

## XI. The Myth of Palaemon

JOHN G. HAWTHORNE

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The Temple of Palaemon on the Isthmus of Corinth was discovered in 1956, and the excavation of it and its precinct was completed in 1958.<sup>1</sup> A year before the discovery a detailed investigation of the myth and cult of Palaemon was made by Edouard Will, who arrived at the tentative conclusion that the Isthmian cult was of great antiquity and derived from an even earlier, probably pre-Hellenic, agrarian cult of Ino-Melicertes.<sup>2</sup> In a brief review of the literary fragments for the myth down to and including the Augustan authors, together with a summary of the recent archaeological evidence, I hope to show that Professor Will's thesis cannot be upheld and that the probabilities are in favor of an Augustan date for the establishment of the cult.

The first allusion to the myth is to Palaemon's mother, Leucothea, who appears in Homer as the sea-goddess who rescues Odysseus from the storm off the coast of Phaeacia (*Od.* 5. 333). Homer is aware that she is the apotheosis of Ino, later described by Pindar as having received "for all time a deathless life beneath the sea, amid the ocean-daughters of Nereus" (*Ol.* 2.28). The feature of the Homeric episode which deserves attention is the sequence of the angry storm, the plunge into the sea and the succeeding calm, for this became the central theme in the story of Palaemon and is constantly reiterated in later literature. Calm, in particular, was associated with Leucothea and Palaemon, who were invoked as saviors to whom prayers were addressed and dedications offered for calm and safety from the sea in many parts of the Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> It is in this context that

<sup>1</sup> O. Broneer, *Hesperia* 27 (1958) 1-37.

<sup>2</sup> Edouard Will, *Korinthiaka* (Paris 1955) 168-80 and 210-12.

<sup>3</sup> In the Homeric episode the word for calm is used twice. There was a representation of calm in the temple of Poseidon on the Isthmus (Paus. 2.1.9). The Greek anthology contains several dedicatory prayers of this type (Loeb ed., Vol. I, Book 6, Nos. 164, 223, and 348). The same theme is found in Aelius Aristides (*Isthm. in Pos.* 49, Dindorf 45), Nonnus (*Dionysiaca*, 47.354) and the Orphic Hymns (Nos. 74 and 75).

Palaemon first appears in literature. In the *I. T.* (270) Euripides speaks of Palaemon, Leucothea's son, as the "guardian of ships." He is begged to show himself propitious and is associated here, as in later authors, with other saviors from the sea, Castor and Pollux and the Nereids. Euripides also alludes to the myth in the *Medea* (1282), but there his purpose was to compare Ino with Medea as the murderers of their children and nothing is said about the deification of the two figures or their role as divine saviors. Two centuries later the name Palaemon appears in Lycophron's *Alexandra*. In one passage (229) he is described as being on the island of Tenedos, watching the Greek ships sailing in from Troy. In the obscure phraseology of Lycophron the term used to express the Greek ships is "corded gulls," the same word that is used of Leucothea's appearance to Odysseus as a "gull" or "diving-bird"; and this may serve to establish the identity of Palaemon here. In another passage (663) Lycophron uses the word as a name for Hercules, a cult-title to be attributed to him elsewhere. This is the earliest evidence for the connection between Hercules the wrestler and Palaemon, the son of Leucothea. The same association occurs in the *Rudens* of Plautus (160). The scene is off the coast of Africa and again the context is one of safety after shipwreck. Palaemon is invoked as the companion of Neptune and as the ally or partner of Hercules. The line is corrupt, but it has been interpreted as the first reference to the identification of Palaemon with Portunus, the Roman god of harbors.<sup>4</sup> This identification, which is paramount in the Augustan authors, is difficult if we think of Palaemon as the young child-hero of the Isthmian cult. But the difficulty, especially the age-factor, is at least mitigated, if we consider him, like his mother, as a general sea-deity, associated with figures such as Castor and Pollux, Neptune and Hercules; and the connection between a god of harbors and a god who provides calm and safety from an off-shore tempest is clear.

