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THE CORPSE WHO CALLS THEOGNIS

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Lines 1229–30 of Theognis present this eerie couplet:

> ἤδη γάρ με κέκληκε θαλάσσιος οἴκαδε νεκρός,
> τεθνηκὼς ζωῷ φθεγγόμενος στόματι.
>
> A corpse of the sea has now called me home.
> Although dead, it speaks with a living mouth.

What does it mean? Athenaeus, to whom we owe the quotation (*Deipn.* 457A), claimed that it was riddling about a conch-shell (*kokhlos*) used as a trumpet. His explanation works well up to a point, but beyond that there remain problems: *me* and *oikade* are still unexplained, and the eeriness has been dispelled. My intention in this paper is to examine two further solutions that may account for the other elements and also restore the aura of importance. These solutions involve the examination of civic cult and myth relating to Theognis and Megara, and they suggest that riddle, cult, and myth work together in a complex system of mutual signification.

Although some riddles in some circumstances may accept simple solutions, the natural power of others points to matters that are not simple. Even in the context of Athenaeus, two solutions to other riddles (456D–E and 456F–457A) are strikingly long and complicated, and they require the presentation of much background information about the "author" of the riddle. A quick and simple solution is not always appropriate; that something deeper or more extensive may be needed is indicated by Athenaeus' expression (445F) for "Do you get it?": "*Manthaneis*?" "Are you learning? Are you being educated?" The need to be alert for a detailed background is also stressed at 456E, introducing an epigram of Simonides "which stumps those who are unskilled in history." To understand a riddle, therefore, can mean to understand a great deal indeed and can be tantamount to an education: " ... interpréter une figure, c'est faire bien plus que la décrypter, c'est accéder à un univers de pensée."[1] An intricate solution is stronger than a simple

[1] Joëlle Tamin-Gardes, "Sur la difficulté et l'importance de comprendre le sens figuré," *Bulletin de l'association Guillaume Budé* 1 (1985) 41.

one if it is needed to open the door of the riddle to a richer world of meanings. If the hidden meanings involve a major social institution, something central to the values and identity of the community, especially if they involve a matter of cult and myth, then the knowledge of the answer does not bring a clean break from the puzzle; one is instead drawn deeper into the mystery. With some riddles we are in the presence of *ainos*:[2] a single communication with plural meanings, of which the non-surface meanings carry an awesome power to evoke profound societal concerns. In epinician poetry, for example, "water," "gold," and "*aithêr*" (Pindar, *Ol.* 1.1, 6; a tighter triad in Bacchylides 3.85–87) are formidable enigmas, requiring lengthy explication to approach them, and it is not clear that the process of solution has an end.

Returning to the riddle about the corpse of the sea, let us search for further meanings specifically in the world of Theognis, acknowledging him as the poser of the riddle. The corpus of Theognis as a whole appears to be essentially a civic tradition suited to accretion and accumulation, and its utterances, riddles included, had a solemn and serious purpose for Megara. This riddle, as a fragment of archaic poetry, brings with it an acute need to consider the persona of the poet and the precise social group addressed. Athenaeus' solution, acceptable for one time and place, ignored *me* and *oikade*, but why should the dead be calling *Theognis*? Does it matter that Theognis is being called *home* to *Megara*? What is the nature of the call?

Gregory Nagy has now interpreted the riddle of the corpse of the sea with full attention to its political and epichoric aspects.[3] Nagy suggests *Ino* as the key. She is the *nekros* because her tomb is in Megara. She is *thalassios* because the Megarians—uniquely—buried her after recovering her body from the surf.[4] She is both dead and alive because she is a hero, and she is alive also because she has the additional identity of the goddess Leukothea, who gave Odysseus her life-saving wimple. She is able to call because of Leukothea's epithet *audêessa*. She calls homeward because as Leukothea she gave Odysseus his *nostos* and because in her avatar of the seabird *aithuia* she suggests the Athena Aithuia who

[2] As expounded in G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979) Ch. 12 and *Theognis of Megara* (below, note 3) Ch. 2, section 2.

[3] "Theognis of Megara: A Poet's Vision of His City" (Ch. 2 of T. Figueira and G. Nagy ed., *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis* [Baltimore 1985]) sections 75–79; earlier in "Theognis of Megara: The Poet as Seer, Pilot, and Revenant," *Arethusa* 15 (1982) 124–26.

