

Bacchylides 17: Theseus and Indo-Iranian *Apâm Napât*

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Although comparative linguistics demonstrates the provenience of the Greek language from Indo-European, there remains a considerable lag in the study of connections between Greek myth and the conjectured IE inheritance.¹ This gap is due in part to the dominance of Dumézil's approaches, which, for evidence, have drawn more heavily on Indo-Iranian, Roman, and Celtic than on Hellenic reflexes. Nonetheless, though his method may omit or neglect Greek *comparanda*, Dumézil was instrumental in calling attention to a figure well attested in the *Rig Veda* and the *Avesta*, and, to a lesser extent, in Celtic and Roman myth, *Apâm Napât*, the "Child of the Waters." This essay argues that Bacchylides' depiction of Theseus' dive shares a number of motifs associated with *Apâm Napât*, and that awareness of the possible IE provenience of these motifs resolves some problems of interpretation in that poem. That Vergil's depiction of Aristaeus in the *Fourth Georgic* also shares numerous motifs central to *Apâm Napât* offers further support for the possibility of a Hellenic version of the figure. I propose that the Theseus of Bacchylides 17 and Indo-Iranian *Apâm Napât* both descend from a common IE ancestor.

Bacchylides 17 narrates how Theseus, taken by Minos among fourteen young Athenians on ship to Crete, confronts the king when he forces his attentions on one of the maidens. Theseus proclaims his divine paternity, and association with the Nereids. Minos prays to his father, Zeus, to show proof of his paternity, challenging Theseus, that if he is really Poseidon's son, he will retrieve a golden ring which Minos casts to the bottom of the sea. As Theseus dives into the sea, Minos alters the ship's course. Dolphins escort Theseus to his equine (ἵππιου) father's realm. Entering an undersea hall, Theseus

¹Exceptions include, among others, the works of Nagy, Boedeker, Puhvel, and Watkins.

sees the Nereids, their limbs gleaming like fire, gold shining in their hair. Amphitrite, Poseidon's wife, wraps a purple cloak around him, and gives him a wreath. He then ascends, reappearing beside the ship, in spite of its changed course, no mention of the golden ring.

Apâm Napât, though the subject of numerous studies,² and well attested in the *Rig Veda* and *Avesta*, remains an obscure, problematic figure.³ *Napât* is "grandson",⁴ *Apâm*, genitive plural, "of the Waters", female deities. I follow Findly in rendering *Napât* as "child" to emphasize the feminine and maternal attitude of the "Waters" toward him.⁵ MacDonell, in a discussion of *RV* 2.35, the only Vedic hymn specifically addressed to *Apâm Napât*, offers a pertinent thumbnail sketch, "... in the *Avesta Apâm Napât* is a spirit of the waters, who lives in their depths, who is surrounded by females, who is often invoked with them, who drives with swift steeds, and is said to have seized the brightness in the depth of the ocean."⁶

RV 2.35 does not narrate a specific myth, but offers a definitive portrait of the Vedic *Apâm Napât*, and some of the dominant motifs associated with him. He is a youth, whose abode is in the waters; he shines or glows like fire in the water, and is attended and surrounded by the Waters, a band of female deities, who flow about him as swift streams, themselves clothed in robes. He is closely associated with horses. Relevant excerpts of *RV* 2.35 are as follows:

²See Magoun, Dumézil 1963: 50-61, 1973: 21-43, Littleton, Ford, Findly, Puhvel 277-83, and *obiter dicta* in Nagy's works. See Findly for further bibliography. Though transliterated forms of the Sanskrit and Avestan figure differ slightly, in this essay, for convenience I render both as *Apâm Napât*, *pace* respective specialists in both fields.

³He has been seen variously as an epithet of Agni, Savitar, or Varuna, e. g. Nagy 1990: 99-102, Boyce 44-8. See Findly's arguments, however, against assimilating him with another figure. His survival into both Indic and Iranian traditions undermines this view, as does the probable kinship of Irish Nechtan and a possible Latin parallel in Neptune. I omit consideration of Irish and Roman parallels (other than the *4th Georgic*) to keep this discussion to a reasonable length.

⁴Cognate are Latin *nepos*, *nepotis*, English "nephew", and the like. Some argue that Neptune is also cognate, and there is a probable Greek cognate in νεπώδες, as discussed below.

⁵Findly 169. Cf. O'Flaherty's translation of *RV* 2.35.

⁶MacDonell 67-8. His text is quoted for *RV* 2.35.

- 1: ... let the god of rivers gladly accept my songs. Surely the child of the waters, urging on his swift horses, will adorn my songs ...
- 2: ... With his divine energy, the child of the waters has created all noble creatures.
- 3: ... The pure waters surrounded this pure, radiant child of the waters.
- 4: The young women, the waters, flow around the young god, making him shine and gazing solemnly upon him. With his clear, strong flames he shines riches upon us, wearing his garment of butter, blazing without fuel in the waters ...
- 6: The birth of the horse is here and in the sun ...
- 7: ... Gathering strength within the waters, the child of the waters shines forth
- 8: ... he shines forth in the waters with pure divinity ...
- 9: Clothed in lightning, the upright child of the waters has climbed into the lap of the waters as they lie down. The golden-hued young women flow around him, bearing with them his supreme energy.
- 10: Golden is his form, like gold to look upon; and gold in colour is this child of the waters ...
- 14: He shines forever, with undarkened flames, remaining in this highest place. The young waters, bringing butter as food to their child, themselves enfold him with robes.⁷

Mention elsewhere in the *Rig Veda* supplements our information. Close association with horses is frequent. He is *aśuḥeman-*, or “swift-driving” (2.35.1); “Steeds swift as thought” (*manojuvo vrsano*, 1.186 5d) carry him. *RV* 10.30 underscores *Apâm Napât*’s power to shine so brightly that he appears to burn underwater without consuming any fuel (*didaya anidhmah*, 10.30.4). He is closely associated with the ritual intoxicating beverage, soma (10.30.3-4), and perhaps with mead (10.30.7, 13).