Among the Augustan authors who allude to the figures of the myth are Varro (*Schol. Aen.* 5.241), Horace (*Ep.* 2.3.123) and Vergil. Vergil stresses the theme in the *Georgics* (1.436), when he describes how sailors, saved from the hazards of the sea and

<sup>4</sup> J. D. Craig, *CR* 40 (1926) 152.

safe ashore, pay their vows to Melicertes. In the *Aeneid* (5.239), during the boat race in the funeral games for Anchises, Cloanthus prays for victory and "under the deep waves the whole band of Nereids and of Phorcus, and the virgin Panopea, heard him, and the sire Portunus with his own great hand drave him on his way. Swifter than wind or winged arrow the ship speeds landward, and found shelter in the deep harbour." Later in the same book (822), Venus intercedes with Neptune to oppose Juno's anger and ensure a safe voyage for Aeneas and his ships from Sicily to the Tiber. Neptune granted her request, calmed the waves and the storm, and rode over the sea followed by his train, which included Ino's son, Palaemon. It remained, however, for Ovid to provide the fullest treatment of the myth and establish it firmly in Roman literature. He told the story twice: in the *Fasti* (6.473-562) and the *Metamorphoses* (4.416-562).

In the account in the *Fasti* Ovid first tells of the sea-plunge of Ino with Melicertes and of the incidents leading up to it. He locates the event, although without mentioning names, near a place which cannot be other than the Isthmus of Corinth: "A land there is, shrunk with narrow limits, which repels twin seas, and, single in itself, is lashed by two-fold waters." Then he describes how, before their names were changed, Ino and her son were swept through the sea and came to the Tiber and the Latin shore. Here Hercules rescued them and they made their way to the prophetess, Carmentis, who assured them of safety and welcomed them to Italy with the words: "Rejoice, Ino, thy labours are over. . . . Thou shalt be a divinity of the sea: thy son, too, shall have his home in ocean. Take ye both different names in your own waters. Thou shalt be called Leucothea by the Greeks and Matuta by our people: thy son will have all authority over harbours; he whom we name Portunus will be named Palaemon in his own tongue." The account in the *Metamorphoses*, which again gives a geographical location for the sea-plunge, is longer and is filled with lurid details. Ovid describes the family life of Athamas and Ino, the anger of Juno, her descent into Hades and her incitement of the Furies. Then follows the maddening of Athamas, accomplished by the Fury, Tisiphone, with poisonous herbs and snakes to the psychological accompani-

ment of Grief, Terror, Dread and Madness. We see the raving of Athamas, the murder of his elder son, Learchus, and the escape of Ino and Melicertes. Again Venus intercedes with Neptune, who "consented to her prayer and, taking from Ino and her son all that was mortal, gave them a being to be revered, changing both name and form; for he called the new god Palaemon, and his goddess-mother, Leucothoë."

Now it may be justifiable to assume that the localization of the sea-plunge near the Isthmus of Corinth antedated Ovid, but the literary evidence up to, and including, him indicates no other connection between the central figures of the myth and the Isthmus.<sup>5</sup> Leucothea and Palaemon have hitherto appeared as non-localized sea-deities in widely separated places on or near the coasts of Phaeacia, Tauris, Tenedos, North Africa, Sicily and Latium. Ovid himself clearly thought of Palaemon's home as the sea; there has been no mention of any home or cult of his on the Isthmus.

The excavations of the Sanctuary of Poseidon on the Isthmus have yielded no evidence indicating the presence of a Palaemonian cult of Classical Greek or Hellenistic times, much less of an earlier period. When the foundations of the Temple of Palaemon were finally cleared, they were found to lie over the end of the starting-line of a Greek stadium, dating from the late fifth or early fourth century B.C. Within them an underground passage, with its entrance at the front, leads to a subterranean Greek reservoir which supplied the water for the stadium. Close to the precinct three sacrificial pits, blackened by fire, yielded ashes and burnt bones of a type that indicates sacrificial holocausts of a chthonic nature. Large quantities of lamps, some of a unique type, together with small beakers, pan-shaped plates and two-handled pitchers, which were discovered in and near the pits, show the need for illumination and liquid containers such as a nocturnal rite would require. But all of these cult-objects and con-

<sup>5</sup> In the post-Augustan era the abundance of the literary evidence for Palaemon's connection with the Isthmus is in striking contrast to the previous silence. Compare Plutarch, *Thes.* 25.5; Pausanias 2.1.6; Aelius Aristides, *ibid.*; Philostratus, *Im.* 2.16; *Her.* 19.14; *Vit. Soph.* 551; Hyginus, *Fab.* 2; Ausonius, *Ecl.* 21 and 22; and the scholia on passages cited in the text.

structions date from the first and second centuries A.D.; no evidence for a pre-Augustan cult was found during the campaign.