[4] Paus. 1.42.7: *μόνοι δέ εἰσιν Ἑλλήνων Μεγαρεῖς οἱ λέγοντες τὸν νεκρὸν τῆς Ἰνοῦς ἐς τὰ παραθαλάσσια σφισιν ἐκπεσεῖν τῆς χώρας . . . καὶ Λευκοθέαν τε ὀνομασθῆναι παρὰ σφίσι πρώτοις φασὶν αὐτὴν καὶ θυσίαν ἄγειν ἀνὰ πᾶν ἔτος* ("The Megarians are the only Greeks who say that the corpse of Ino was cast up on their shore . . . and they say that she was first named Leukothea among them and that they do sacrifice to her every year"). See Nagy (above, note 3) for his other documentation and the full presentation behind my summary.

saves sailors; the Odyssean allusion adds another reason why she is *thalassios*. She is calling to Theognis because of his persona of the pilot who is away from his ship. The riddle is therefore about Megara's urgent need for Theognis to return and save his city from shipwreck and drowning. Nagy's solution not only accounts for all parts of the puzzle but also, by restoring Theognis and the civic and sacral elements, restores eeriness to the call of the corpse.

Nor is Ino alone. The rest of this paper will propose that Theognis' riddle also fits another figure from Megarian cult and legend, namely the king and hero *Kar*. The purpose is, I stress, not to displace Ino, but to continue the process of explication, complication, and accretion, and so to add another voice to the summons.

To begin with, I am suggesting that Kar could readily be referred to as a *thalassios nekros* because of the construction of his tomb, as described by Pausanias:

> καὶ Καρὸς τοῦ Φορωνέως μνῆμά ἐστι, τὸ μὲν ἐξ ἀρχῆς χῶμα γῆς, ὕστερον δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ χρήσαντος ἐκοσμήθη λίθῳ κογχίτῃ. μόνοις δὲ Ἑλλήνων Μεγαρεῦσιν ὁ κογχίτης οὗτός ἐστι, καί σφισι καὶ ἐν τῇ πόλει πεποίηται πολλὰ ἐξ αὐτοῦ. ἔστι δὲ ἄγαν λευκὸς καὶ ἄλλου λίθου μαλακώτερος· κόγχοι δὲ αἱ θαλάσσιοι διὰ παντὸς ἔνεισίν οἱ. (1.44.6)
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> There is also a monument of Kar, son of Phoroneus, which was at first a mound of earth, but later, because of an oracle, was adorned with conchite. The Megarians are the only Greeks who have this stone, and many other things in the city as well are made from it. It is extremely white and softer than other stone; there are sea-mussels all through it.

The detail to be stressed at this point is that the tomb was "adorned"—perhaps faced all around, as one may imagine, with a strikingly white stone, all full of shells. Kar's tomb was a clear and vivid sign of the sea.

The location of Kar's tomb is also important. When Pausanias encountered it, he was finished with the actual city of Megara and was on the road to Corinth (Paus. 1.44.6). This road leaves the city on the south side and leads down to the seacoast before turning west to hug the shore as one goes on to Corinth; the distance from Megara to the shore by this road is approximately two kilometers. As a matter of spatial arrangement, Kar's tomb is connected to the sea. Of all the hero-shrines of Megara, Kar's was the only one so located, outside the city and *en route* to the sea—a most fitting place from which to call to an absent citizen; the caller has come some way in search of the lost one and is in position to meet the "*revenant*."[5]

[5] F. Bohringer, "Mégare: Traditions mythiques, espace sacré et naissance de la cité," *L'Antiquité classique* 49 (1980) 21 presents an interesting *exempli gratia* plan to sum up

Pausanias also says that many things in the city were made of the same conchite that adorned the tomb of Kar and that the Megarians "are the only Greeks who have this stone." It appears that Megara and conchite are strikingly linked with each other, and that conchite should even be understood as a sign of Megara. This shows an impressive concatenation, with Megara linked to Kar through conchite and both of them linked thereby to the sea, giving additional force to the understanding that for Theognis "the corpse of the sea" ultimately symbolizes Megara and its cults. Kar, with his seawards tomb of mussel-stone, is the only Megarian institution that can give rise to this particular pattern of signs.