Iranian *Apâm Napât* is mentioned frequently in the *Avesta*, closely replicating the principal qualities of his Vedic counterpart. *Yast* 2.9 invokes *Apâm Napât* in tandem with the female deities, the Waters, as “the swift-horsed, the tall and shining lord” (2.9=5.72). *Yasna* 2.5 appeals to the “kingly and brilliant *Apâm Napât*, of swift horses.” *Yasna* 70.6 invokes “that

⁷The translation is by O’Flaherty. Specific passages are discussed below in conjunction with Bacchylides 17.

high Ahura, the royal *Apâm Napât*, the glittering one, of the fleet horses", again mentioned in tandem with the Waters. Both the Vedic and Avestan figures evidence a close association with horses, codified in roughly parallel epithets.⁸ Overall, the Avestan *Apâm Napât* closely parallels the Vedic iconography of a youthful male deity, shining and brilliant, surrounded by female water deities, and closely involved with horses.

Gershevitch suggests that, in particular, the Avestan *Apâm Napât* functions as a symbol of political authority.⁹ He cites *Yast* 13.95, "henceforward the strong Grandson of the Waters will further all supreme authorities of the countries, and hold down (countries) that are in turmoil." Another passage which suggests a political dimension is *Yast* 8.34, "*Apâm Napât* ... divides the waters amongst the countries in the material world."

The fullest Avestan account of *Apâm Napât*, *Yast* 19, describes his role in a specific myth which supports Gershevitch's thesis that the deity particularly functions as a symbol of political authority. The narrative concerns the history of the *xvarenah*, the "kingly glory" or "kingly Fortune, by which legitimate rule is maintained among the Iranians."¹⁰ Created by Mazda (19.9), the *xvarenah* is possessed by a series of hero-kings (19.31-8), validating their right rule. When Atar, or Fire, the son of Ahura Mazda, and Azhi Dahaka, a three-headed chaos demon, compete for possession of the *xvarenah*, *Apâm Napât* enters the narrative,

That Glory (*xvarenah*) swells up and goes to the sea Vouru-Kasha. The swift-horsed Son of the Waters seizes it at once: this is the wish of the Child of the Waters, the swift-horsed: 'I want to seize that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized, down to the bottom of the sea Vouru-Kasha, in the bottom of the deep rivers.' (51)

We worship the high Lord, imperial, majestic, Child of the Waters, who has swift horses, the hero who gives help when called upon. (It is) he who created men, he who shaped men, the god amid the waters, who being prayed to is the swiftest of all to hear. (52)¹¹

⁸On the parallel see Littleton 434, Boyce 44, among others.

⁹Gershevitch 27.

¹⁰Boyce 42.

¹¹The translation of 51 is by Darmesteter, *Sacred Books of the East*, available at the Avestan website, <http://www.avesta.org/avesta.html>; translation of 52 is by Boyce (42).

Then Frangrasyan, a non-Iranian, attempts to seize the *xvarenah*. Three times he strips and dives into the sea, Vouru-Kasha, the *xvarenah* evading him on each occasion, as it is forbidden for a non-Iranian to possess it. On each failed attempt, a new lake or river is created as the *xvarenah* shifts location. After three attempts, Frangrasyan ceases trying to win it, knowing only an Iranian may possess it (19.56-64).

Yast 19 suggests an active, heroic dimension of *Apâm Napât* less evident in the Rig Vedic figure. He comes to people in distress, "the hero who gives help when called upon" (19.52). He has a pronounced nationalistic tendency, especially aiding Iranians when threatened by foreign tyrants, as in the Frangrasyan episode. Gershevitch (59-60) finds substantial support for his thesis that *Apâm Napât* is primarily a political figure, noting a number of parallels between *Apâm Napât* and Mithra,

Both are ... pacifiers of countries in turmoil and supporters of governmental authority. Either takes charge of fortune (*xvarenah*-) at times when that precious commodity is in danger of falling into wrong hands: *Apâm Napât* takes the *xvarenah*- to the bottom of the sea in *Yt.* 19.51 after an inconclusive contest for it between Fire and the dragon Azi Dahaka. It looks as if the Grandson of the Waters intended to save the *xvarenah*- from coming to harm while it was being pursued by the two rivals ... Accordingly, the resemblance between Mithra and *Apâm Napât* consists in that both are politically minded. Hence their concern in the fate of the *xvarenah*, symbol of legitimate supreme authority.

The *xvarenah*- itself, though Gershevitch is correct in seeing it as a symbol of legitimate authority, is closely tied to the nature of *Apâm Napât*. As with his Vedic counterpart, he has the paradoxical quality of seeming to be "fire in water" (cf. *Yast* 2.9 = 5.72, *Yasna* 2.5, *Yasna* 70.6, and the like). *Xvarenah*- itself derives from IE *swelnos, "solar matter."¹² Puhvel (281) adduces Sanskrit *svar*, "sun", used of *Apâm Napât* (RV 2.35.6). There is, then, an equation of sorts between the glowing *Apâm Napât* of the deep and the brilliant *xvarenah*- which he guards in

¹²Pace Boyce 66, who adopts an alternate etymology, this is the consensus view. Cf. Brandenstein 53-4, Pokorny 881, Lincoln 79, Puhvel 281, and so on.

the depths.¹³

Not only do the Indic and Iranian testimony share a sizable number of motifs, he is shining, surrounded by the female Waters, and associated with horses, his considerable antiquity is suggested in the parallel descriptions of him as a creator god (*RV* 2.35.2: "the child of the waters has created all noble creatures", *Yast* 19.52: "he who created men, he who shaped men"). In both traditions, however, his apparent earlier importance has waned, making difficult an accurate assessment of his position in the Vedic and Avestan pantheons.

