This paper examines miraculous events in maritime contexts, comparing ancient Greek examples with similar medieval or early modern Roman Catholic narratives and practices involving the Virgin Mary. Such parallels can be understood as the result of cultural diffusion (the “folklore” model), as the result of cognitive processes which recur across cultures, or as some combination thereof.

The first example is the rescue of Odysseus by the sea-goddess Ino-Leukothea, whose veil acts as a kind of life-supporter until he reaches the shore. A similar story is told by Gonzalo de Berceo in the medieval collection *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*. The motif of the goddess’ protective garment may be the result of diffusion from antiquity (though the *Odyssey* was not widely available in the Latin West), but it is more likely that the stories draw from a common stock of tales about magical garments. Notably, these two tales share a common motif of a protective feminine garment, which sheds a novel light on the *Odyssey* episode and demonstrates the heuristic value of comparative study, regardless of whether the two tales are historically related.

The second example concerns the finding of a divine image at sea, which happened in the case of Hermes at Ainos (Callim. fr. 197 Pf.) and several Marian cult images, including the Virgin of El Cobre in Cuba. The motif of mysterious origin from sea or sky is a common one for holy objects, and such objects often indicate their wishes via further miraculous signs. Despite significant differences among the narratives I cite, they share the uncanny violation of intuitive expectations about the physical properties of objects (“folk physics”). These narratives are best understood not as the results of cultural diffusion, but as representations which are likely to recur cross-culturally given that certain types of uncanny events are more salient to our minds than others and thus more likely to be transmitted (per Pascal Boyer’s theory of the minimally counterintuitive).

Related to these examples are parallel tales of a ship’s miraculous immobility in the cases of Hera on Samos and Our Lady of Schiedam in the Netherlands. In each case, people attempt to remove a cult statue which does not wish to leave its home, and find that they are unable to do so. The striking similarity of these accounts might cause us to suspect cultural diffusion, but the appearance of a similar motif in a Chinese cult of Guanyin points to independent recurrence.

To take an example from the realm of ritual, three-dimensional votive ships were common in both ancient Greek contexts and in Marian cult. These objects could be presented as gifts before a voyage or in fulfillment of a vow, particularly one made during a storm or shipwreck. Either way, votive practices are byproducts of our evolved capacity for reciprocity, including gift exchange, and as such they appear cross-culturally. Vows are particularly compelling because they allow gods to become active and worshipers to make specific causal attributions. These effects are increased in situations of high risk and “miraculous” rescue. In these cases, the perception of a miracle is not counterintuitive according to Boyer’s criteria, yet (I suggest) it
violates intuitions of probability. The ship votives themselves may function in ways which differ depending on the temporal sequence of the offering. The format of the offering—3-D model or painting, size, and material—is most likely to be a product of cultural diffusion.

To conclude, cognitive theory helps to explain not only why certain motifs and practices are more likely to be disseminated culturally, but also why they recur in far-flung cultures quite independently.