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Seafaring Practice and Narratives in Homer's *Odyssey*

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Abstract

It is intrinsically plausible that the *Odyssey*, which freely uses realistic details of many aspects of life on and beside the sea, was informed by real seafaring experience. This paper corroborates that hypothesis. The first part catalogues parallels between details of Odyssean and real-world seafaring. Odyssean type-scenes in particular echo real practice. The second part argues that three larger episodes have real-world parallels—the visit to the Lotos Eaters anticipates incidents of sailors deserting in friendly ports; the escape from Skylla and Charybdis demonstrates a safe course through a turbulent strait, and the encounter with Ino / Leukothea foreshadows the contemporary phenomenon of a sensed presence during a crisis. The pattern of coincidence between the *Odyssey* and the real world of seafaring constitutes a cumulative argument that suggests that those episodes in particular, and the poem as a whole, was informed by that world—a conclusion with consequences both for our understanding of the poem, and for our knowledge of the early Mediterranean maritime.

Keywords: Homer, Odyssey, seafaring, maritime, Lotos Eaters, Skylla, Ino, Sensed Presence, Type-scene.

The part of the *Odyssey* describing Odysseus's wanderings is an epic of seafaring, describing how, in a series of misadventures at sea and on unknown shores, Odysseus loses all his ships and all his men. Shorter narratives of lesser voyages by subsidiary characters orbit this principal journey, and brief mentions of seafaring appear throughout the whole narrative.[1] This is a world of travel by boat.[2]

[1] Lesser voyages: Telemachos' journeys from Ithaka to Pylos and back (2.413–3.11; 15.284–300, 495–500); other heroes' returns from Troy (Nestor: 3.157–184; Menelaos: 3.276–312; 4.351–587: Aias: 4.499–511); the suitor's ambush (4.842–47); the various voyages described in the Cretan tales (13.272–86; 14.245–58, 295–315, 339–59), Eumaios' arrival on Ithaka (15.474–82). Brief mentions of quotidian trading, travel, and transport, by boat: 1.182–86, 260, 292–93; 3.72; 4.634; 5.249–50; 8.161–64; 9.128–29; 13.272–74; 14.296, 334–35; 19.291–92; 21.18; 24.418–19.

[2] On this world in general, see L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton 1971) esp. chapters 4, 12, 16; M. Finkelberg (ed.), *The Homer Encyclopedia*

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This paper argues that the depiction of this world in the *Odyssey* reflects a real world of seafaring, by noting precise details and parallels with more recent sailing practice and maritime experience. The first part reviews small-scale details of kit, practice, and geography, and examples of sailors' lore. The second part examines three larger episodes: first, the visit to the Lotos Eaters, which resembles incidents of deserting crew members during the age of sail; second, the escape from Skylla and Charybdis, which demonstrates the correct navigational approach to a difficult strait between tall cliffs; and third, Odysseus's encounter with Ino / Leukothea, which recalls episodes in which modern-day adventurers, similarly *in extremis*, encounter wonderful helpers.

This pattern of coincidence, at different scales, between the *Odyssey* and a later real world of seafaring, constitutes a cumulative argument that suggests that the poem was informed by similar realities experienced in the ancient world. This conclusion both corroborates the intrinsically plausible hypothesis that this seafaring epic includes episodes from a tradition of recounted seafaring experiences, and also offers to reflect light back on the real world of seafaring from which those narratives emerged.

1. Real-World Seafaring Details in the *Odyssey*

Though much of the business of sailing itself goes unremarked in the poem,[3] details of many aspects of seafaring recur. Homeric nautical vocabulary specifies a variety of gear, tackle, and trim.[4] Terms are used without explanation, carefully and not interchangeably: for example, when Odysseus's boat is wrecked before his second encounter with Charybdis, the *forestays* have torn and the mast has fallen backwards as a consequence (12.409–10), but there is no reason why the *backstay* should have been ripped in that incident, and it has not—it is still attached to the top of the mast (422–23). Equally precisely: Polyphemos' new staff is in length and thickness like the mast of a *particular* size and type of boat (9.321–24).[5]

There are similar particulars of geography. Odysseus (9.80–81), Menelaos (3.287–88), Agamemnon (4.514), and Odysseus in his Cretan tales (19.187) are all blown off course at mountainous Cape Maleia

(Oxford 2011) s.vv. 'sea', 'seafaring', 'ship', and 'economy'; S. Mark, *Homeric Seafaring* (College Station 2005), with review by L. Casson, *IJNA* 36 (2007) 197–99. Seafaring is at the heart of society—'ein Leben ohne Schifffahrt is unzivilisiert und fast undenkbar', according to D. Gray, *Seewesen* (Gottingen 1974) 136.