The three traditions under investigation share a number of significant parallels. Bacchylides 17 includes the two central motifs noted by Dumézil and others in comparative studies, the "fire in water" motif, clustered especially about the Nereids, "for a brilliance like fire was shining from their radiant limbs" (103-5: ἀπὸ γὰρ ἀγλα - / ὦν λάμπε γύϊων σέλας / ὥτε πυρὸς),¹⁴ and an opposition between figures who have legitimate access to the brightness in the water, and those who do not, Theseus and Minos. Theseus, on his descent, enters into a community of female water deities, as *Apâm Napât* is so described. Amphitrite wraps Theseus in a cloak, as the Apas enfold *Apâm Napât* in their robes (*atka*: *RV* 2.35.14). Theseus has some connection with horses, a central feature of *Apâm Napât*, as his father, into whose palace he is received, is described with the epithet ἵππιος (99), "equine." Theseus in many ways is the embodiment of the hero who comes to the rescue, who has a pronounced nationalistic tendency, and is primarily a political figure, as noted above of the Avestan *Apâm Napât*.

Perhaps more intriguingly, several of the motifs which offer parallels to *Apâm Napât* occur in passages which have long been thought problematic in readings of Bacchylides 17. Why, for instance, if the poem emphasizes that Poseidon is Theseus' father, does he not only never appear, but why is there a sustained, thematic emphasis on female sea deities instead, the Nereids and Amphitrite? Why, of the many possible epithets, is ἵππιος used of Poseidon (99)? Why is the golden ring, the retrieval of which is the motivation for Theseus' dive, not returned, nor even mentioned again, once the hero dives down after it? These particular points, and others, appear less

¹³Cf. Littleton (428), "Iranian *Apâm Napât* ... is ... almost the embodiment of the *xvarnah*."

¹⁴The Bacchylides text is that of Snell-Maehler; translations are my own.

problematic when placed in the larger context of *Apâm Napât* narratives.

Though Vedic and Avestan accounts of *Apâm Napât* share considerable common ground, they emphasize different aspects of the "Child of the waters", or suggest that the figure evolved slightly differently in the two traditions. The Avestan narratives offer the best parallels for his relevance to issues involving government, and a contest involving legitimacy, while the Vedic accounts offer the best evidence for the figure's close relationship to the band of female water deities.

Of the several oppositions around which Bacchylides constructs his ode, perhaps the most central is the contest of wills between Minos and Theseus.¹⁵ In the larger context of Greek myth, their struggle embodies the struggle of Athens against a foreign power which demands tribute paid. Theseus, as other sources suggest, goes voluntarily as part of a tribute of human sacrifice to the Minotaur. The narrative of his dive, then, in these larger contexts, serves to foreshadow the larger story of Theseus freeing Athens from the tyrannical yoke of Minos.

Seen as a political struggle, the illegitimacy or tyranny of Minos against the legitimacy of Theseus, the challenge and implicit contest shares many features with the Avestan account of Frangrasyan, the foreigner, striving for possession of the *xvarenah*, guarded by *Apâm Napât*. The Avestan *Apâm Napât*, as Gershevitch argues, is an embodiment of governmental authority. In Bacchylides 17, as elsewhere in Greek myth, Theseus implicitly embodies correct, legitimate leadership, as opposed to the tyrannical ruler who uses force, as Minos here. The first action in the poem has Minos touching the cheek of one of the Athenian maidens. While commentators have analyzed the incident primarily focusing on its overtones of sexual assault¹⁶, the episode immediately establishes Minos as a figure of blunt force, imposing his will (*μεγαλοῦχον ... βίαν*, "domineering force": 23) on his assumed subjects. That the narrative views him largely in a political sense is evident in his epithets: *πολέμαρχε Κνωσίων*, "warlord of the Knossians" (39), *Κνώσιον ... στραταγέταν*, "Knossian general" (120-1)¹⁷, (cf. *κυβερναῖς*: 22, *κέλευσέ*: 87).

¹⁵For a recent overview of literature on Bacchylides 17 see Clark 103-142.

¹⁶E. g., Segal 25-27.

¹⁷Segal 36.

In Minos' ring we have an object that suggests close parallels with the Iranian *xvarenah*. Brilliantly shining entities operate as a central thematic structure or motif in Bacchylides' poem. The narrative depicts a basic shift in first associating such qualities with Minos, temporarily, but transferring them, to stay, to the Nereids and Theseus.¹⁸ Minos, who begins the narrative apparently in full control of the other characters, receives a sign from Zeus, πυριέθειραν άστραπάν, "lightning with tresses of fire" (56), validating his paternity. Immediately after receiving this bright fiery sign, Minos calls attention to his equally bright ring, clearly a symbol of his authority, τόνδε χρύσειον ... άγλαόν ... κόσμον, "this brilliant, golden ornament" (60-2).

The specific word that serves as vehicle both for suggesting "shining" as well as depicting its transference is άγλαός, "radiant", occurring three times in the poem (61, 103, 124). Brimming with confidence from Zeus' lightning response, Minos confidently issues his challenge, a very ancient and traditional type, frequent in Greek heroic myth. An evil, illegitimate king, when confronted by a youthful, right heir to the throne, sends him on a labor which will presumably result in the hero's death, and the consolidation of the usurper's power. This basic motif is the central organizing element in Eurystheus dispatching Heracles on his labors, Pelias dispatching Jason after the Golden Fleece, Polydectes and Perseus, and so on. Minos presumes he is sending Theseus, whatever his paternity may be, to his death.¹⁹ Hence his startled reaction on seeing the hero reappear (119-21).