Both the literary and the archaeological evidence is evidence from silence and must be treated with caution, especially in view of Professor Will's arguments for an early date for the cult. Moreover, in support of his thesis, some general factors of an inferential character may be cited. It was once argued, for example, that the lack of Greek sources indicated a cult of non-Greek, probably Phoenician, origin, though this view is now generally abandoned.<sup>6</sup> Again, a mystery cult of a strictly localized nature would not suffer from publicity, and contemporary literary sources for the Corinthian neighbourhood are virtually non-existent. The strength of the local tradition, as recorded in the authors of the Roman period, should not be lightly set aside; and one archaeological fact is significant in this respect: the location of the temple over the starting-line of the early Greek stadium, for it is tempting to infer from this that the spot was already sacred. Pausanias records the local belief that Palaemon was buried here, and this belief may have been based on some ancient ceremony of which all trace is lost. On the other hand the absence of evidence from both types of source is impressive; and if we were to look for reasons for the development of the myth and the establishment of a cult on the Isthmus during, or very shortly after, the Augustan period, one historical event immediately stands out: the re-establishment of Corinth as a Roman colony in the year 46 B.C. For a hundred years before this, since its destruction by Mummius, Corinth lay under Roman displeasure and the Isthmus shared in the general disfavor. Pausanias indeed records (2.2.2) that the Isthmian Games were not interrupted but were entrusted to the Sicyonians, yet we may have reservations as to the enthusiasm with which they were celebrated. For during this period many of the early Greek constructions, including the stadium and the water-channel that supplied it, fell into disuse and, according to the archaeological evidence, were buried beneath a fill of earth and clay.

<sup>6</sup> The argument was supported by the identification of Melicertes and Melqart. The latest treatment of this much discussed question is in Ed. Will (above, note 2) 169, note 3, who concludes definitely that Melicertes was wholly Greek.

Caesar did not long survive the foundation of his new colony, but his policy at Corinth was adopted and expanded by Augustus and his successors. The Isthmus also shared in this revival. It became the center of an Imperial State cult; the old games were revived and a new set, the Quinquennial Imperial Caesarea, were founded in honor of Augustus; a third set was added under Claudius. The festivals grew ever more popular and were crowded with visitors from all parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> One of the more spectacular occasions was that on which Nero proclaimed the freedom of the Greeks, took part in the artistic contests, and initiated plans for a Corinth canal; he acknowledged the local deities by chanting a hymn to Poseidon and Amphitrite and singing a lyric song to Palaemon and Leucothea (Luc. *Nero* 3). The appearance of the Sanctuary changed drastically, and building activity was intense and magnificent: there were constructed a new theater and a marble stadium, temples to Demeter and Korê, Artemis, Dionysus and other deities, three stoas surrounding the precinct, dormitories for athletes, and other buildings. Statues and decorations were set up on the same opulent scale, of marble and bronze, ivory and gold. The names of many benefactors, some holding high religious or athletic offices, are on record.<sup>8</sup>

As part of this activity the cult of Palaemon, as we know it, was established. Plutarch, the first author to mention the rites, Pausanias, Aelius Aristides and Philostratus describe the celebration.<sup>9</sup> It took place at night; the initiates wore special garments and chanted mysterious and inspired dirges; bulls were sacrificed in a manner appropriate to a chthonic deity; and, at the core of the ceremony, an oath was sworn in the subterranean passage where Palaemon was thought to have been buried. An inscription (*IG* iv.203) records the building of the temple by P. Licinius Priscus Iuventianus, high-priest for life; and there are coins which illustrate it together with Palaemon and his dolphin,

<sup>7</sup> Dio Chrysostom (*Orat.* 8.9) gives a picture of the scene; compare also Livy 33.32.

<sup>8</sup> The chief literary source for the appearance of the Sanctuary is Pausanias (2.1.6); the epigraphical evidence is collected by A. B. West, *Corinth* 7, part 2: *Latin Inscriptions* (Harvard 1931) 47-80.

<sup>9</sup> The references are given in note 5.

the pine-tree, the priest, and the sacrificial bull.<sup>10</sup> The enthusiasm with which the cult was celebrated was partly due to the prevailing eagerness with which such cults were embraced, but the theme of safety after storm, of calm, of safe arrival in port, which I have traced from Homer to Ovid, was singularly appropriate for the inhabitants of a revived and favored district of the ancient importance of Corinth and the Isthmus. Furthermore, in addition to its local and individual appeal, the theme embodied a major imperial policy, promoted by Augustus and echoed in the opening words of Horace's ode to the ship of state.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> F. Imhoof-Blumer and P. Gardner, *A Numismatic Commentary on Pausanias* (London, 1887) 11.

<sup>11</sup> Horace, *Carm.* 1.14.1-3.