3 The sailing part of an uneventful journey is covered in a single verse: W. Arend, *Die Typische Szenen bei Homer* (Berlin 1933) 86.

4 Unpacked in J. S. Morrison and R. T. Williams, *Greek Oared Ships* (Cambridge 1968) 47–57; Casson, *Ships and Seamanship* (n. 2) 43–48; Mark, *Seafaring* (n. 2) chapters 6, 8—for example (at 129–131) the various lines, sheets, and ropes: προτόνος and ἐπίτονος (forestay and backstay), σπάρτα (perhaps a kind of binding), ὑπέραι (perhaps a bracing line), πόδες (sheets, that is, ropes attached at the bottom of the sail), κάλοι (brails, for shortening sail), ὅπλον (a cable), and δεσμός (mooring cable).

5 Casson, *Ships and Seamanship* (n. 2) 65.

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(4.514), at the south-eastern point of the Peloponnese and north of Kythera (9.80–81). This is no random cape, but an exceptionally stormy one, where the prevailing south-westerlies meet the northerly of the Aegean.[6] Indeed, it is a northerly that does for Odysseus (9.81). The routes from Crete to Egypt (14.252–57) and from Phoenicia to Libya (14.291–301) reflect real-world winds and currents.[7] Pharos (4.355–56) is plausibly a day's sailing from Egypt.[8] Amnisos is truly a difficult anchorage (19.188–89): it is just a river mouth.[9]

There are details of navigational techniques. By day, sailors could rely on making identifiable landfalls, still the most obvious navigational method.[10] So, at the end of Odysseus's journey from Ogygia, Phaiakia reveals itself as a distinctive landmark: it is like a shield (5.279–81; see also 3.171–72, 278; 9.80; 15.294–99). Note the sly variation at 12.265–66: Odysseus knows Thrinakia by the *sound* of the cattle. By night, Odysseus orientates himself by Ursa Major (5.270–75), a reliable constellation for Mediterranean navigation.[11]

Observations of life at sea recur. Cold land breezes blow at the end of the night and early morning (5.469), as they do, as land and sea cool at different rates.[12] Waves behave differently in different contexts; for example, they are stilled by headlands around bays (10.87–97; 13.96–101).[13] Knowing his waves, when trying to get to shore on Phaiakia, Odysseus seeks salvation in shore that is oblique to the force of the waves (5.418) and finds that obliquity in the mouth of a river.[14] Sea fish, specific seabirds with different behaviours, and shipbuilding tools appear in similes.[15] κορῶναι εἰνάλιαι nest in

[6] J. Morton, *The Role of the Physical Environment of Ancient Greek Seafaring* (Leiden 2001) 38–41, 48, 81–85, with D. Engels, *Roman Corinth* (Chicago 1991) 51 with table 6, p.159, and http://www.sailingissues.com/meltemi.html (accessed 30 December 2018). Strabo reports the proverb Μαλέας δὲ κάμψας ἐπιλάθου τῶν οἴκαδε (8.6.20).

[7] Mark, *Seafaring* (n. 2) 141; Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 38 and fig. 21.

[8] Rhys Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (Los Angeles and London 1946) 99.

[9] Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 106 n. 60.

[10] For the importance of landfalls in Mediterranean navigation, Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 177–85, 188–89; S. McGrail, 'Navigational Techniques in Homer's *Odyssey*', *Tropis* 4 (1996) 311–20, 314. A neat example of the importance of landfall in later navigation is William Heather's 1804 *New and Improved Chart of the Hebrides*, which includes sea-level profiles of various islands, with compass bearings: C. Fleet, M. Wilkes, and C. W. J. Withers, *Scotland: Mapping the Islands* (Edinburgh 2016) figure 4.12.

[11] S. McGrail, *Boats of the World* (Oxford 2001; 2004) 101–2. McGrail also points out that the recognition of differing qualities in winds from different quarters (12.289–90; 14.458, 475–76) suggests that they too were used as a compass.

[12] Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 52–53.

[13] Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 33–34.

[14] Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 110, 114–16.

[15] Fish: caught (12.251–55), speared (10.124), and landed (22.384–89), plus an octopus pulled from its lair (5.432–35); birds: a gull or tern (5.51–53); cormorants (12.418, 14.308); a

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noisy colonies in trees near the sea (5.65–68): they must be cormorants.[16] Seals gregariously haul out for the night—and their colonies *stink* (4.404–6, 413, 441–42, 449).

