Phorcys (Triton does not appear in Homer). Nonetheless, Glynn asserts that the term Hálios Gérōn attaches itself 'more properly to Nereus', to whom Homer can refer without there being any resulting ambiguity. And it is he whom the later authors prefer to identify as *the* 'Old Man of the Sea'.[10] Hesiod had no doubt that Nereus is the deity indicated:[11]

> Pontos begat Nereus, truthful and never false,
> eldest of his children; he is called the Old Man
> since he is true and gentle; what is lawful
> he remembers, and he knows just and gentle thoughts…
> [and]
> …As for the daughters of Nereus, old man of the sea…

Glynn insists that artistic testimony also supports this identification of Nereus, on a shield-band relief from Olympia, a fish-tailed man—'balding and bearded, metamorphoses suggested by the flames leaping from his

forehead and the serpent springing from the back of his head'[12]—is identified by a retrograde inscription in the Argive alphabet, which reads 'Hálios Gérōn'. Seizing hold of him is Herakles (also inscribed). Lydos (an Attic vase painter in the black-figure style), active between about 560 and 540 BC, depicts a human figure inscribed as Hálios Gérōn on an oinochoe (wine jug) in Berlin, where he is a passive observer at Herakles' fight with Kyknos. It is a late mannered work by the artist and makes the link with the later humanized figure of Nereus depicted after the mid-560s BC.[13]

Ἅλιος γέρων (or Hálios Gérōn), as the prototype pre-Hellenic sea-god, is the forerunner of Poseidon/Neptune (god of the sea, lord of horses and brother of Zeus/Jupiter and Hades/Pluto). Nereus, son of Pontos (*the Sea*) and Gaia (*the Earth*)—Pontos himself being a son of Gaia—was the father in mythology of the fifty nereids, including the water goddess and sea-nymph Thetis, the mother of Achilles. Thetis is mentioned several times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and her sisters make frequent appearances in the *Odyssey*. Although the name Nereus is not used in Homer, the maidens are referred to as nereids, which may suggest that the identification of Nereus with Hálios Gérōn had already taken place. Thus it is possible that Nereus developed out of the more ancient Hálios Gérōn.[14] Triton is also not mentioned in Homer. The earliest reference to him is in Hesiod where he is identified as the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite. He is invariably represented as a merman engaged in epic wrestling matches with Herakles. Later *tritons* become a plural generic term for mermen. 'Triton, whose body was half man and half fish, and who gave his name to all his males descendants'.[15]

The term 'nereid' was originally reserved for the fifty daughters of Nereus and 'grey-eyed' Oceanid Doris, that is for those nymphs that populated the sea. The nymphs of antiquity, of land and water, were extremely long-lived (rather than immortal) supernatural entities, linked to the natural elements such as streams, pools of water and trees.[16] Certain myths and legends depict them as vengeful, jealous and given to kidnapping children and abducting the humans they fall in love with. A famous instance would be that of Hylas (one of the Argonauts, a companion and servant of Herakles), a handsome young man snatched by nymphs (specifically water naiads) when he had gone to draw water from a pond.[17] It was said that

children and young adults, who had died prematurely, had been ‘abducted’ or ‘snatched from life’ by the nymphs.[18] The attitude of nereids toward humans was often ambivalent. They could cause significant harm to humans, but also, when it suited them to do so, bestow gifts of riches, beauty, health and even artistic skill. However, all too often, they could be both malignant and whimsical and one had to act with great cunning and skill to obtain something from them. Tommaso Braccini, of the University of Siena, asserts:[19]

> Ancient nymphs could be hazardous to deal with, since they were jealous, touchy and vindictive. Medieval and modern nereids, however, could be much worse[!]