Despite initial appearances, however, Minos has possession of brilliant shining entities, so important to the poem, only fleetingly. Though he, and the poem's structure, call significant attention to his radiant golden ring, τόνδε χρύσειον ... άγλαόν ... κόσμον, highlighted at the poem's center (ll. 60-2, in a poem of 132 lines), after he hurls it into the sea, it is never seen again, nor does the poem again describe him or his possessions with any similar radiance. The ring's epithet, χρύσειον, "golden", recalls another brilliant item. When he first stands up to Minos, Theseus declares his own heroic ancestry, noting a marriage gift his mother received, χρύσεόν / τέ οί δόσαν ίόπλοκοι κά- /

¹⁸Pieper 400, 404, suggests the poem itself moves from dark to light, but Janko 258, notes exceptions.

¹⁹Also the reason Minos orders the sailors to change course after Theseus dives (ll. 87-9).

λυμμα Νηρηίδες, "and the violet-tressed Nereids gave her a golden veil" (36-8). The mention of the Nereids serves a number of purposes. It is the first real indication of the direction the poem will take, already suggesting the (surprising) absence of Poseidon, the familial relation that will unfold between the Nereids and Theseus, and the poem's interest in tying these topics together through a sustained focus on bright, shining entities. In Theseus' mention of the χρύσεόν veil, the poem also points to the lasting association between the Nereids and Theseus, and stuffs such as the ring, which Minos now throws into the ocean, into the Nereids' realm. The poem further solidifies the association of χρύσεος with the Nereids in the description of their golden headbands, ἀμφὶ χαίταις / δὲ χρυσεόπλοκοι / δίνηντο ταινίαι, "and headbands, inwoven with gold, eddied about their tresses" (105-7).

As the ring's first epithet, "golden", is more closely associated with the Nereids than with Minos, so is its second, ἀγλαός, "radiant" or "splendid." Descending to the depths, and entering his father's palace, Theseus is dazzled, awestruck on first seeing the Nereids, ἀπὸ γὰρ / ἀγλαῶν λάμπε γυίων σέλας / ὥτε πυρός, "for a brilliance like fire was shining from their radiant bodies" (103-6). Unlike the lightning, that flashed momentarily for Minos, or the ring which he threw into the deep, the radiance of the Nereids is part of their being. As Theseus surfaces, emerging from his dive, ἀγλαό-/θρονοὶ τε κοῦραι σὺν εὐ-/θυμίαι νεοκτίτῳ / ὠλόλυξαν, ἔ-/κλαγεν δὲ πόντος, "the radiant-throned maidens raised the cry with new-found enthusiasm, and the sea rang" (124-). Who are the ἀγλαόθρονοι κοῦραι, the Athenian maidens on board, or the Nereids? Commentators are neatly divided.²⁰ I argue that they are, in fact, the Nereids (often called κοῦραι, as at *Odyssey* 24.58), not only on the basis of the ἀγλαο- compound, but ἔ-/κλαγεν δὲ πόντος, "and the sea rang out" (127-8), fits the context better, if the Nereids, sea deities who have ensured the hero's triumph, are those who are crying out.²¹

The ring is never mentioned again, the poem's single greatest "error" or interpretive problem.²² Does the poet forget

²⁰See Clark, n. 197, for a summary of the opposing views and justifications.

²¹Cf. the depictions of the Nereids escorting ships in Euripides, *E.* 432-441, *I.A.* 231-41.

²²In some later authors, Hyginus, *Poet. Astr.* ii 5, also Pausanias i 17.3, the ring is returned, but these may be attempts to "correct" Bacchylides.

to mention Theseus retrieving it, or decide it is unnecessary to mention this, or does Theseus actually not retrieve the golden ring? We cannot prove the poet's motivation, but the lack of mention seems deliberate. It clearly serves to indicate Minos' loss of prestige and a mistake on *his* part, underestimating his opponent, for, as in other instances of the type, the hero performs the presumably lethal task, remaining alive and a thorn in the tyrant's side. Further, if the ring is taken as an embodiment of Minos' rule, a sign of his legitimacy, his apparent loss of it points to the end of his claim over Theseus and the Athenians aboard, as the conclusion of the same myth, Theseus' defeat of the Minotaur, will make clear. At the very least, Minos' possession of the ring, regardless of what Bacchylides does or does not say about its return, is undermined.

Minos' failure to maintain possession of the golden ring resembles Frangrasyan's inability to possess the *xvarenah*, the radiant "symbol of legitimate supreme authority" (Gershevitch: 60). As noted above, *Yast* 19 narrates how *Apâm Napât* hides the *xvarenah* in the depths at the bottom of the sea, a close relationship existing between the *xvarenah* itself and *Apâm Napât* its guardian. In Vedic testimony, *Apâm Napât* himself is described as "fire-in-water." In the *Avesta* the brightness-in-water is the *xvarenah*, "solar matter", itself so closely identified with the Child of the Waters, as to be seen as an extension of him. Theseus in Bacchylides 17 plays a role quite parallel to that of *Apâm Napât* in *Yast* 19. He is not said to conceal the ring, nor even come into contact with it. But he does escort the radiant ring to the bottom of the sea, where it remains, as the *xvarenah*, out of reach of the illegitimate authority figure, its brightness seemingly transferred to the Nereids, now dancing about Theseus.

