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REFLECTIONS ON THE THRACIAN SEA-NYMPH ABA

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Two Greek lexicographic sources mention the sea nymph Ἀβα as a mistress of Poseidon. She bore him a son Ἐργίσκος, who, according to a local aetiological story, became the eponymic founder of the ancient town of Ergiske (now Çatalca, Turkey), located in East Thracia on the ridge between the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea. It is obvious that the proper name Ἀβα, denoting a local sea nymph, represents a Thracian ingredient in Ancient Greek mythology. The article demonstrates that the theonym Ἀβα derives from the appellative ἄβα denoting ‘a large sea-monster’, specifically ‘Mediterranean sea cow’, cf. the Hesychian gloss ἄβα: τροχός, ἡ βοή.

Keywords: Aelian, etiology, etymology, nymphs, sea mammals, theonymy, Thracian

РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ О ФРАКИЙСКОЙ МОРСКОЙ НИМФЕ АБЕ

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В двух греческих лексикографических источниках морская нимфа Ἀβα упоминается как любовница Посейдона. Она родила ему сына, которого называли Эргискос. Согласно местной этиологической традиции, ее сын Эргискос стал одноименным основателем древнего города Эргиске (совр. Чаталджа, Турция), расположенного в Восточной Фракии на хребте между Мраморным и Черным морями. Очевидно, что личное имя Ἀβα, обозначающее местную морскую нимфу, представляет собой фракийский компонент древнегреческой мифологии. В статье показано, что теоним Ἀβα происходит от апеллятива ἄβα, обозначающего «большое морское чудовище», а именно средиземноморскую морскую корову, ср. глоссу Гесихия ἄβα τροχός, ἢ βοή.

Ключевые слова: Элиан, этимология, этимология, нимфы, морские млекопитающие, теонимы, фракийский язык

The nymph Ἀβα is a local sea divinity, mentioned by Harpocration, the lexicographer of the first or second century AD, as well as by the so-called *Etymologicum Magnum* (12th cent. AD). Both lexicographic sources inform us that this nymph was one of numerous mistresses of Poseidon, the Greek god of sea and other waters. She bore him a son called Ergiskos¹.

The name Ἀβα appears in Harpocration's lexicon under the heading Ἐργίσκη: Ἐργίσκη Αἰσχίνης κατὰ Κτησιφῶντος. καὶ ἡ Ἐργίσκη τῆς Θράκης ἐστίν, ὠνόμασται δὲ ἀπὸ Ἐργίσκου τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος καὶ Ἀβας νύμφης — “*Ergiskē*: Aischines in the speech *Against Ctesiphon*. Moreover, the town of Ergiske in Thracia takes its name from Ergiskos, the son of Poseidon and the nymph Aba”².

The main part of the same information is repeated in *Etymologicum Magnum*, s.v. Ἐργίσκη, τῆς Θράκης ἐστίν, ἀπὸ Ἐργίσκου τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος καὶ Ἀβας νύμφης — “*Ergiskē*: it is located in Thracia and named after Ergiskos, the son of Poseidon and the nymph Aba”³.

Both sources agree that Ergiskos, the son of Poseidon and the nymph Aba, was — according to a local etiological story — the eponymic hero, who gave his name to the ancient town Ergiskē (now Çatalca, Turkey) located in East Thracia on the ridge between the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea⁴. From this, it is obvious that the name Ἀβα, denoting a local sea nymph, represents a Thracian ingredient in Ancient Greek mythology. Although the Thracian origin of the nymph is highly probable, the theonym Ἀβα is not explained from an etymological point of view⁵. Also the semantic motivation of the proper name Ἀβα remains unclear. The most famous Aba, the daughter of Zenophanes, lived in the first century BC (fig. 1). She was a regent of the Cilician town Olbe in the times of the triumvir Marcus Antonius (Strab. 14. 5. 10)⁶. It is uncertain, however, whether the Cilician female anthroponym Ἀβα was of Thracian origin or not.

In my article I would like to demonstrate that the name of the Thracian sea-nymph Ἀβα derives from the Thracian appellative ἄβα denoting a large sea-monster living in ancient

¹ Pape, Benseler 1911, 1; Detschew 1957, 1; *DGE* s.v.

² Dindorf 1853, 134; Detschew 1957, 1, 170.

³ Sylburg 1816, 335; Gaisford 1974, 1061.

⁴ Detschew 1957, 170.

⁵ See also the female personal name Ἀβα attested in Ancient Greek sources (Dornseiff, Hansen 1978, 7).