If an abducted lover, for example, cooperated the nereid might reward him with riches and good fortune, but nereids were jealous lovers and having an affair with a nereid was said to be physically exacting and ‘wore out the body’.[20] Nereids prized human children, as they were often healthier than their own, and would swap them with their own, either temporarily or permanently, as in stories of changeling abduction. If the children were later returned they were often said to be more beautiful than before, perhaps bearing some precious gift or token from the ‘ladies’.[21]

Following this somewhat necessary preamble on classical sea-deities and their attendant entourage we come to the next most common type of sea-being depicted in ancient Greek art, the hippocamp itself. The earliest known literary reference where the name means a sea monster is in Menander (ca. 342-292 BC), and Strabo (ca. 64 BC-21 AD) mentions a statue of Poseidon, at Helike, in which the sea god was holding a hippocamp.[22] However, the first half of the fifth-century BC witnesses the earliest examples of representations of nereids riding hippocamps and carrying the weapons of Achilles (son of the sea-nymph Thetis). It is thus established that the Greek sculptor Scopas (395-350 BC) was not the inventor of such types, as scholars had once assumed. However, as Katharine Shepard points out, it is probable that the famous group of Scopas, in the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (which has not survived, but is described by Pliny the Elder) had much to do with the popularity of nereids as the riders of sea monsters in the Hellenistic age.[23] It is recorded

that Scopas also worked on the monuments of the Temple of Athena, at Tegea, and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. According to Pliny, writing in the first century AD, Scopas carved at least one of the columns of the Temple of Artemis. He also worked on the sculptures of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, alongside Bryaxis, Timotheus and Leochares (all active in the fourth century BC). A large proportion of sea-monster depictions in the Hellenistic period in Greece (323-31 BC) carry nereids on their back. Depictions of hippocamps are also especially common on later Etruscan monuments. The Etruscans often copied Greek types, but in addition added others of their own invention. As already noted, Oriental art influenced Greek art—a great variety of fish-tailed monsters appeared in the art of the East, such as the goat-fish, the sea-lion, bird-fish, dog-headed fish and sea-bull.[24] It would be natural to suppose that, like other cryptid types, the hippocamp was also derived from the East. The epic of Aleiyan Ba'al (ca. 1,400 BC) possibly gives us a literary prototype of the hippocamp, in which the god Kousor is described as driving a chariot over the sea and commanding his chargers to 'push the water against the throne of Ba'al'.[25]

Hippocamps, nereids and tritons are typically incorporated—for decorative and symbolic purposes—as the entourage, or *thiasos*, of the great gods such as Poseidon. They are seen as part of the sea-god's triumphal wedding procession with Amphitrite, for example. In addition to their decorative appeal hippocamps represent the untamed power of nature, especially of waves and sea-currents. Depictions of Nereus or Poseidon/Neptune riding a hippocamp (see Figs. 1, 2, 18 & 19), or drawn in a chariot by hippocamps, demonstrate the sea-god harnessing the power of the waves. The celebrated 1999 Guinness television advertisement, about a group of surfers (inspired by Walter Crane's 1893 painting, *Neptune's Horses*), makes use of the metaphor of the 'sea-horse' to illustrate the wild and unrestricted power of the ocean.[26] While examples of the hippocamp were less common in the Greek Archaic period (ca. 600-480 BC) they do exist and like other depictions in other periods typically feature the head and forequarters of a horse and the hind-parts of a fish or dolphin. The hippocamps were sometimes winged (as depicted in Fig. 17, or the water bull in Fig. 16), or alternatively (see Fig. 1) with fin-like appendages (Greek hippocamps could be winged, while the Etruscans show a preference for the

wingless type, in later depictions both types are described),[27] and the rider, who invariably carries a trident, is commonly identified (as noted) as Nereus, later as Poseidon/Neptune, although specific attribution often cannot be conclusive.

The Etruscans were fond of representing fish-tailed monsters, especially on their grave monuments and the hippocamp was commonly featured as a favourite motif on the painted gables of Etruscan tombs. As noted, Etruscan artists seem to have invented more freely than the Greeks, adopting wholly new types of 'chaos monsters', such as the 'siren-fish', the 'sea-dog' and the 'lion-fish'.[28] During the course of the fifth-century BC, new designs incorporating hippocamps were increasingly introduced into Greek art, such as those already noted of nereids riding hippocamps.[29] There are several examples on red-figured vases of the period. A kylix (a two-handed drinking cup) in the Louvre shows a draped nereid riding a hippocamp, carrying a shield. Shepard draws attention to a painted marble vase of this period, in the Walters Gallery in Baltimore, in which Poseidon and Amphitrite are represented in a chariot drawn by two hippocamps. In front of them in the water is the figure of Triton and each hippocamp appears with two tails, an uncommon feature.[30] A vase of Parian marble, found in Rhodes (now in Munich), is carved with figures of nereids riding an assortment of sea animals and carrying armour. The monsters have spiked dorsal fins running the length of the body and a small fin between the legs. Their long smooth bodies with crescent tails are curved or twisted in serpent-like fashion. Furtwangler and Wolters have dated the vase to about 400 BC.[31] Another example of a nereid riding a hippocamp is seen in a mosaic excavated at Olynthus in 1928. The creature has a huge fish body with spiked fin and twisted tail. The horse's head is relatively small and fins take the place of forelegs.

