

Myrsilus of Methymna and the White Goddesses

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In this article I examine Felix Jacoby's commentary on three of the fragments of the third-century B.C. paradoxographer and local historian Myrsilus of Methymna. The three fragments we are concerned with are *FGrH* 477 F 10, 14 and 15. And the question is whether there is any connection between them. On the face of it there appears to be very little. F 10 refers to Ino as Leucothea (the White Goddess) and to the Nereids as Leucotheae, F 14 to the story of an Aeolian called Enalus, who is rescued at sea by a dolphin and carried in safety to Lesbos, and F 15 to the fact that Myrsilus thought of the Hyades as the daughters of Cadmus. However, Ino is a daughter of Cadmus, and by her marriage to Athamas, son of Aeolus, she is also linked to the Aeolid line, with which the character in the dolphin tale, Enalus, is also connected. Ino is therefore an obvious link between the three fragments. It is with her, I think, that we must make a start. It is my contention here that all three fragments are indeed connected and that in them we see an attempt by the eighth-century Aeolian colonists of Lesbos, who were the direct ancestors of Myrsilus of Methymna's contemporaries, to adapt certain myths to enhance their island's ties with the mainland.

Tradition has it that Ino, daughter of Cadmus, leaped into the sea and drowned, only to be deified by Zeus as Leucothea, or the White Goddess. The story was an old one and our first reference to it appears in the *Odyssey* (5. 333–35):

τὸν δὲ ἴδεν Κάδμου θυγάτηρ, καλλίσφυρος Ἰνώ,
 Λευκοθέη, ἣ πρὶν μὲν ἔην βροτὸς ἀυδήεσσα,
 νῦν δ' ἄλως ἐν πελάγεσσι θεῶν ἕξ ἔμμορε τιμῆς.

Reinhold Merkelbach and M. L. West believe that Hesiod, too, refers to it in his *Catalogue* (fr. 70. 2–5 M–W):

μ]εγάροισι λιπ[
 εὔ]αδεν ἀθανάτ[οισι
 πατή]ρ ἀνδρῶν τε θ[εῶν τε
], ἵνα οἱ κλέος ἄφθιτ[ον εἴη

Merkelbach (*Fragmenta Hesiodica* [Oxford 1967] 43) completes thus:

Ἀθάμαντα ἐνὶ μ]εγάροισι λιπ[οῦσα

ἐν πόντῳ ναίει, μάλα δ' εὖ]αδεν ἄθανάτ[οισι·
 τιμὴν γάρ οἱ ἔδωκε πατὴρ] ἀνδρῶν τε θε[εῶν τε
 Λευκοθέην τ' ἐκάλεσ]σ', ἵνα οἱ κλέος ἄφθιτ[ον εἴη.

Having left Athamas in his palace she lives in the sea, and has become beloved by the gods. For the father of men and gods honoured her with the name Leucothea, so that her fame might be everlasting.

According to Merkelbach and West's reckoning of the order and structure of the *Catalogue's* genealogies Ino was Athamas' third wife after Nephele and Themisto.¹ It now seems fairly certain also that fr. 91 M–W refers to the same part of Ino's story:²

ἐκ] γαίη[ς
 εἰ]ς ἄλ' ἀπο[
 τ]ῆν δὴ νῦ[ν καλέουσι
 ἀν]θρώπ[ω]

Pindar, too, refers to Ino as the White Goddess, Leucothea (*Pyth.* 11. 2), and he is the first extant source specifically to link Ino with the Nereids:

Ἴνώ δὲ Λευκοθέα
 ποντιῶν ὁμοθάλαμε Νηρηίδων.

Myrsilus of Methymna (*FGrH* 477 F 10) not only says that the White Goddess was Ino but also calls the Nereids White Goddesses:

Μυρσίλος δὲ οὐ μόνον τὴν Λευκοθέαν Ἴνώ φησιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς
 Νηρηίδας Λευκοθέας ὀνομάζει.

Clearly, then, Myrsilus is telling us that Ino and the daughters of Nereus share the same attributes and, presumably, perform the same functions.³ Myrsilus therefore further elucidates the words of Pindar, and in effect he is saying that Ino became a Nereid.

One of the most important functions of the Nereids was the saving of mariners in storms,⁴ and in our passage from the *Odyssey* already mentioned

¹ See M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women* (Oxford 1985) 66 n. 79.

² West (previous note) 64 n. 75.