As Odysseus's ship is destroyed in a storm, the mast falls straight backwards and smashes the helmsman on the head (12.409–413). This is not just dramatic and bad luck for the helmsman: with the mast set into the notch of the μεσόδμη,[17] once the forestays part, it would fall *straight* backwards, onto the stern of the boat. This is an accurate detail, and anyone who worked with these boats would have seen masts accidentally dropped in this way, just as any sailor today knows how booms swing and crack the heads of the inattentive. Even Odysseus's fabricated shipwreck (9.283–86) is plausible.[18]

Stopovers are, for the Homeric seafarer, as much a part of the voyage as sailing.[19] The episodes of departure and arrival by boat are fertile ground for formal analysis,[20] but their details also reveal realistic seafaring practices: cargo stowed so it doesn't interfere with the oars (13.20–23); the two phases of launching a beached boat—pushing it into the water and then setting up the mast and oars—that can be done in stages to save time later (8.50–55; 4.779–86); cutting the mooring ropes for an emergency exit (10.127; casting off, for example at 9.562, is more usual); securing the oars with leather straps (8.53);[21] stashing kit in caves if the boats are likely to be beached for a while (10.404, 424); dragging them right up the beach in bad weather (12.317).

Consider the routine on landing:

> ἔνθα δ᾽ἐπ᾽ ἠπείρου βῆμεν καὶ ἀφυσσάμεθ᾽ ὕδωρ,
> αἶψα δὲ δεῖπνον ἕλοντο θοῇς παρὰ νηυσὶν ἑταῖροι.
>
> … and there we set foot on the mainland, and fetched water,
> and my companions soon took their supper there by the fast ships.
>
> 9.85–86 = 10.56–57[22]

diving bird (5.337, 352f); a tern (15.479); shipbuilding: drilling (9.384–88). See J. Ziolkowski, R. Faber, and D. Sullivan, *Homeric Similes: A Searchable, Interactive Database* (http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~sullivan/SimileSearchR3.html).

16 J. Mynott, *Birds in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2018) 340 n. 1.

17 Casson, *Ships and Seamanship* (n. 2) 47 n. 30; Mark, *Seafaring* (n. 2) 124–30.

18 Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 78.

19 A pattern of sailing by day and laying up by night is for many voyages a sensible strategy, and not a sign of incompetence: Mark, *Seafaring* (n. 2) 136–49; Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 143–62, 173–77, 234–35, 263–64, countering e.g. C. A. Maury, 'Maritime Aspects of Homeric Greece', *CJ* 14 (1918) 97–102, at 99–100; T. D. Seymour, *Life in the Homeric Age* (London 1907) 305–6.

20 Arend, *Die Typische Szenen* (n. 3): departure, 81–85; arrival, 79–81.

21 A method also used in fifth-century Athens: J. G. Landels, *Engineering in the Ancient World*, rev. ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2000) 141.

22 Similarly, 12.306. All translations of the *Odyssey* are from R. Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York 1967; 2007).

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The priority is fresh water, and then food. Formally, this pattern of finding water and preparing a meal is part of the landing type-scene after a tiring journey; practically, it is good and real seafaring routine: the formulae echo the sailor's checklist.[23] We can see a discipline like Odysseus's when Captain Cook, on his second voyage, enters Dusky Sound in New Zealand after four months at sea. He first sends out a fishing and hunting party and then his lieutenant to look for a place to drop anchor. The hunters provide a fresh meal from a seal and 'as much fish as all hands could eat for supper', and his lieutenant finds 'a good harbour with every other conveniency'—in other words, it is safe, provides wood for fuel, and a 'fine stream of fresh water'.[24] Always, for Cook and other early European navigators, the priorities are wood and water.

It follows that the availability of water is an important feature of a good anchorage.[25] Odysseus imagines the harbour that could be made on the island of the goats: not only is it sheltered, but there is fresh water there (9.140); Menelaos says the same of Pharos (4.358–59), and it is one of the features of Phorkys (13.109).

There is a similar play between formal aspects, etiquette, and practicalities in hospitality type-scenes.[26] Steve Reece analyses twelve such scenes in the *Odyssey* to illuminate the aesthetics of oral poetry, how details of each play off against each other, and how their variations are significant.[27] At the same time we can remark that episodes of hospitality were essential to the early Mediterranean traveller in an age of brigandage and piracy, and remain so in more recent times.[28] A voyage as long as Odysseus's involves a great deal of hospitality. Just because the acts of hospitality have become ritualized,[29] it does not mean that the actors are not being hospitable: the

[23] Arend, *Die Typische Szenen* (n. 3) 81; A. Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters* (London 2014) 30.