Later red-figured vases with designs of marine monsters, such as those in southern Italy, show the horse's body to have inner markings of rings and dots. A horse's mane is typical but crested manes are not uncommon. They usually have the forelegs of a horse with a pair of fins directly behind them. In some cases fins take the place of legs. The tail may be a fork or a crescent or even 'a large flappy fin'.[32] There are only isolated instances of the winged variety in this later Italian period. Usually the hippocamp has a nereid rider

and often the figures form part of a mythological scene—Scylla fighting with a hippocamp, Perseus rescuing Andromeda in the company of hippocamps, ridden by nereids carrying armour, etc. It is again evident that the Etruscans would often appropriate Greek mythological subjects and modify them to their own ends. Evidently, from such as the Tomb of Reliefs at Cerveteri, the Etruscans imagined that the soul was carried to the next world on the back of a sea-monster. However, the Etruscans would also improvise—their repertoire included the hippocentaur and ichthyocentaur (sea monsters with the upper body of a human, front legs and fore-parts of a horse, and tail of a fish), along with bizarre depictions of Scylla (the sea-nymph turned monster) with the foreparts of a dog, or sea-gryphons and monsters with multiple female torsos attached to split fishtails.

Rome's Trevi Fountain (see Fig. 3) features two impressive-scale hippocamps. Designed by the Italian architect Nicola Salvi (1697-1751) and completed by Giuseppe Pannini in 1762, the fountain is some 85 feet high and 160 feet wide. Pietro Bracci's (1700-1773) sculpture of the sea-titan Oceanus features as the centrepiece, in an oystershell chariot pulled by two hippocamps accompanied by two tritons, themed as the *Taming of the Waters*. Three other sculptors completed the decorative work, Filippo della Valle, Giovanni Grossi and Andrea Bergondi.[33] The fountain has featured in several films and books, notably in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* of 1960. Also in Rome, in the gardens of Villa Borghese, is the *Fountain of the Sea-Horses*, executed by Vincenzo Pacetti in 1791, based on a design by Christopher Unterberger, an Italian painter of the early-Neoclassical period. In Florence, Bartolomeo Ammannati's (1511-1592) *Fountain of Neptune*, situated in the Piazza della Signoria in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, was created with the assistance of several other sculptors between 1560 and 1575 and features some fine examples of supporting sea-horses (see Fig. 4). And in Lisbon in Praça do Império (Empire Square) there are twin imposing statues of paired teams of hippocamps facing each other from opposite ends of a water channel running east to west along the southern edge of the square, parallel to the adjacent River Tagus. They are by the sculptor António Duarte and installed there in 1940 (see Fig. 5). The two identical fountains in Lisbon's Rossio Square were installed in 1889, replacing two wells that had existed there since 1837. The main figures are

by the French sculptor Mathurin Moreau (1822-1912) and the supporting figures and ornaments designed by Michel Joseph Napoléon Liénard (1810-1870). Two pairs of figures preside in each of the fountains, the mortal shepherd Acis, paired with the nereid Galatea, and Poseidon and Aphrodite. Four sea nymphs rise as mermaid-type creatures from the water at the perimeter of each fountain (see Fig. 6).