³ The *Etymologicum Genuinum* (s.v. Λευκοθέα) ascribes Ino's new nomenclature to the fact that becoming mad and running (*theousa*) across the White (*Leukou*) plain somewhere near the Megarid she hurled herself into the sea: Λευκοθέα· ἡ Ἰνώ· ὅτι ἔμμανθῆς γενομένη, διὰ τοῦ Λευκοῦ πεδίου θέουσα (ὅ ἐστι περὶ τὴν Μεγαρίδα) ἑαυτὴν ἐς τὴν θάλασσαν ἔρριψε. Nonnus, too, gives a similar reason for her new name (*D.* 10. 76–77): καὶ Λευκοῦ πεδίοιο διατμήγουσα κονίην / Λευκοθέη πεφάτιστο φερώνυμος. The characteristic qualities shared by Ino and the Nereids are unlikely to include any form of running across a white plain. But this reasoning does not preclude the possibility that "White-Runner" is an accurate description of both Ino and the Nereids. Such a description can be applied to the small white breakers one sees on an otherwise generally calm sea. Hesychius (s.v. Λευκοθέαι) describes the "White Goddesses" as belonging to all the seas.

⁴ The same applies to the Dioscuri, who are described by Pindar (*Pyth.* 1. 66) as *leukopoloî*. "White-horses" is still an expression used today to describe the small breakers on the sea. The

Ino saves Odysseus from the violence of the sea (5. 333–53 and 458–62). Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 3. 4. 3) also mentions Ino's capacity for saving sailors (together with that of her baby son):

καὶ Λευκοθέα μὲν αὐτὴ καλεῖται, Παλαίμων δὲ ὁ παῖς, οὕτως
ὀνομασθέντες ὑπὸ τῶν πλεόντων· τοῖς χειμαζομένοις γὰρ βοηθοῦσιν.

So, too, Nonnus (*D.* 10. 121–25):

Λευκοθέην δὲ
πεπταμέναις παλάμησιν ἔδέξατο κυανοχαίτης
δαίμοσιν ὑδροπόροισιν ὁμέστιον· ἔνθεν ἀρήγει
ναύταις πλαζομένοισι, καὶ ἔπλετο ποντιάς Ἴνώ
Νηρεῖς ἀφλοίσβοιο κυβερνήτειρα γαλήνης.⁵

We know that for Myrsilus of Methymna (*FGrH* 477 F 14) the Nereids were an integral part of the Lesbian colonisation myth celebrating the eighth-century settlement on the island of Aeolian Greeks.⁶ Plutarch, who almost assuredly is using Myrsilus as his source,⁷ tells us that an oracle had demanded from the colonists a bull for Poseidon and the human sacrifice of a virgin for Amphitrite and for the Nereids in return for a safe voyage:

χρημοῦ γὰρ γενομένου τοῖς οἰκίζουσι Λέσβον Ποσειδῶνι μὲν ταῦρον
Ἀμφιτρίτῃ δὲ καὶ Νηρηΐσι ζῶσαν καθεῖναι παρθένον.

The lot fell to the daughter of Smintheus, who was duly dressed for the occasion and ceremoniously thrown overboard, no doubt destined to be carried safely to the Nereids' underwater chambers. Enalus, a young nobleman who was in love with the girl, jumped into the sea to effect a rescue in some manner which he could not have hoped to fathom. Happily, the wretched lad was rescued by a dolphin, which carried him safely to Lesbos. Dolphins and the Nereids are synonymous with sea rescue. The Nereids are mentioned only collectively in this fragment (Amphitrite is regarded as Poseidon's consort), but we may reasonably assume Ino's involvement here, since she was, after all, by definition one of them. And she would have had a special association with the insular colonisation of the

Nereids and the Dioscuri were invariably invoked for protection by sailors about to set off on a voyage. The two groups are mentioned in the same breath at Eur. *IT* 270–71.

⁵ Apollonius of Rhodes gives us a fine example of the Nereids helping sailors in distress in his most pleasing description of the Argonauts trying to pass through the Wandering Rocks (4. 930 ff.):

ὡς δ' ὀπότεν δελφίνες ὑπὲξ ἄλδος εὐδιόωντες
σπερχομένην ἀγεληδὸν ἐλίσσωνται περὶ νῆα,
ἄλλοτε μὲν προπάροιθεν ὀρώμενοι ἄλλοτ' ὄπισθεν
ἄλλοτε παρβολάδην, ναύτησι δὲ χάσμα τέτυκται.