[24] J. Cook, *The Journals*, ed. P. Edwards (London 2003) 261 (27, 28 March 1773).

[25] J. W. Norie, *New Piloting Directions for the Mediterranean Sea* … (London 1831) always mentions the local availability of 'good water', e.g. at 206, describing Kalamata.

[26] M. W. Edwards, 'Homer and Oral Tradition: The Type-Scene', *Oral Tradition* 7/2 (1992) 284–330, at 303–8.

[27] A beautiful example is the different treatments of the motif of the Dog at the Door: S. Reece, *The Stranger's Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene* (Ann Arbor 1992) 14–15.

[28] Conveniently illustrated by a letter of Patrick Leigh Fermor in A. Sisman (ed.), *Dashing for the Post: The Letters of Patrick Leigh Fermor* (London 2016) 21. He describes a voyage from Patmos to Samos by caïque in late summer 1946, during which the boat was forced by a storm to put in on Arki. He was immediately made welcome at the big house and stayed for four days with other *naufragés*; their host remarked, 'one day last year … the sea brought us seventy-two guests'.

[29] Ritual as action redirected as communication: W. Burkert, S*tructure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 35–39.

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guest is safe, and ends up clean, fed, and with a bed for the night. And the last element in the type-scene, where the host escorts the guest to the next destination, is, in its weakest form, the voyager receiving onward sailing instructions from the local—an obvious, and still used, technique for the navigation of unknown waters.[30]

The Phaiakians' arrival on Ithaka gives us another example of how realistic details appear in type-scenes. The voyage ends with a flashy piece of seamanship: their boat goes *straight* to the right place and

> ἡ μὲν ἔπειτα
> ἠπείρῳ ἐπέκελσεν, ὅσον τ᾽ ἐπὶ ἥμισυ πάσης,
> σπερχομένη· τοίων γὰρ ἐπείγετο χέρσ᾽ ἐρετάων·
> οἱ δ᾽ ἐκ νηὸς βάντες ἐϋζύγου ἤπειρόνδε …
>
> The ship, hard-driven, ran up the beach for as much as
> half her length, such was the force the hands of the oarsmen
> gave her. They stepped from the strong-benched ship out onto the dry land …
> 13.113–16

There are two interesting points here. First, while this magical return has parallels in folktale,[31] it is also an appropriate and significant variation on the realistic landfall navigational technique: the Phaiakians, master navigators, go straight to Phorkys, πρὶν εἰδότες (113). (Even more wonderfully, their boats know everywhere, 8.560–61—a magical extension of the theme, just as Alkinoos' dogs at 7.91–94 are the magical extension of the Dog at the Door theme.) Secondly, this presages contemporary practice: anyone who has beached a small boat knows that the perfect courtesy is to enable one's passengers to go ashore without getting their feet wet. It is a very cool trick, and at the same time another significant variation: the Phaiakians are such expert sailors that they do without the standard elements of mooring.[32]

Finally, some incidents have parallels in the lore of later sailors. William Hansen found in the strange prophecy of 11.121–29, in which Tiresias tells Odysseus to walk inland with an oar until someone mistakes the oar for a winnowing shovel, a transformed seaman's tale—still being told by sailors to sailors in the twentieth century—of the old sailor, sick of the sea, who vows to walk inland carrying an oar until he meets someone who doesn't know what it is, and there spend his retirement: he's far enough away

[30] Reece, *Stranger's Welcome* (n. 27) 39: the Escort to the Visitor's Next Destination, in its weakest form at 10.508–40, 12.25–27; McGrail, 'Navigational Techniques' (n. 10) 315.

[31] In the folktale that overarches the *Odyssey*, the tale of the returning husband, the husband's return is frequently swift and magical: see W. Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread* (New York 2002) 208, 201–11; M. L. West, *The Making of the Odyssey* (Oxford 2014) 15f.

[32] Arend, *Die Typische Szenen* (n. 3) 80.

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from the sea now.[33] Aiolos' bag of winds (10.19–55) recalls various magical devices sold to sailors and promising to give control over the wind.[34] There are parallels to the petrification of the Phaiakian ship (13.163) in the aetiologies of rock formations in the Faeroes and Kerkyra/Corfu.[35]

In summary, there is within the *Odyssey* an array of details of seafaring equipment, experiences, practice, and lore, which appears to be true to life, not just because it is plausible and precise (though it is), but because it bears comparison with later parallels. That array suggests a poem that reflects a real seafaring world.