The Victoria Memorial, by Sir Thomas Brock, located at the end of The Mall, in London, outside the front gates of Buckingham Palace (completed in 1924) boasts an elaborate scheme of iconographic sculpture below a gilded bronze *Winged Victory* at the top. A nautical theme (in accord with Admiralty Arch) is described, with merfolk accompanied by dolphins and sea-horses. A triton and nereid bronze relief is seen on one side of the base (see Fig. 7) and a sequence of friezes of sea-thiasoi, described in marble relief surround the base (see Figs. 8 & 9), suggestive of Britain's naval prowess. The sea-horse is also a popular motif in heraldry. The 125th anniversary crest of Newcastle United Football Club, for example, takes elements from the coat of arms of the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (first granted in 1575, but unofficial since the 1300s), an important historical harbour in Northumberland, with a strong seafaring heritage. The city's coat of arms features three castles (built by order of Robert Curthose, eldest son of William the Conqueror, in 1080) argent (i.e. silver), on a gules (red) shield, supported by two sea-horses, 'crined' and 'finned' (with manes and fins), below a castle with a demi-lion guardant and flagstaff. The motto, *fortiter defendit triumphans* ('triumphing by brave defence') features in a scroll at the foot of the crest, adopted in celebration of the city's defiant resistance against the Scots in 1644.

To summarise on the origins and evolution of the types of sea-monsters (with our focus on the hippocamp) depicted in Graeco-Roman mythology and the decorative arts we can thus recap. The merman is a type that originated in the Orient. Indeed, this type probably existed as early as 3,000 BC and first appeared on Greek monuments during its Orientalizing period (ca. 700-600 BC). Examples of this influence are commonly seen at those sites most closely in touch with the East, such as Ionia, Corinth, Attica and Etruria. The Greeks adopted this type to represent Hálios Gérōn, the principal generic Old Man sea deity of the early period and prototype of

Nereus, Poseidon/Neptune and others. Herakles is found wrestling with Nereus, typically identified as *ἅλιος γέρων*, 'Old Man of the Sea', in much ancient literature and decorative art, a design also borrowed from Oriental art in which fighting contests of man and monsters are common. It seems Nereus was unsuitable for propaganda purposes, perhaps simply because, as Boardman put it, Nereus was 'not at heart a bad man'[34] and not in the same category of Herakles's formidable enemies. And so another sea-god is invented for the purpose, Triton, son of Poseidon. The motive of Herakles wrestling with sea-gods at all tends to disappear in the Hellenistic period (ca. 323-31 BC), where the central participants become more humanised. However, variations of the merman-type, hippocamp and nereid continue throughout the Hellenistic and late-Etruscan periods as part of the entourage or *sea thiasos* for the presiding deity, comparable to the Bacchic thiasoi of Dionysus.

Scylla appears for the first time on fifth-century BC monuments. The legend of Scylla is ancient and may have originally come from Phoenicia. It is likely to have come to Greece via the Minoans (a Bronze Age civilization centred on the island of Crete), who as a seafaring nation would certainly have had legends of sea-monsters.[35] In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus describes the torment of witnessing Scylla devouring six of his crew.[36]

> now Scylla snatched six men from our hollow ship,
> the toughest, strongest hands I had, and glancing
> backward over the decks, searching for my crew
> I could see their hands and feet already hoisted,
> flailing high, higher, over my head, look—
> wailing down at me, comrades riven in agony,
> shrieking out my name for one last time!

This description of Scylla is probably derived from the imagery of words associated with her name—namely, 'hermit-crab' (Greek: *skyllaros*), 'dog', and 'dog-shark' (*skylax*) and the verb 'to rend' (*skyllô*). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (written in the early part of the common era) Scylla was once a beautiful nymph of human appearance, loved by the sea-god Glaucus, but her jealous rival, the witch Circe, used magic to transform her into a terrifying monster.[37]

As noted, the hippocamps themselves may also have been inspired by the East. In the Archaic period hippocamps appear in Ionic and Etruscan decoration and on Etruscan sepulchral monuments. Hippocamps are often represented with nereid riders in sea thiasoi in the Hellenistic age. The hippocamp may be seen as a metaphor for the sea and the swiftness of the waves, bearing sea-deities and nereids alike in chariots, or on its back. The hippocamp is a decorative (as well as symbolic) motif and, as Shepard notes, 'always a minor denizen of the ocean…', albeit invariably in the company of sea-deities and sea-nymphs of greater and lesser significance and status, and appears to have none of the terrorizing aspects associated with the *ketos* or other specific types of sea monster here described.[38]

The water horse will re-emerge in later centuries in something more than a supporting role, also developing many of the 'terrorizing aspects' it apparently lacked in the Graeco-Roman period, as will become apparent in our subsequent chapters.