For Ino/Leucothea's possible connection with the Samothracian mysteries, a focal point of which was salvation at sea, see W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford 1985) 281–85.

⁶ See my "Myrsilus of Methymna and the Tales of the Dolphins," *LCM* 18 (1993) 82–85.

⁷ See Plut. *Sept. Sap. conv.* 163a–d, quoted by Jacoby in his *Commentary* (Text) on 477 F 14, p. 381.

Aeolians in that, until her changing into a sea-goddess, she was the wife of Athamas, son of Aeolus.⁸ We find, perhaps, a clearer indication of this association in the case of Tenedos.⁹

According to Pausanias (10. 14. 2–4), the early name for Tenedos was “Leukophrys” (white-browed). We find the word *leukophrys* appearing only once elsewhere—in an oracular utterance of Pythian Apollo (quoted by Herodotus 3. 57). Pythian Apollo was of prime importance to the Aeolian Greeks, who took his cult with them wherever they colonised, and this included Tenedos.¹⁰ According to some (Apollod. *Bibl.* 3. 23), Apollo was the father of Tenes, the island’s eponymous hero. Eustathius and the scholiast on Homer (*Il.* 1. 38) tell us that the sister of Tenes was called Leucothea. Plutarch (*Quaest. Graec.* 28) recounts that Leucothea was seduced by Achilles despite warnings from his mother Thetis that Apollo would take his revenge. A clear attestation, then, of Leucothea’s association with Tenedos.

It is, I think, reasonable to suppose that the Myrsilan fragments 10 and 14 are connected. Jacoby, in his note on F 10 (477 *Commentary* [Text], p. 380), wonders whether F 15, where Myrsilus says that the Hyades were the daughters of Cadmus, is also similarly connected, although in the same note he adds a specific concern regarding F 14: “F 15 aus dem gleichen zusammenhang? Der name Leukothea ist für Tenedos, aber nicht für Lesbos bezeugt; die Nereides kamen in der Enalogschichte (zu F 14) vor.”

To comment firstly on his note of concern, I think that this can be alleviated simply enough. The Nereids played a significant role in the Aeolian colonisation myths of the eastern Aegean, which, we know, interested Myrsilus. Ino with her marital link to the Aeolian *genos* would have been of prime importance in navigating her kinsfolk to safety. This would have applied equally to Lesbos, to Tenedos, or to any other of the relevant Aeolian colonies. The fact that there is attestation for *Leucothea*’s association with one island of this colonisation and not with another should provide us with little worry.

⁸ I have already described elsewhere (see above, note 6) how the Aeolian–Lesbian colonisation myth of Enalus and the Dolphin was quite possibly the prototype for the Corinthian tale of Arion and the Dolphin, after Periander was told the tale by the Aeolian–Lesbian colonists of the mainland during the time of the tyrant’s arbitration in the Sigeum dispute. Interestingly, Athamas’ brother was Sisyphus, king of Corinth, who instituted the Isthmian games at Corinth in honour of Palaemon (otherwise known as Melicertes), the son of Ino, who was carried by his mother as she went into the sea (Paus. 1. 44. 11). There is a statue of Palaemon riding a dolphin at Taranto, and Arion of Methymna set out from there on his ill-fated voyage to Corinth.

⁹ For the Aeolian colonisation of Tenedos, see *AJA* 67 (1963) 189 f.; also J. Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas* (London 1980) 84 f. For a, perhaps, similar indication of this association, cf. also the case of Samothrace (see Burkert [above note 5] 281–85), where the Aeolian Greeks arrived about 700 B.C. and peaceably absorbed the native Thracian population: Boardman, *ibid.*, and see also S. G. Cole, *Theoi Megaloi: The Cult of the Great Gods of Samothrace* (Leiden 1984) *passim*. Cf., too, F. Prinz, *Gründungsmythen und Sagenchronologie* (Munich 1979) 187–205.

¹⁰ See C. Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles* (Cambridge 1990) 172–78.