2. Beyond the Details: Three Larger Episodes

Given these details we might ask whether any of the larger episodes of Odysseus's voyage might reflect incidents from a real world of seafaring. M. L. West's discussion of the attack by the Laistrygones at Lamos, combining particular details and later parallels, illustrates the validity of the question.[36] The attack is an ambush in an inviting harbour, which gives shelter from all wind, but also leaves boats dead in the water and unable to escape. West points out that the topography locates the episode in Balaklava, where pirates operated in later years, ambushing sailors who had sought refuge there (Str. 7.4.2). This later parallel suggests that real-world experience informed the episode: as West says, the episode 'originated as an epicized account of an unpleasant experience of Greek seamen in the bay of Balaklava'.[37] There is no difficulty in the assertion that accounts of witnessed or experienced episodes should appear in oral traditions.[38]

In what follows I consider three episodes: the visit to the Lotos Eaters, the escape from Skylla and Charybdis, and the encounter with Ino / Leukothea. Each of these Odyssean episodes has a parallel in more recent maritime experience.

During the visit to the Lotos Eaters (9.82–104), three of Odysseus's men, sent to scout on shore after a long leg of sailing (nine days, 9.82), are so entranced by the welcome they find on shore that they desert their duties.

For the navies and shipping companies of the great age of sail, reliant on manpower, deserters—known as runners—were a fact of life. 'If a ship were

[33] W. F. Hansen, 'Odysseus and the Oar: A Folkloric Approach', in L. Edmunds (ed.), *Approaches to Greek Myth* (Johns Hopkins 1990) 241–72.

[34] W. F. Hansen, 'Homer and the Folktale', in I. Morris and B. Powell (eds.), *A New Companion to Homer* (*Mnemosyne* Suppl. 163 1996) 454–55; D. Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973) 73–78; M. F. Shaw, *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh 1986) 7.

[35] Hansen, 'Homer and the Folktale' (n. 34) 455f.

[36] M. L. West, '*Odyssey* and *Argonautica*', *CQ* 35 (2005) 39–64 = M. L. West, *Hellenica* vol. 1 (Oxford 2011) 277–312, 292–96.

[37] West, '*Odyssey* and *Argonautica*' (n. 36) 295.

[38] J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Wisconsin 1985), passim and 193–96.

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bound for Heaven and should stop at Hell for wood and water[,] some of the crew would run away', wrote the captain of the whaling ship *Florida* in his log book in 1859.[39] For many runners, jumping ship was not a serious attempt at desertion, but a temporary disappearance in a friendly port; this was known in the eighteenth-century Royal Navy as 'rambling'.[40] And this seems very like what happens during the visit to the Lotos Eaters.

> οἱ δ᾽ αἶψ᾽ οἰχόμενοι μίγεν ἀνδράσι Λωτοφάγοισιν·
> οὐδ᾽ ἄρα Λωτοφάγοι μήδονθ᾽ ἑτάροισιν ὄλεθρον
> ἡμετέροις, ἀλλά σφι δόσαν λωτοῖο πάσασθαι.
> τῶν δ᾽ ὅς τις λωτοῖο φάγοι μελιηδέα καρπόν,
> οὐκέτ᾽ ἀπαγγεῖλαι πάλιν ἤθελεν οὐδὲ νέεσθαι,
> ἀλλ᾽ αὐτοῦ βούλοντο μετ᾽ ἀνδράσι Λωτοφάγοισι
> λωτὸν ἐρεπτόμενοι μενέμεν νόστου τε λαθέσθαι.
> τοὺς μὲν ἐγὼν ἐπὶ νῆας ἄγον κλαίοντας ἀνάγκῃ,
> νηυσὶ δ᾽ ἐνὶ γλαφυρῇσιν ὑπὸ ζυγὰ δῆσα ἐρύσσας.
>
> 'My men went on and presently met the Lotus-Eaters,
> nor did these Lotus-Eaters have any thoughts of destroying
> our companions, but they only gave them lotus to taste of.
> But any of them who ate the honey-sweet fruit of lotus
> was unwilling to take any message back, or to go
> away, but they wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating
> people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home. I myself
> took these men back weeping, by force, to where the ships were,
> and put them aboard under the rowing benches and tied them
> fast …'
>
> 9.91–99

To paraphrase: after a nine-day leg of what is already a gruelling voyage, the boat stops in a nice place with hospitable inhabitants, and three of the crew take advantage of being sent ashore by running. Odysseus finds the ramblers and drags them back to the boat.