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Notes: Chapter One

1 Katharine Shepard, *The Fish-Tailed Monster in Greek and Etruscan Art*. First pub. 1940, p. 28. Shepard speculates (with reference to Spyridon Marinatos, the archaeologist) that the *ketos* has a prototype in a Minoan 'ferocious fish'.
2 Ibid. p. 29.
3 Ibid. p. 2.
4 Extract from fragments of Polyhistor (translated by I. P. Cory, 1832), referenced in Sir Arthur Waugh's presidential address to the Folklore Society, 'The Folklore of the Merfolk', in *Folklore*, June 1960, vol. 71, no. 2, pp. 73-84.
5 Sir Arthur Waugh, *Folklore*, 1960, p. 74.
6 Ibid. p. 74.
7 Ruth Glynn, 'Herakles, Nereus and Triton: A Study of Iconography in sixth century Athens', in *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 85, no. 2, April 1981, p. 121.
8 Ibid. p. 121.
9 Ibid. p. 121.
10 Ibid. p. 121.
11 Hesiod's *Theogony* (lines 233-236 & 1,003), translated by Richard S. Caldwell (1987), unequivocally identifies Nereus as *the* 'Old Man of the Sea' (*ἅλιος γέρων*), whereas Homer's *Odyssey* offers alternative claims to the title, in Nereus, Proteus and Phorcys. 'As the Old Man of the Sea's [Nereus] daughters [the nereids] gathered round' (bk. XXIV, 62); 'Proteus, that great power, the Old Man of the Sea' (bk. IV, 408-409) and 'the Old Man of the Sea who never lies' (bk. IV, 389); and Phorcys, 'the old god of the deep' (bk. XIII, 109, 393), translated by Robert Fagles (1997).
12 Glynn, 1981, op.cit., p. 121.
13 Ibid. p. 121.
14 Konstantin Kuruniotis, *Herakles mit Halios Geron und Triton: auf Werken der älteren griechischen Kunst*, 1893. Kuruniotis advances the opinion, in his inaugural dissertation, that the name *nereid* is older than *Nereus* and that Nereus was invented later, perhaps by Hesiod, to furnish a genealogy for the family (see pp. 8-12). The

objection to this is that *nereid* is a patronymic form (i.e. derived from the name of a father or ancestor).

15 Hélène Adeline Guerber, *The Myths of Greece and Rome*, 1938 (first pub. 1907), p. 124.

16 For land and water nymphs of antiquity see Jennifer Larson's, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult and Lore*, 2001.

17 In Apollonius Rhodius' (third century BC) epic poem *Argonautica*, the sea-god Glaucus informs the Argonauts that a nymph has lost her heart to Hylas and made him her husband. Theocritus has the nymphs shutting his mouth underwater to stifle his screams. In other versions of the episode the nymphs changed Hylas into an echo.

18 See ch. 13, by Tommaso Braccini, 'Greece (and Italy): The Nereids, Those from Outside', in *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings*, 2024, p. 218.

19 Ibid. p. 226.

20 Ibid. p. 223.

21 Ibid. p. 224.

22 Shepard, 1940, op.cit., p. 25.

23 Ibid. See p. 3 & p. 51.

24 Ibid. p. 8.

25 Ibid. p. 9.

26 Voted "Best advert of all time" (in 2000) in a poll conducted by Channel 4 and *The Sunday Times*.

27 Shepard, 1940, op.cit., p. 34.

28 Ibid. p. 34.

29 Waldemar Gang, *Nereiden auf Seetieren*, 1907. Gang lists examples of nereids riding sea monsters, which he believes to be fifth-century BC. Also, note Shepard, 1940, p. 40.

