Pilgrimage, Healing, and Maritime Oracles: 
the Gallizenae of Sena, Achilles of Leuke, and Apollo 

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In book three of the *Chorographia* (3.48), Pomponius Mela describes an otherwise unattested oracular cult overseen by nine maritime priestesses (the Gallizenae: the Gauls of Sena). These women serve a Gallic divinity off the Ossismican coasts at the island of Sena (Sein, Pointe du Raz, Finistère, off the coast of Brittany), a known hazard for mariners owing to the currents for which the area is notorious (*raz* is Brettanic for “sea-current”) together with reefs that extend thirty or so miles westward from the island into the *Chaussée de Sein*. Remarkable for their virginity and purity, the priestesses are able to rouse the seas and winds with their chants, and they can transmogrify into “whatever animals they wish” (aligning with metamorphic Greek sea-deities, such as Thetis). In addition, they allegedly can heal “whatever is incurable among other peoples.” Furthermore, the unnamed Gallic deity, to whom the Gallizenae are devoted, oversees a pilgrim cult to which sailors and others come in order to consult the priestesses. The Gallizenae, whose number and chastity evokes Apollo’s Muses, subsequently share their proprietary knowledge only with pilgrims who make the dangerous journey by sea to their abode.

Arrian (*Periplus Ponti Euxini* 21-23) describes another oracular maritime cult to Achilles on the unpopulated “White” island of Leuke (modern Berezan), which rises sharply from the sea and is so-called either for the color of the limestone cliffs or the animals who dwell there. Widely attested at sites along the Black Sea as “Pontarchos” (“master of the Pontus”), Achilles would appear to sailors nearing his island, indicating the best approaches and moorages. Achilles was honored on his remote, stormy island with a temple cult, established in conjunction with the Milesian settlement of the Black Sea, perhaps as an incubation sanctuary mandated from Delphi (Tolstoi 1918: 36-38; Rusyaeva 2003: 4; cf., Pausanias 3.19.11; Ammianus Marcellinus 22.35; Tertullian, *de Anima* 45). Offerings to the hero include clay discs, precious stones, rings, phialai, coins, and inscriptions (IOSPE I: 325-326). As the son of Thetis, a Nereid honored with her own maritime cult, Achilles was naturally associated with the sea, and many votives to Achilles (occasionally together with Thetis) were made by sailors. Furthermore, the hero’s epithets included σωτήρ, implying the power to aid those in distress.

Both cults, those of the Gallizenae at Sena and Achilles at Leuke, invite comparison with other protectors of sailors at sea, including the *Theoi Megaloi* of Samothrace and the Dioskouroi. For Arrian the link between Achilles at Leuke and the Dioskouroi is explicit: like Pollux, Achilles wanted to die after the demise of his beloved friend Patroclus. But there is a stark distinction: while the Dioskouroi appear to sailors everywhere, the Pontine Achilles appears strictly to sailors approaching his island. Likewise, only by making the pilgrimage to Sena can worshippers obtain proprietary information from the god who held sway over the sea and communicated exclusively through his priestesses.

In this talk we shall tease out comparanda between Greco-Roman traditions of pilgrimage, oracular cults, and maritime saviors. We shall focus particularly on the imbrications of these two cults and the cult of Apollo, the oracular healer who was also a significant maritime
deity, invoked as Aktios (of the shores), Ekbasios (of landings), and Neosoos (protector of ships). Apollo was also a god of “colonization” whose oracular shrine at Delphi on the slope of Mount Parnassus was, like Sena and Leuke, remote and difficult to reach. Most of Apollo’s pilgrims, likewise, would have arrived by sea, trekking to the sacred site from the harbor at Kirra.

References:


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