⁶ See Toepffler 1894, 4; Pape, Benseler 1911, 1; Detschew 1957, 1; Roller 2018, 121–123.

times in certain bays on the Thracian coast. This term of foreign (non-Greek) origin is only attested in the lexicon by Hesychius of Alexandria (5th cent. AD). Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to explain the gloss ἄβρα τροχός, ἢ βοή without the use of Claudius Aelian's testimony concerning mysterious sea-monsters called τροχοί (NA. 13. 20). Hence, I begin my argumentation by discussing Aelian's chapter on these unidentified marine creatures.

In his work *De natura animalium*, Claudius Aelian describes not only sea monsters of the pelagic zone (NA. 9. 49)⁷, but also mysterious large animals living close to the coast (NA. 13. 20)⁸. The latter creatures were called τροχοί in ancient Greek. Below I quote Aelian's original chapter along with its English translation (NA. 13.20).

Τῶν δὲ κητῶν τὰ ὑπέρογκα ἄγαν καὶ τὸ μέγεθος ὑπερήφανα νήχεται μὲν ἐν τοῖς πελάγεσι μέσοις, ἥδη γε μὴν καὶ σκηπτοῖς βάλλεται. πρὸς τούτοις μὲν οὖν ἔστι καὶ ἕτερα ἐπάκτια τοιαῦτα, καὶ ὄνομα τροχός αὐτοῖς. καὶ νεῖ κατ' ἀγέλας ταῦτα, μάλιστα μὲν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Ἄθω τοῦ Θρακίου, ἐν τε τοῖς κόλποις τῷ ἀπὸ Σιγείου πλέοντι, ἐντυχεῖν δέ ἐστιν αὐτοῖς καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἀντιπέρας ἡπειρον παρά τε τὸν Ἀρταχάϊου καλούμενον τάφον καὶ τὸν Ἀκάνθιον ἰσθμόν, ἐνθα τοὶ καὶ ἡ τοῦ Πέρσου φαίνεται διατομή, ἣ διέτεμε τὸν Ἄθω. τὰ κήτη δὲ ταῦτα, ἃ καλοῦσι τροχοῦς, ἄλκιμα μὲν οὐ φαίνονται εἶναι, λοφιδὴν δὲ ὑποφαίνει καὶ ἀκάνθας ὑπερμήκει, ὥς καὶ πολλὰκις ὁρᾶσθαι ἐξάλους αὐτάς. ἀκούσαντα δὲ εἰρῆσις κτύπου περιστρέφεται τε καὶ κατελλεῖται ὥς ὅτι κατωτάτω ἑαυτὰ ὠθοῦντα· ἐνθεν τοὶ καὶ τοῦδε τοῦ ὀνόματος μετεῖληχεν. ἀναπλεῖ δὲ ἀνελιχθέντα καὶ κυλιόμενα ἔμπαλιν⁹.

Sea-monsters of excessive bulk and of prodigious size swim in mid-ocean, and are, at times, struck by lightning. Besides these, there are others of the same kind that come close to the shore, and their name is *Trochus* (wheel). These swim in droves, especially on the right side of Thracian Athos and in the bays as one sails from Sigeum, and one may encounter them along the mainland opposite – close to what is called the Tomb of Artachaeus and the isthmus of Acanthus where the canal which the Persian King cut through Athos is to be seen. It is said that these monsters which they call *Trochus* are timid, though they expose their head-tip (λοφία¹⁰)

⁷ See Kaczyńska, Witczak 2018, 43–56.

⁸ See Kaczyńska, Sadziński, Witczak 2019a, 7–18; 2019b, 45–58. An alternative version is suggested by Le Goïc, Cam, Ferrière 2020, 21–34. Unfortunately, the proposed identification of τροχός with the ocean sunfish or the common mola (*Mola mola* L.) is hardly acceptable for a number of reasons. Firstly, the sea monsters termed *trochoi*, described by Claudius Aelian (NA 13. 20), lived in the shallow coastal zone, whereas the ocean sunfish, a giant predator, frequently hunts in deeper waters (at least 200m in depth) and rarely approaches the seacoast. Secondly, the *trochoi* swam in big groups in some bays near the Chalcidice Peninsula and the Thracian shore, whereas the ocean sunfish are usually found alone, occasionally in pairs. Third, the *trochoi* frequently stayed on the surface of the seawater, whereas all kinds of mola actively occupied the epipelagic and mesopelagic zones, hunting in the depths. Molas are sometimes seen at the surface, when they are basking in a horizontal position. This common practice of basking during the day seems to be a method of “thermally recharging” after diurnal, and especially nocturnal dives, into deeper and colder zones in order to feed.

⁹ Scholfield 1959, 116; Maspero 1998, 776–778; see also García Valdés, Llera Fueyo, Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén 2009, 323–324.