30 Shepard, 1940, op.cit., pp. 40-41.

31 Ibid. p. 56.

32 Ibid. p. 64.

33 Vernon Hyde Minor, *Passive Tranquillity: The Sculpture of Filippo Della Valle*, 1997, p. 252.

34 Glynn, 1981, op.cit., p. 132. Glynn cites Prof. John Boardman.

35 Shepard, 1940, op.cit., p. 93.

36 Homer, *Odyssey*, bk. XII: lines 264-270 (translated by Robert Fagles, 1997); lines 246-252 (Greek text). Odysseus tells of his torment in witnessing Scylla devour six of his crew.

37 Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. See bks. XIII-XIV in which the beautiful water nymph (of human appearance) is transformed into a monster by the witch Circe.

38 Shepard, 1940, op.cit., p. 96.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE FABULOUS WATER MONSTERS OF THE BESTIARIES, MAPS AND MANUSCRIPT ILLUSTRATIONS OF MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE WORLDS

In this chapter we jump forward several centuries from the hippocampi and assorted marine cryptids associated with the ancient gods to focus on depictions of sea monsters that featured in the medieval bestiaries and were seen in Medieval and Renaissance manuscript illuminations and map illustrations. Many sea monsters that appear on medieval maps, including the sea-horse, are cryptids that incorporate aquatic elements with those of recognisable land creatures. The medieval idea that every land creature had its equivalent in the sea is derived from Pliny the Elder (ca. 23-79) who explicitly notes in his *Natural History*, '…the vulgar notion may very possibly be true, that whatever is produced in any other department of Nature, is to be found in the sea as well'.[1] This idea is later also found in Isidore of Seville's (ca. 560-636) *Etymologiae* and Gervase of Tilbury's (ca. 1150-1220) *Otia imperialia*: 'there is no form of any creature found living among us on dry land whose likeness, from the navel upwards, may not be observed among the fish of the ocean off Britain'.[2] The *Physiologus*—a didactic Christian text written (or compiled) in Greek, by an unknown author in Alexandria, around the second century (or later)—included descriptions of animals from the natural world, along with other fantastic creatures. Each animal is described, with an accompanying anecdote from which its moral and symbolic qualities are derived. This exerted a tremendous influence, as a source text, for the various medieval bestiaries (book of beasts), in which we find descriptions of a great number of beasts, birds and fishes, varying from instantly recognisable animals from the natural world to the fantastical beasts of myth, legend and plain fantasy.

The object of the bestiary was not so much to document the natural world, it was to understand its workings. Their purpose was, 'the edification and instruction of sinful man'.[3] Everything in creation had its purpose and each creature its own nature, habits and mystical significance, which carried with it a moral lesson for the reader. While no explicit written descriptions of the water horse, as such, appear in the bestiaries there are full written descriptions of horses, sirens, water serpents, dolphins, whales, etc., and there is a rare fine mid-13th century illustration of a water horse, among other water cryptids, hybrids and natural fish (see Fig. 12) in a bestiary depiction in the Bodleian Library.[4] The bestiary informs us that:[5]

> Cattle and the beasts of the field and of the air were given names by men before fishes, because they saw them first. As man learnt little by little about the kinds of fishes they were given names, often from their similarity to creatures on land, such as frogs, calves, lions, blackbirds and peacocks […] Other fishes were so called because their ways were like those of creatures on land: dogfish were called after dogs, because they bite; wolves got their name because they pursue other fish voraciously, etc…

The bestiaries offer us an insight into the medieval mind. They were made not only to provide something of a natural history, but to draw from animal behaviours moral lessons for the instruction of man. They were also intended to reveal certain mystical significance (the phoenix as a symbol of Christ's resurrection, for example, see note).[6] In the bestiaries the same creature might well represent both good and evil, Christ or the devil. Confusion arose, and the writer was often reduced to attributing two meanings to the same beast, one good and one evil. Through such moral instruction and revealed meaning man could both reflect on his sinful state and learn the way to redemption. Although the written descriptions and the conclusions drawn from these descriptions can often be confusing there is considerable consensus between the various bestiaries. This is because the immediate source for any particular bestiary was an earlier bestiary and a common ancestor for them all was the *Physiologus*, in which descriptions of plants and animals (some natural, some fantastic) are described (and sometimes illustrated) with an anecdote from which the moral and symbolic qualities of the subject derive. The original Greek text had been translated into Latin at some point between the mid-fourth and early-sixth centuries.