On the question of F 15 being also similarly linked, my feeling is that it is indeed similarly connected. When Aratus (*Phaen.* 173) speaks of the Hyades, he says that they are to be observed within the constellation of Taurus. The scholiast remarks that the sisters were thus named because they had nursed Dionysus, an epithet of whom was Hyas: ἡ δὲ προσωνυμία ὅτι τὸν Διόνυσον ἀνεθρέψαντο, Ὑγῆς δὲ ὁ Διόνυσος. Euphorion (fr. 14 Powell = 15 van Groningen) says: Ὑγῆ ταυροκέρωτι Διωνύσῳ κοτέσσασα. This was after his father Zeus Hyas (Herodian 1. 59 L and Hesychius s.v. "Hyas"). Plutarch (*Is. et Os.* 34, 364d) explains that the Greeks called Dionysus Hyas because he was God of Wet (*hygra*). In Homer *hygra* means "the sea." Kleidemos (*FGrH* 323 F 27) records that a sacrifice is made to Dionysus when the god brings the rain. The scholiast on Aratus (= Eur. fr. 357 Nauck) goes on to say that for Euripides in his *Erechtheus* the Hyades were three in number and were the daughters of Erechtheus: Εὐριπίδης μὲν οὖν Ἐρεχθεῖ τὰς Ἐρεχθέως θυγατέρας Ὑάδας φησὶ γενέσθαι τρεῖς οὔσας. But, the scholiast continues, Myrsilus (= *FGrH* 477 F 15) says that the Hyades were the daughters of Cadmus and were so named because of Dionysus' title Hyas: ὁ δὲ Μυρσίλος τὰς Κάδμου θυγατέρας κληθῆναι δὲ οὕτως δι' ἣν προεῖπομεν αἰτίαν. Homer (*Il.* 6. 130 ff.) tells how Lycurgus, son of Dryas, chased the nurses of Dionysus through the holy hills of Nysa and smote them with his ox-goad. Dionysus fled and jumped into the sea and was taken into safety by Thetis. This is our earliest reference to the nurses of Dionysus. Despite subsequent references by various authors to a relatively large number of places called Nysa, this earliest reference in Homer, where Lycurgus and Thetis are involved, points to the area of the northern Aegean. Undoubtedly Homer is referring to the earlier Dionysus Zagreus, son of Zeus and Persephone,¹¹ and not to the later son of Semele, sister of Ino, Agaue and Autonoe. The former was the legend with which the Hyades were concerned.¹² Hesiod (fr. 291 M–W) names five of them—Phaisyla, Coronis, Cleeia, Phaiio and Eudora; and Theon of Alexandria (Schol. Arat. *Phaen.* 172, p. 166 Martin)¹³ names six—Ambrosia, Cleita, Bromeia, Cisseis, Phaisyla and Eudora. The Semele story became the accepted form throughout Greece but undoubtedly was false. The composer of the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus makes this abundantly clear at lines 5–6: ἄλλοι δ' ἐν Θήβησιν ἀναξ σε λέγουσι

¹¹ For the various legends and cults of Dionysus, see *RE* V (1903) 1010 f., L. R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* V (Oxford 1909) 85 f., Roscher I 1029 f., M. P. Nilsson, *Opuscula selecta* II (Lund 1952) 524–41 and *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age* (Lund 1957) 6 f., 46 f., 51 f.

¹² Cf. Ovid, *Fast.* 5. 163 f.

¹³ Theon of Alexandria, a distinguished philosopher and mathematician of the fourth century A.D., who is responsible for most of the scholia on Aratus, was the last known member of the Alexandrian Museum and the author of commentaries on Aratus, Euclid and Ptolemy. The oldest and best MS of Aratus (Marcianus 476 = M) represents the recension of Theon.

γενέσθαι / ψευδόμενοι. The same applies to the tale of Ino's nursing of her sister's son—widely accepted but false.¹⁴

If Ino and her sisters were not bona fide Hyades, why does Myrsilus say that they were? There may well be an indication to the answer in what Myrsilus clearly sees as their association with Dionysus Hyas. In the *Iliad*, remember, Dionysus Hyas (God of Wet) jumped into the sea to escape destruction and was saved by the Nereids and taken by Thetis to their underwater chambers. Not only was Ino a Nereid but so too were her sisters Agaue and Autonoe (Hes. *Th.* 247 and 258 respectively),¹⁵ and Pherecydes of Leros (*FGrH* 3 F 90a) calls Semele Hya. The daughters of Cadmus were Hyades in that they could be counted among the number of Nereids who saved and nursed Dionysus Hyas. Another example of this is Eudora, who was both Nereid (Hes. *Th.* 244) and Hyad (Hesiod's and Theon of Alexandria's lists; see previous page).