The Nereids themselves, then, have the radiance which Indo-Iranian accounts ascribe both to *Apâm Napât* and the female waters, the *Apas*, ἀπὸ γὰρ / ἀγλαῶν λάμπε γυίων σέλας / ὥτε πυρός, "for a brilliance like fire was shining from their radiant bodies" (103-6). Ἄγλαός, closely associated with them in Bacchylides 17, is elsewhere used of a torch (*O.T.* 214-15: ἀγλαῶπι ὦ πεύκαι). Thetis, though not specified in the poem, is the individual Nereid occurring most frequently in Greek myth, and her attributes may be generalized for the Nereids as a group. Hesychius notes πυρραΐη, "fiery", as her

epithet.²³ The parallel female deities in the Vedic account, the *Apas*, have precisely the same radiant quality, "The golden-hued (*hivanyavarnah*)²⁴ young women flow around him" (2.35.9). Furthermore, they are depicted as being in part the source for *Apâm Napât*'s similar radiance, "The young women, the waters, flow around (*pari yanti*) the young god, making him shine (*marmjyamanah*) and gazing solemnly upon him" (2.35.4).²⁵

Having emphasized the Nereids' fiery radiance Bacchylides proceeds to describe their graceful dance, χορῶι δ' ἔτερ- / πον κέαρ ὑποῖσι ποσσίν, "and with their moist (nimble) feet they were delighting their heart in dance" (107-8). Though the image of a band of female deities dancing together is common enough in Greek myth, it affords another parallel with *Apâm Napât*, particularly the Vedic account. While "dance" *per se* does not occur in *RV* 2.35 to articulate the *Apas*' activity around *Apâm Napât*, the hymn stresses their busy activity around him: "The pure waters surrounded (*pari tasthur*) this pure, radiant child of the waters" (2.35.3); "The young women, the waters, flow around (*pari yanti*) the young god, making him shine and gazing solemnly upon him." (2.35.4); "The golden-hued young women flow around (*pari yanti*) him" (2.35.9) The repeated verbal prefix *pari* keeps the *Apas* in circular motion about *Apâm Napât*.

Having witnessed the radiant Nereids collectively in dance, Theseus now becomes aware of Amphitrite, in particular. She places a purple cloak or robe about him (112)²⁶ and a garland on his head (113-5), a wedding present to her from Aphrodite. In another Vedic parallel, the *Apas*, in the final couplet of the hymn enfold the Child of the Waters with their robes, "The young waters ... themselves enfold him with robes (*atkaih*)" (2.35.14). In Bacchylides 17, Amphitrite throwing the cloak about the hero is the last item in the narrative's underwater

²³Hesychius, *Alexandrius Lexicon*, v. III, 414. rec. M. Schmidt (Amsterdam: Hakkert 1965). The epithet may, however, refer to her as placing Peleus' children in fire to see which were immortal, so Gantz 231.

²⁴Sanskrit "*hiranyo*" is a cognate with English "golden", Pokorny 429-30.

²⁵Is *marmjyamanah* to be connected with *marut* and *marūtā*? If so compare the description of Poseidon's underwater palace in the *Iliad*, χρύσεια μαρμαίροντα (13.22).

²⁶Though there is considerable ambiguity in the text, Barron makes the case for ἀγῶνα as cloak; cf. Theseus' parallel description in Bacchylides 18.52, χιτῶνα πορφύρεον; Blass (1904 ed) notes a Nereid named *Aicna* = *Eione*, Hesiod, *Theog.* 255

section. In RV 35, the parallel action, in fact, closes the hymn. In both narratives, the image of the female water deities covering the Child of the Waters figure with robes provides closure, cementing the close relationship between the female band and the young male in their midst. Theseus gains considerable stature, if not power, from his visit with the Nereids, much as the Vedic Child of the Waters is described in his context, "gathering strength within the waters" (2.35.7).

We have noted that Indic and Iranian testimony emphasizes *Apâm Napât*'s close association with horses, consistently throughout both traditions (RV 1.186.5; *Yast* 2.9 = 5.72, *Yasna* 2.5, and so on). Bacchylides 17 briefly parallels this detail as well. As Theseus descends underwater, he receives unexpected help, φέρον δὲ δελφῖνες (ἐν) ἄλι - / ναίεται μέγαν θοῶς / Θησέα πατρὸς ἱππί- / ου δόμον, "dolphins, sea dwellers, were bearing him to the great palace of his equine father" (97-100). Some have criticized the relevance of this epithet,²⁷ Gerber's comment (363) being typical, "It may seem out of place here, but is purely ornamental." Janko's justification (258), on the other hand, partly that Theseus rides the dolphins like horses, is apropos. If, however, Theseus' involvement in this myth is cognate with the Child of Waters, we should expect him, in some way, to be accompanied by horses.

Having mentioned Poseidon, we should consider whether Poseidon himself might not be a more expected Hellenic reflex than Theseus of a possible IE Child of the Waters figure. The name of his Roman equivalent, Neptune, has been advanced as possibly cognate with *Napât*.²⁸ Littleton argues that Poseidon may be a Greek version of an IE "source of waters" god, cognate with *Apâm Napât*. From at least Homer onward, however, Poseidon is typically represented as a much older figure, middle aged, and without a central myth which replicates or retains nearly as many of the central iconographic features common to *Apâm Napât* and the Theseus of Bacchylides 17, excepting the very close association with horses. It may very well be that such a myth once existed. If so, in time his son became imbued with the qualities most closely associated with the original IE figure (a not unlikely occurrence in Greek myth, in particular, in which inheritance plays so large a role).

²⁷F. G. Kenyon, first editor (London 1897): 170, Jebb 386, Gerber 363. Defending it, is Janko 257-9.

²⁸See Dumézil 1973, Littleton 425, Puhvel 279-282.

Though Theseus is human, and mortal,²⁹ the ease with which he makes his descent through the sea underscores a natural affinity for a (sub-)marine context. Similarly, his reception by Amphitrite and the Nereids complete, he surfaces right beside the ship, though Minos had shifted course (87-9). Though such superhuman undersea ability is not without parallel in mythology³⁰, in Bacchylides 17 Theseus seems to possess the aquatic qualities expected in a deity such as *Apâm Napât*. An innate marine kinship is perhaps suggested in the poem's description as he dives, πόντιόν τέ νιν / δέξατο θελημόν ἄλσος, "the sacred marine precinct kindly welcomed him" (84-5).