Apart from these special features of his tomb, Kar holds a prime position in the myths of Megara. According to the mythical king-list and civic genealogy of Megara, Kar was the first king; he is the eponym of one of Megara's two citadels (Karia), and the name of Megara stems from his reign (Paus. 1.39.5). It is highly appropriate and moving that Kar, as first king, founder, and proto-Megarian, should be calling to Theognis from the origins of the city down through its generations of civic heritage.[6]

Our considerations must also include Kar's origins. Kar was the son of Phoroneus, who is part of Argive myth rather than Megarian, but since Kar is certainly a part of Megarian legend it is legitimate to ask what is connoted by this affiliation. According to the myth as given by the Argives (Paus. 2.15.5), Phoroneus was the son of the river Inachus and was the first man. With the land originally under water, Inachus, together with the rivers Asterion and Kephisos, arbitrated for Poseidon and Hera concerning possession of the region. It was awarded to Hera and the waters receded. Phoroneus "was the first to gather the people together into a community, for they had up to then been living as scattered and lonesome families." Thus Kar, the first-founder of Megara, is himself the son of another first-founder and civilizer. The resemblance goes further: Phoroneus' foundation at Argos took place after the

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Pausanias' tour of the shrines of Megara. Kar's tomb has not been archaeologically identified, and Bohringer's putting it quite near the Corinth gate is not to be taken as exact, but is to show that the tomb was somewhere along that road. R. P. Legon, *Megara* (Ithaca 1981) 28 presents a more detailed and non-tentative plan of the Pausanian monuments, which, however, does not show the tomb of Kar. I assume this to be an oversight, unless it is meant to lie off the map and therefore closer to the coast. Identification of the site would help to make discussion more vivid, but it is not critical: no matter where we put the tomb, the conchite connection Sea-Kar-Megara (below) will hold. On the proximity of Megara to the seacoast, see Legon 31.

[6] Bohringer (above, note 5) 6 gives a simplified stemma. Elsewhere (8) he declines to call Kar the "true founder of the city," in order to reserve this title for Alkathoös, whose cult and myth appear to be more central to the developed *polis*. When, in this article, I call Kar the "founder," I am using the word in a less privileged sense.

primeval flood had subsided. The myth, by naming the river-gods involved in the arbitration, also reveals the extent of the inundation: from the Inachus and Asterion in the Argolid to the Kephisos in Attica. This means that the whole Isthmus, including the Megarid, was involved, so that Megara, as well as Argos, became dry land fit for civilized habitation only in the time of Phoroneus. Kar was therefore repeating and extending his father's work when he settled the city of Megara in the newly risen land. It is therefore doubly fitting for Kar to have the role of summoning Theognis the pilot back, to avert another watery disaster and prevent the undoing of the founder's work.

My last point concerns one further detail from the information of Pausanias (1.44.6, cited above). He reports that the tomb of Kar was originally a mound of earth (*ex arkhês khôma gês*) and that the conchite adornment came later, in consequence of a divine oracle (*tou theou khrêsantos*). Both stages are significant. It would be hasty to ignore the original "rude" construction or to consider its rudeness as a sign of neglect, cheapness, or indifference. Now that we have connected Kar with the ending of the primeval flood and the creation of the land of Megara, we can see that the mound of earth, rough though it may be, is in itself a symbol of emergent land. Rising above the plain like an island, as the whole land had risen above the sea-surface, the earlier state of the tomb was already a potent symbol of the local meaning of Kar.[7] We can now, I believe, go on to make sense of the oracle that ordered the tomb to be adorned with conchite. With this change, the tomb preserves its original meaning of "flood conquered," but by now being covered with shell-stone, a clear relic of inundation, a souvenir of drowning survived, the eminent mound reinforces the idea that it was the sea-bottom that arose. Because the tomb itself signifies the sea-bottom, Kar, who is within and beneath it—perhaps heaving it upwards and so sustaining the land—is in a still deeper sense a "corpse of the sea" (*thalassios nekros*). The oracle was therefore a command to honor the founder more emphatically, to amplify and enhance his epichoric significance.

One last part of the riddle still remains to be related to Kar, namely that the corpse "speaks with a living mouth." Nagy allowed that the conch-shell of Athenaeus' answer "may well turn out to be at least part of a solution." My stress on the shell-filled conchite of Kar's tomb brings the interpretation close to this, but not all the way. It would indeed tie many things together if we could imagine the shell of a large conch (*kokhlos*, which is a gastropod) within the conchite of Kar's

[7] The tomb of Kar therefore unites meanings of the word *khôma* which are otherwise separate (*LSJ* s.v.): it is both a "sepulchral mound" (as in the *Iliad* and elsewhere) and a mound connoting defense against water ("dyke," "dam," "mole, jetty," "promontory").

tomb, but we must be limited by Pausanias' description of the stone, which specifies only *konkhoi* (which are bivalves.) Thus the solution "Ino" does best at accounting for all parts of the riddle. "Kar," however, does serve as a secondary answer reinforcing the element of fear-of-drowning fundamental to the concerns of Ino and the pilot Theognis.