Just as Homer was referring to an earlier Dionysus, so too are we speaking here of an earlier Ino, the Ino who belonged to heroic saga and who was connected with the Aeolid line by marriage to Athamas, son of Aeolus. This was the Ino who became a Nereid,¹⁶ and who was of interest to Myrsilus.

The connection, then, between our three fragments is a complex one. Ino was the third wife of Athamas, son of Aeolus. She became a Nereid and was therefore important for the safety at sea of the Aeolian voyagers and colonists. The Nereids were heavily involved in the colonisation stories of the Aeolians, as Myrsilus in turn records for us. Homer tells us (*Il.* 24. 78 ff.) that Thetis and her nymphs dwell in the sea halfway between Samos and Imbros, in other words around Lesbos, the heart of Aeolian colonisation in the eastern Aegean.

When Myrsilus of Methymna not only says that the White Goddess was Ino but also names the Nereids as White Goddesses, he is referring to the

¹⁴ Apollod. *Bibl.* 3. 4. 3; Paus. 3. 24. 4; Ovid, *Met.* 4. 480 ff., *Fast.* 6. 485. For the nurses of Dionysus, see Roscher I 1048, II 2244; Gruppe, *Gr. Myth.* 1435; Allen-Halliday, *Homeric Hymns*, p. 98. Cf., too, A. Henrichs, "Greek Maenadism from Olympias to Messalina," *HSCP* 82 (1978) 121-60 and J. N. Bremmer, "Greek Maenadism Reconsidered," *ZPE* 55 (1984) 267-86.

¹⁵ Agaue is also listed as a Nereid at *Il.* 18. 42. But there she is part of a shortened list of Nereids (lines 39-49), which is generally regarded as an interpolation. See further M. L. West, *Hesiod. Theogony* (Oxford 1966) 236.

¹⁶ Although she is portrayed elsewhere as the cruel stepmother of Phrixus and Helle (Herodotus 7. 197; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1. 7. 3 and 3. 4. 3; Hyg. *Fab.* 1-5; Paus. 1. 44. 11 and 9. 34. 5; Nonnus, *D.* 10. 1 ff.; Ovid, *Met.* 4. 480 ff., *Fast.* 3. 853) and the murderess of her own children (Eur. *Med.* 1284 f.; but see D. L. Page, *Euripides. Medea* [Oxford 1938] ad loc.), the evidence in the earliest sources tends to suggest that Ino/Leucothea was, simply, a mortal queen who became a marine deity. Interestingly, neither Pindar (*Pyth.* 4. 162: ματριαῖς) nor Apollonius Rhodius (2. 1182: μητριαῖς) mentions Ino as the stepmother of Phrixus and Helle. And the Pindaric scholiast's remarks are worth noting in this respect (Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 288a, II 136 Drachmann): ταύτην δὲ ὁ μὲν Πίνδαρος ἐν Ὑμνοῖς Δημοδικῆν, Ἰππίας δὲ Γοργώπιν· Σοφοκλῆς ἐν Ἀθάμαντι Νεφέλην· Φερεκύδης Θεμιστώ.

most ancient of legends concerning Ino, which represented her as the wife of Athamas, son of Aeolus, who, like her sisters Agaue, Autonoe and Semele, became a Nereid helping sailors and others in distress at sea, among whom were Odysseus and Dionysus Hyas. In the case of the latter, Ino and her sisters with other Nereids for a while became nurses of Dionysus, or Hyades. Hence Myrsilus' declaration that the daughters of Cadmus were Hyades because they saved the life of Dionysus Hyas (God of Wet).

Our supposition must be, and it is quite feasible, that Myrsilus was describing, presumably in his *Lesbiaca*, the history and myth surrounding the Aeolian colonisation of Lesbos, in which the Nereids reputedly played a significant role and in which Ino with her marital link to the Aeolian *genos* would have been of prime importance in navigating her kinsfolk to safety. Myrsilus would naturally have told the story of Ino and her sisters, including their part in the Nereid sea rescue of Dionysus Hyas. All of this should, I think, answer Jacoby's question and alleviate his concern; and at the same time we see something of Myrsilus' history of Aeolian colonisation off the Asian coast.¹⁷

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¹⁷ I wish to record my thanks to the two anonymous referees and to the editor for their helpful and useful comments on this paper, but, of course, responsibility for any possible errors in the thesis remains with me.