Bacchylides employs another root thematically articulating both the "watery" nature of Theseus and kinship with the Nereids. When the poet first signals Theseus' opposition to Minos, he does so through the hero's nonverbal communication³¹, ἴδεν δὲ Θησεύς, / μέλαν δ' ὑπ' ὀφρύων / δινάσδεν ὄμμα, "but Theseus saw, and spun a dark glance under his brows" (16-8). While δινάω / δινέω is common in such descriptions (cf. Pindar, *Paeon* 20.13: ὀμμάτων ἄπο σέλας ἐδίνασεν), the verb is a denominative from δίνη, whose earliest meaning denotes watery eddies, or whirlpools.³² Typical of the poem's careful structure³³, the verb recurs later, describing the Nereids, ἀμφὶ χαίταις / δὲ χρυσεόπλοκοι / δίνηντο ταινίαι, "and headbands, inwoven with gold, eddied about their tresses" (105-7). While the verb need not evoke aquatic associations, when applied to the Nereids, such association of meaning is quite natural, and forms another, if subtle, link and identification between the young hero about to dive into the depths and the marine female deities who receive him. Similar ambiguity is undoubtedly present in ὕγροισι ποσσίν, occurring in the next line (108). Ὑγρός has a secondary meaning of "nimble", but referring to the Nereids dancing in their watery realm, it surely retains some of its primary *liquid* associations.

²⁹Accounts of his death are late, Plutarch (*Thes* 35) and Diodorus 4.62.4. Cf. Gantz 297-8.

³⁰*Beowulf* offers a parallel in the hero's combat with Grendel's mother (1491-1570) and earlier defeat of the sea-monster (549-72).

³¹See Lateiner for a relevant study.

³²The usual use in Homer, see especially *Il.* 21.11, 132, and so on.

³³On which, see, e. g. Janko, Segal, Pieper, and Clark.

To strengthen the case that Theseus' dive descends from an IE "Child of the Waters" figure, we should observe that Vergil's account of Aristaeus in the *4th Georgic* shares several key motifs. Though Vergil draws from a number of sources, that his narrative, as will be seen, shares so many key motifs increases the likelihood that a "Child of the Waters" figure was known to Hellenic culture. As the myth begins Aristaeus stops by "the sacred font of the river's source", *extremi sacrum caput astitit amnis* (319),³⁴ to complain to his mother, Cyrene, at the bottom of the river, Peneus, in "the depths of the whirlpool." In his complaint, Aristaeus asks her to "bring a savage flame upon my stalls", *fer stabulis inimicum ignem* (330), "burn my crops", *ure sata* (331). Cyrene dwells in the depths accompanied by a band of water nymphs, her sisters (351). The female deities give off a radiance from their hair, "their shiny tresses flowing over their shining necks", *caesariem effusae nitidam per candida colla* (337), heads, *flavum caput* (352), and golden ornaments (342).

Hearing her son's complaint, Cyrene commands that he be brought below, "At once she ordered the deep streams to part wide so the youth could enter" (359-60). He enters, awestruck,

... the wave, arched into the shape of a mountain, surrounded him and took him in its deep cavity and sent him under the river (*amnem*). And now, marvelling at his mother's palace and watery realms ... he went, and dumbstruck, by the tremendous surge of the waters, he gazed at all the rivers gliding under the great earth. 360-7

Ushering him in, the Nymphs pour spring waters on his hands, and lay out a feast, "the altars ablaze with Panchaeian fires", *Panchaeis adolescent ignibus arae* (379). When Cyrene then pours libations, "three times the flame shone back, having reached the rooftop", *ter flamma ad summum tecti subiecta reluxit* (385). The narrative then shifts to an episode closely based on Menelaos' encounter with Proteus (*Od.* 4.351-570).

While commentators have observed that Vergil borrows various details from known sources, Homeric epic (*Iliad* 18, in particular), Hellenistic poetry (Callimachus, *H.* 3.42-3)³⁵, and so on, the overall narrative shares a considerable number of motifs with both Bacchylides 17 and Indo-Iranian accounts of the

³⁴The Latin text is that of Thomas; translations are my own.

³⁵Thomas 209.

"Child of Waters." Aristaeus is a youth, *iuuenis* (360), son of a water deity. The narrative emphasizes the fire-in-water motif in repeated attention to the radiant qualities of the Nymphs (337, 342, 352), the fire leaping up as Cyrene pours libations (385), and in Aristaeus' seemingly paradoxical request of a *water* deity to *burn* his stables (330-1).³⁶ The youth is received by a band of female water deities on his descent. As with Theseus Aristaeus has legitimate access to this domain, *fas illi limina divum / tangere*, "it is lawful for him to touch the thresholds of the goddesses" (358-9). Though Aristaeus receives considerable aid in his descent and in his capture of Proteus, the narrative nonetheless suggests his own affinity for aquatic pursuits. Line-initial *ibat* occurs twice in the poem, first of Aristaeus as he enters his mother's palace (365), then of Proteus, as he enters his lair (430).³⁷ The careful detail suggests a thematic parallel between Aristaeus and the older sea deity.