If we read the episode as one of sailors beguiled by the pleasures of shore leave, how should we weigh the psychotropic power of the fabulous *lotos*? No drugs are *necessary* to explain νόστου … λαθέσθαι: that forgetfulness is implicit in the exhortation to any dallying traveller to remember their destination or journey (10.472; 11.110; 12.137; cf. 15.3; 3.142).[41] Gregory Crane, discussing the spectrum of forgetfulness induced by feast plus drug that we

39 B. C. Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do for Me: The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington 1994) 104. As many as *two-thirds* of a whaler's crew might go missing during a voyage (chapter 6; 92).

40 See N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World* (London 1988) 188–204, on running and (at 190–91) rambling in the Georgian navy.

41 D. Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (Yale 1978) 35–36.

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are shown in the *Odyssey*—Helen, the Lotos Eaters, Kirke—concludes 'there may well have been a conventional dichotomy between good φάρμακα which cause a beneficial forgetfulness and bad φάρμακα which produce a sinister forgetfulness'.[42] And this reminds us of the completely clean feast when Odysseus first lands on Thrinakia. So long as they are feasting, the crew forgets their grim experiences,

> αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἕντο,
> μνησάμενοι δὴ ἔπειτα φίλους ἔκλαιον ἑταίρους
>
> But when they had put aside their desire for eating and drinking,
> They remembered and they cried for their beloved companions
>
> 12.308–10

This respite is even more short-lived than that given by the drugs Helen administers to Menelaos and Telemachos (4.223). Finally, though Kirke first mixes with the sailors' Pramnian wine a drug that makes them forget their homeland (10.235–36), it is the feasting that makes Odysseus forget his home—for a year (10.472). In this nexus, with no clear distinction between the effects of feast and *pharmaka*, the *lotos* seems less pharmaceutical. And indeed, Page comments that it was originally a staple (though exotic) food.[43]

The second episode is Odysseus's first encounter with Skylla and Charybdis (12.73–110, 222–59). Skylla and Charybdis have long been located in the Straits of Messina, where turbulence is caused by the asynchronicity of the tides at the northern and southern ends of the strait.[44] However, the situation described in the *Odyssey* is nothing like the strait of Messina: Kirke describes two cliffs facing each other, an arrow's shot apart (12.102), one so high that its peak is always encircled by cloud (12.73–75). The strait of Messina is wider and the terrain flatter.

More interesting than the attempt to locate the whirlpool is the general topography of the situation. Homer's narrow strait has cliffs on both sides (12.73, 101), though one is higher than the other (101). Such a landscape might well cause turbulence: the narrowness of the strait is one factor; the existence of some deep water, suggested by the high cliffs, another.[45] Both

[42] G. Crane, *Calypso, Backgrounds and Conventions of the Odyssey* (Frankfurt 1988) 44; also 32, 42–44.

[43] Page, *Folktales* (n. 34) 13–14.

[44] Hecataeus *FGrH* 1F 82; Thuc. 4.24; Str. 1.2.16, 6.2.3; J. Purdy, *The New Sailing Directory for the Strait of Gibraltar and the Western Division of the Mediterranean Sea* (London 1832) 155. The tides: F. Bignami and E. Salusti, 'Tidal Currents and Transient Phenomena in the Strait of Messina: A Review', in L. J. Pratt (ed.), *The Physical Oceanography of Sea Straits* (Dordrecht 1990) 95–124, 97.

[45] Cliffs of the 'plunging' type drop straight into deep water, with no shore platform, either above or below sea-level: R. Davidson-Arnott, *Introduction to Coastal Processes and Geomorphology* (Cambridge 2010) 398–400. They are common on the Greek coast (Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 21f); indeed, Odysseus encounters one at 5.413.

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may well amplify the effects of tidal or other currents; we may compare the topography of the great Corryvreckan whirlpool, in the strait between Jura and Scarba.[46] (It is a happy coincidence that Charybdis is compared to a cauldron on the boil (237–38), for Corryvreckan is named from the Scots Gaelic *coire bhreacain*, ‘the speckled cauldron’.)[47] Faced with such a navigational challenge, a sailor must avoid the whirlpool, by hugging the far cliffs as closely as possible (but without, of course, striking any rocks). And this is what Odysseus tells his helmsman to do:

> σοὶ δέ, κυβερνῆθ’, ὧδ᾽ ἐπιτέλλομαι· ἀλλ’ ἐνὶ θυμῷ
> βάλλευ, ἐπεὶ νηὸς γλαφυρῆς οἰήϊα νωμᾷς.
> τούτου μὲν καπνοῦ καὶ κύματος ἐκτὸς ἔεργε
> νῆα, σὺ δὲ σκοπέλου ἐπιμαίεο, μή σε λάθῃσι
> κεῖσ’ ἐξορμήσασα καὶ ἐς κακὸν ἄμμε βάλῃσθα.
>
> ‘For you, steersman, I have this order; so store it deeply
> in your mind, as you control the steering oar of this hollow
> ship; you must keep her clear from where the smoke and the breakers
> are, and make hard for the sea rock lest, without your knowing,
> she might drift that way, and you bring all of us into disaster.’
>
> 12.217–21

This encounter seems, then, partly an anecdote about a navigational challenge in a turbulent strait, a stratum that has been overlaid with the monstrous.[48] And, as with the risk of rambling crewmen, that realistic layer reflects a genuine seafaring experience.

The third episode I discuss is more unusual, though it springs from the common experience of shipwreck. Towards the end of his wanderings, and after seven years on Ogygia, when Kalypso finally allows Odysseus to leave, he builds a small boat (5.228–261),[49] and manages to sail for seventeen days, reaching sight of Phaiakia (278–81). But Poseidon notices him and sends a storm that dismasts his boat (316–17). He is washed off the hull and, weighed down by his clothing, barely manages to swim back

[46] Currents through Mediterranean coastal straits: Morton, *Physical Environment* (n. 6) 42–45, 85–90. Corryvreckan’s situation is conveniently shown in Fleet et al., *Scotland* (n. 10) 217, fig. 9.8.

[47] H. Haswell-Smith, *The Scottish Islands,* rev. ed. (Edinburgh 2004) 51.

[48] Morton suggests Skylla is a ‘generic term for the monsters that symbolised the dangers of rocky coasts, and the dread mariners felt when sailing in their vicinity’ (*Physical Environment* (n. 6) 70).

[49] S. Mark, ‘*Odyssey* 5.234–53 and Homeric Ship Construction: A Reappraisal’, *AJA* 95 (1991) 441–45; Mark, *Seafaring* (n. 2) 70–96, with McGrail’s review (n. 2) and S. McGrail, ‘Sea Transport, Part 1: Ships and Navigation’, in J. P. Oleson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Engineering and Technology in the Classical World* (Oxford 2009) 608–37, at 617–21.

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(313–25). From this predicament, he is saved by the nymph Ino / Leukothea,[50] who appears from the depths and advises him to swim for it:

> εἵματα ταῦτ᾽ ἀποδὺς σχεδίην ἀνέμοισι φέρεσθαι
> κάλλιπ᾽, ἀτὰρ χείρεσσι νέων ἐπιμαίεο νόστου
> γαίης Φαιήκων, ὅθι τοι μοῖρ᾽ ἐστὶν ἀλύξαι.
> τῇ δέ, τόδε κρήδεμνον ὑπὸ στέρνοιο τανύσσαι
> ἄμβροτον· οὐδέ τί τοι παθέειν δέος οὐδ᾽ ἀπολέσθαι.
>
> 'Take off these clothes, and leave the raft to drift at the winds' will,
> and then strike out and swim with your hands and make for a landfall
> on the Phaiakian country, where your escape is destined.
> And here, take this veil, it is immortal, and fasten it under
> your chest; and there is no need for you to die, nor to suffer.'
>
> 5.343–47[51]

This does not seem like sensible advice to Odysseus—the land he saw was too far away—and so he decides to stay on the boat unless it is wrecked, and only then swim (360–64). And this is what happens: when the boat is smashed, leaving Odysseus astride a single plank, he throws off the clothes Kalypso gave him, wraps Leukothea's veil around himself, and swims for it (370–75).

In this episode, then, a wonderful figure appears out of nowhere to a sailor whose boat is being wrecked in a storm and advises him how to escape (345). This narrative has a close counterpart in the experience of modern adventurers who, *in extremis*, believe they are joined by a comforting and advising figure, who in some way points to their salvation.[52] The mountaineer Reinhold Messner, alone in his tent at altitude during his 1980 ascent of Everest, dehydrated and disorientated, heard someone tell him to get on with the cooking—which he did, and kept himself alive. Another Everest climber, Steve Swenson, forced to spend two nights at 8000 metres, an altitude impossible to survive for more than forty-eight hours, saw a kindly woman who kept him from falling asleep and ensured he brewed tea: 'every piece of advice I was getting, was exactly what I needed to do'. Joshua Slocum, like Odysseus a single-handed sailor, ill and delirious during

[50] For her story, see C. Pache, *Baby and Child Heroes in Ancient Greece* (Illinois 2004) 135–68. Dead by drowning after leaping into the sea; she lives with the Nereids; see Pind. *Pyth*. 11.1.