Though the *4th Georgic*, Bacchylides 17, and Indo-Iranian accounts share the motifs noted briefly above, Vergil's poem replicates some details visible in accounts of *Apâm Napât*, but absent in Bacchylides. Unlike Theseus, Aristaeus is a god, as is the Child of the Waters, being the answer to the question that initiates his tale, *Quis deus hanc, Musae, quis nobis extudit artem? ... pastor Aristaeus* (315-7). Aristaeus' descent, unlike Theseus', is to a river bottom. In Indo-Iranian tradition the *Apas* are divine personifications of all waters, seas, lakes, rain, and often represented as rivers, and their sources, issuing from a particular sea or lake, much as Vergil depicts the Nymphs of the *4th Georgic* (366-7). The Vedic *Apâm Napât* is said to be the offspring of rivers (2.35.1), as is Aristaeus. Vergil's term for river, *amnis* (319, 362), is, in fact, thought to be cognate with *Apas*.³⁸ In *Yast* 19 *Apâm Napât* guards the *xvarenah* at the "bottom of the deep rivers" (*Yast* 19.51), also the relevant locus in the *4th Georgic* (360-7). In *Yast* 19, the other rivers and lakes are generated each time the potential usurper attempts unsuccessfully to obtain the *xvarenah* from the bottom of Vouru-Kasha (19.56-62). Aristaeus sees the sources of many rivers, *omnia sub magna labentia flumina terra / spectabat diversa locis* (366-7, followed by a catalogue; cf. 372-3). The entire *4th*

³⁶Though see Thomas, on 4.329-31, for the fire's reference to events in book 2 of the *Georgics*.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 213.

³⁸Pokorny 51-2; cf. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. *amnis*.

Georgic, in fact, not just the Aristaeus narrative, displays a thematic concern with the sources of the world's rivers. As Vergil describes the *bugonia*, practiced in Egypt, he first gives an account of the source of the Nile, *usque coloratis amnis devexus ab Indis* (293).³⁹ The poem concludes with a reference to the Euphrates (561), which, though Vergil also uses for "political" purposes,⁴⁰ continues a thematic use of rivers and streams throughout the entire work.

After the proem (4.1-7), the narrative focuses on the best location for bees, emphasizing the need to be near *liquidi fontes* (18). This is more than common sense, or a parallel with the *3rd Georgic*.⁴¹ It serves to introduce the importance of waters and rivers, Cyrene and sisters included, and their proximity to Aristaeus, as a theme in the poem. The bees themselves are also depicted as closely involved with water. They are always seeking special waters, *aquas dulcis* (61-2), watching the skies for rains, *speculantur aquas et nubila caeli* (166), providing water for others, *aquantur* (193), they are said to drink "heavenly draughts", *haustus / aetherios* (220-1), and so on.

Vergil's Aristaeus narrative and Indo-Iranian accounts of *Apâm Napât* both depict the youth ingesting, and/or being annointed with special liquids given him by the female water deities. In *RV* 2.35 the *Apas* both suckle the Child of the Waters,⁴² *dhayati* (2.35.13), and they give him clarified butter for food (2.35.10, 11, 14; cf. 10.30.5). Perhaps as a result of receiving this food, or through other activity by the *Apas* (annointing? cf. "themselves enfold him with robes"), *Apâm Napât* is also described as "wearing his garment of butter" (2.35.4). As soon as Aristaeus descends to the chamber of Cyrene and her sisters, they pour spring waters on his hands (*manibus liquidos dant ordine fontis*: 376). Cyrene then pours a libation on the hearth, *ter liquido ardentem perfundit nectare Vestam*

³⁹The passage has been criticized as longwinded (e. g., Thomas on 287-94) perhaps because the thematic connection with Cyrene and other rivers has been overlooked.

⁴⁰See Thomas' intriguing note on 1.509.

⁴¹Thomas notes the parallel in 3.529, *fontes liquidi*, and the proximity of waters to the flocks of the *3rd Georgic*.

⁴²Cf. one of Vergil's presumed sources, Pindar's brief reference to Aristaeus, τὰ δ' ἐπιγουνίδιον θησάμεναι (in spite of the metrical problems, the manuscript θησάμεναι, "having suckled" may offer likelier sense than the adopted reading) βρέφος αὐταῖς, / νέκταρ ἐν χεῖλεσσι καὶ ἀμβροσίαν / στάξιοι. θήσονται τέ νιν ἀθάνατον (P. 9.62-3).

(384). *Liquido ... nectare* occurs earlier in the poem, before the Aristaeus narrative, as a periphrasis for honey, "they (bees) pack it (honey) and swell the cells with liquid nectar", (*stipant et liquido distendunt nectare cellas*: 164). Aristaeus, then, the keeper of honey, himself receives blessing by means of actual nectar from divine hands.

The Vedic Child of the Waters is also closely involved with Soma, the ritual liquid intoxicant, viewed at times as another form of *Apâm Napât* himself. That Aristaeus is a honey tender offers a suggestive parallel. The Soma with which Vedic *Apâm Napât* is mentioned is often compared with honey. In *RV* 7.47.2 the poet calls upon the *Apas* to let The Child of the Waters set in motion "the wave most sweet", i. e. Soma. In *RV* 10.30.3 priests are urged to honor him with an oblation and to press sweet Soma for him, for which in turn he will give "the beautifully clarified wave." *RV* 10.30.4 asks *Apâm Napât* to give the sweet waters with which Indra increases his courage, another Soma reference. The most frequent word for sweet in these passages is *madhu*, cognate with Gk μέθυ, English "mead", and which assumes the meaning "honey" in post-Vedic Sanskrit. Aristaeus, as keeper of honey which is compared to nectar, and equated with other divine substances (*liquido ... nectare* 164 > 384), and *Apâm Napât* are both keepers of, or closely associated with, a special liquid foodstuff, and responsible for mortals' access to it.

After Cyrene and her sisters receive Aristaeus. Vergil's narrative shifts to a scene based on Menelaos' encounter with Proteus (*Od.* 4.351-570). This later scene and its Homeric source both bear additional relevance to our inquiry. Stranded in Egypt, Menelaos receives help from the Nereid-like Eidothea, who gives advice on how to approach and capture her father, Proteus. Central to capturing Proteus is knowledge of his daily routine, which entails that at noon, he sleeps surrounded by his seals. Eidothea describes the seals as νέποδες καλῆς ἀλοσούδνης (4.404), the first and third words being mysterious. Of νέποδες West notes "the most plausible explanation ... is 'descendants, children', cf. Latin *nepotes*." Νέποδες is, then, probably cognate with Indo-Iranian *napât*.⁴³ As for ἀλοσούδνη, in its only other occurrence in Homer it is an epithet of Thetis (20.207), most frequent of the Nereids. Apollonius, following suit, uses it as an

⁴³West 219. Cf. Pokorny 764.

epithet of the Nereids collectively (*Argo*. 4.1599). Chantraine notes that ancient grammarians took it as “daughter of the sea.” In νέποδες καλῆς ἀλοσύδνης, then, we appear to have a Homeric reflex of an earlier phrase much like that which in Indo-Iranian became *Apâm Napât*.⁴⁴ It is most intriguing, then, that the sole context in which νέποδες καλῆς ἀλοσύδνης occurs, is a passage upon which Vergil draws to shape his own narrative of a “Child of the Waters” figure.

Finally, one of the forms which Eidothea says Proteus will assume when Menelaos tries to capture him, is fire, θεσπιδαῆς πῦρ, “magical fire” (4.418). However, when Menelaos wrestles Proteus, the sea deity does not turn into fire (4.455-8). Eidothea’s full description contains not only the fire-in-water motif, so central to the the Child of the Waters, but Proteus’ ability to assume the forms of all living beings perhaps parallels Vedic and Avestan accounts of *Apâm Napât* as the creator of all living beings, πάντα δὲ γιγνόμενος πειρήσεται, ὅσσ’ ἐπὶ γαῖαν / ἐρπετὰ γίγνονται καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ θεσπιδαῆς πῦρ, “And he will try you by taking the form of all creatures that come forth / and move on the earth, even water and magical fire” (4.417-8). Vergil faithfully replicates the pertinent details, as Aristaeus entraps Proteus, Cyrene warning her son that Proteus will assume numerous forms in an attempt to escape, including a roaring fire (409). Unlike in Homer’s account, in the *4th Georgic* Proteus realizes the threatened description, as Vergil fully exploits the fire-in-water motif *transformat sese in...ignem* (441-2), and *ardentis oculos intorsit lumine glauco* (451).⁴⁵

It is unlikely that Aristaeus was always a Child of the Waters figure, as earlier attestations do not place him so closely in contact with aquatic deities. Vergil, if responsible for transforming Aristaeus into such a figure, offers us an example of the adaptable nature of mythical figures. More importantly for our inquiry, however, the *4th Georgic* shares motifs which are present in the Indo-Iranian myths, but absent in Bacchylides’ narrative. Consequently, the *4th Georgic*, though partly modelled on Bacchylides 17, may suggest that the independent survival of a considerable nexus of motifs, loosely associated with a Child of the Waters figure, hangs on not only as late as the Theseus of

⁴⁴Though the grammatical numbers are reversed, νέποδες, a plural, ἀλοσύδνης, singular.

⁴⁵See Thomas, on ll. 407-10, on how closely Vergil echoes the Homeric original.

Bacchylides 17, but into the first century B. C.⁴⁶

On the basis of the parallels considered above, I argue, then, that Theseus, as depicted in Bacchylides 17, and Indo-Iranian *Apâm Napât* derive from the same, inherited IE figure, the "Child of the Waters." I do not extend this argument to the entirety of Theseus as extant in Greek myth. Traditional figures may always take on lives of their own in different eras and contexts, later or other versions not always remaining consistent with earlier conceptions. In Bacchylides 17, we have a heroic exploit fairly unique within the context of Greek myth. While some elements, such as the Nereids and Amphitrite are common enough, a hero's visit to their underwater sanctuary is not a common scene in Greek myth. While investiture is common enough in Greek myth, investiture at the bottom of the sea is not.

By viewing Theseus in light of the Child of the Waters we gain a context in which the predominant motifs of Bacchylides 17 become coherent, expected, and make sense in a new way. This context explains the absence of Poseidon, the centrality of Amphitrite and the Nereids, the apparent disappearance of Minos' golden ring, and so on. There is no such character as Poseidon in the Indo-Iranian Child of the Waters narratives. Though gold and brightness are often associated with Greek deities, Bacchylides 17 locates them at the bottom of the sea, where the Nereids emanate "a brightness as from fire", much as the female water deities and the Child of the Waters himself, a brightness with which the Iranian *Apâm Napât* is equated in the form of the *xvarenah*. Perhaps most intriguingly, Theseus' political dimension, as the embodiment of Athens against outside threats, usually thought to be "new" or "recent", early 5th century at the earliest, is, however, a quality central to the Iranian *Apâm Napât*, as he preserves the shining *xvarenah* from would-be tyrants. Conversely the negative character of Minos is not unlike the demonized opponents in the Iranian tradition.

A fiery essence in the waters which can be successfully approached only by those who have permission, a submarine golden bough, guarded by the Child of the Waters. In Bacchylides' narrative of Theseus' confrontation with Minos, we are faced with the possibility that this hero is descended from

⁴⁶The story of Enalos, as narrated by Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 11.15, 466c, and Plutarch, *Convivium* 20, 163b, suggests a similar "Child of the Waters" figure.

an IE Child of the Waters figure, whose pertinent aspects stubbornly remain in a particular myth in which they were especially apt. The name Theseus is attested in Mycenaean⁴⁷ and some facets of his mythology may very well be earlier than is commonly thought, whether a more pronounced emphasis on watery nature and origin, or even his standing as a political figure, a detail so central to the Iranian *Apâm Napât*. Some of the magic and mystery readers find in Bacchylides 17 may very well be due to the considerable antiquity of its motifs.

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⁴⁷Palmer 7, Masson 287-9.

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