[51] Divine helper giving hero a talisman: Stith Thompson, *A Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington 1955–58) F340–8 (fairies); N810. Why a κρήδεμνον? See D. R. Kardulias, 'Odysseus in Ino's Veil: Feminine Headdress and the Heron in *Odyssey* 5', *TAPhA* 131 (2001) 23–51.

[52] P. Suedfeld and J. Mocellin, 'The "Sensed Presence" in Unusual Environments', *Environment and Behavior* 19.1 (1967) 33–52; J. Geiger, *The Third Man Factor* (Edinburgh 2009), catalogues many examples from testimonies by sailors, mountaineers, polar explorers, and other adventurers.

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a storm, believed that someone else actually took the helm; he felt that he 'had been in the presence of a friend and seaman of vast experience'.[53]

Such experiences of a sensed presence typically occur in an extreme environment, in a context marked by isolation and monotony, such as the solitude of the single-handed sailor, and are triggered by a combination of stresses—a mountaineer suffering an accident while short of oxygen at altitude, or a sailor, cold, dehydrated, and under-nourished after shipwreck.[54] Those who witness the sensed presence are by character open to experience, a trait of the imaginative and independent; they tend to be optimistic of their survival.[55] It seems that this sensed presence is conjured up by some part of the survivor's brain to cut through the noise of the crisis and ensure the right thing gets done.

The context of Odysseus's encounter with Ino / Leukothea corresponds with this pattern. Odysseus has been at sea, alone in a small boat, for seventeen days. He is now in the midst of a storm; he has already been washed off his boat and, while he was able to swim back, now his boat is breaking up. At this moment, πολύτροπος, independent, resourceful, and a survivor, he encounters an adviser who tells him how to escape. It is a psychologically acute (and practically accurate) tale of the traumatic experience of escape from a shipwreck in a small boat in a storm, which has been fitted, most appropriately, to Odysseus at this moment.

It is counter-intuitive that our contemporaries and a Homeric hero should be able to share such an experience, but the alternative, that the *Odyssey* describes a scenario that happened to fit a psychology that did not exist at the time but did later, is vanishingly unlikely. This remains the case even though Homeric heroes frequently encounter the divine in less traumatic circumstances; the wonderful fact is that people of our own time can, in this intense situation, share this Homeric experience.

These three Odyssean episodes, then, all have parallels in real-world seafaring experience. It is easy to overlook those parallels: the rambling among the Lotos Eaters is less dramatic than a feast of magic food, and the navigation of the turbulent strait less dramatic than sea monsters—just as the piratical ambush in Lamos is overshadowed by the fact the ambushers are man-eating giants. The sensed presence is a rare phenomenon.

Nonetheless, the parallels obtain. The most economical explanation for this pattern is that these episodes in the *Odyssey* were informed by the real-life experience of such episodes, just as the pattern of correlation at the smaller scale described in the first part of this paper suggests that it was informed by the objects and practices of that seafaring life.

53 Geiger, *Third Man Factor* (n. 52) 222; 223; 50–51.

54 Suedfeld and Mocellin, 'Sensed Presence' (n. 52) 38–39, 40–41; Geiger, *Third Man Factor* (n. 52) chapters 4, 5.

55 Geiger, *Third Man Factor* (n. 52) chapters 10, 11; 248.

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3. Conclusion

The insights gained from this analysis cast light on the archaic seafaring life as well as on the *Odyssey.* The memorable experience of a presence sensed during a traumatic shipwreck, sailors running during a long voyage, safe navigation of a turbulent strait between cliffs: we may conclude all of these were experiences of early Mediterranean sailors.[56] We can infer that their narratives of these experiences entered the oral tradition from which the *Odyssey* emerged. Finally, we note that these details and episodes fall across the gamut of sailing experience from mundane practicalities to dramas of piracy, storm, and shipwreck. This variety suggests that the *Odyssey* emerged from, and is evidence for, a broad tradition of narrated experiences of all kinds of novelty and hazard encountered by sailors on, near, and in the sea.[57]

[56] The Apologue is of course a first-person narrative, the voice of experience. D. Beck, 'Odysseus: Narrator, Storyteller, Poet?' *CPh* 100 (2015) 213–227 argues that Odysseus's narrative techniques are those of the storyteller, not the poet.

[57] I would like to thank John Geiger, whose research on the sensed presence was the seed of this paper, and the anonymous readers for this journal; this is a better, shorter, and more readable paper as a result of their generous comments and suggestions.

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