¹⁰ The Greek appellative λοφία, Ionic λοφή f. is commonly translated as ‘mane (of horses), tuft of hair or bristly ridge (on the back of other animals); bristly back (of boars or hyenas); back, nape’, also ‘back-fin (of dolphins or similar fishes)’ (*LSJ* s.v.; Montanari 1999, 1204; 2018, 1256; Diggle 2021, 880). It also appears in a poetical description of a sea monster attacking Andromeda (*Ach.* 3. 7. 6). The noun in question is derived from Gk. λόφος m. ‘neck, cervix; crest (of a helmet); tuft (of hair); dorsal fin (of a dolphin); crest of a hill, ridge, hillock’ (Beekes 2010, 873–874). These Hellenic words are commonly compared with Toch. A *lap* ‘head’, ORuss. *lbb*

and dorsal parts of enormous length (ἄκανθα ὑπερμήκεις¹¹) so that they are often seen above the water. But at the sound of oars they revolve and contract and plunge as deep as they can go. It is from this, you see, that they derive their name. And again they uncoil and with a rolling motion swim up to the surface¹².

It was demonstrated in two different papers that in Chapter 13. 20 Claudius Aelian described extinct Mediterranean sirenians similar to Steller's sea cows¹³. It is necessary to repeat the basic arguments for the suggested species identification.

Firstly, the sea monsters called *trokhai* cannot be sharks or other large fish. Why? All fish take oxygen from the water thanks to their gills, so they have no need to emerge from the sea. Meanwhile, the sea monsters in question had the habit of regularly submerging and ascending, which clearly shows that they had lungs (and not gills) and therefore they had to take oxygen from the air every few minutes. It is clear that the *trokhai* were large marine mammals and not sharks or fish.

Secondly, the behaviour of the sea monsters, described by Claudius Aelian in Chapter 13. 20, is highly characteristic of marine mammals belonging to the sirenians (*Sirenia*, Illiger, 1811). A particular difficulty related to the correct identification of sea monsters called τροχοί relates essentially to the fact that no species of *Sirenia* has lived in the Aegean or Mediterranean Sea in modern times (fig. 2)¹⁴. It is not impossible, however,



Fig. 1. Aba, the female regent of Olbe (ca. 43–30 BC). Photo by Martincarp, 1973. Wikimedia Commons

m. 'skull', Russ. *lob* m. 'forehead', Pol. *łeb* m. 'head (of an animal); pate'. The lexical data can suggest that the original meaning was 'top of a head; head-tip; crest or sim.'.

¹¹ For the term ἄκανθα the basic Greek dictionaries give the following meanings: 'thorn, prickle; spine; sting (of animals); backbone, spine, dorsal fin (of humans and animals); thorn, quill (of porcupines or fish)' (*LSJ* s.v.; Montanari 1999, 103–104; 2018, 163; Diggle 2021, 42). I prefer to translate Aelian's phrase ἄκανθα ὑπερμήκεις as "dorsal parts of enormous length".

¹² Translated into English by Scholfield 1959, 117 (with small modifications).

¹³ See especially Kaczyńska, Sadziński, Witczak 2019a, 7–18; 2019b, 45–58.

¹⁴ Modern palaeozoologists believe that no sirenians are known to have lived in the Mediterranean Sea since the late Pliocene period (ca. three million years ago). It is suggested that *Metaxytherium subapenninum* (Bruno, 1839) was the last one to survive there. It was a large sirenian (up to 6 m), having two large tusks, like another Mediterranean species *Rytiodus heali* (see fig. 2). Its behavior was probably much like that of the modern dugong, see Sorbi, Domning, Vaiani, Bianucci 2012, 686–707.

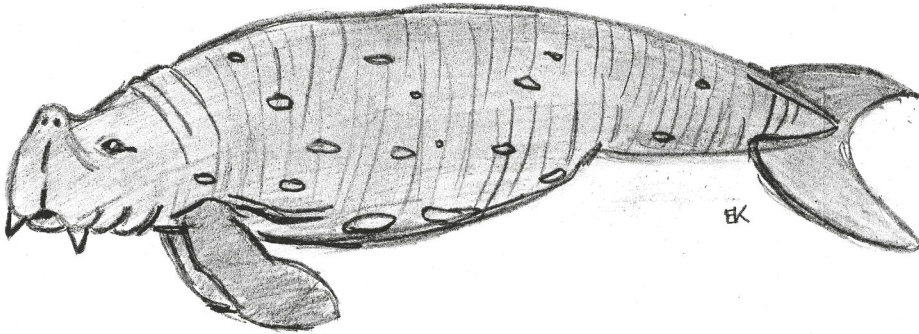


Fig. 2. An extinct Mediterranean species of Sirenia *Rytiodus heali* (with two large tusks). After: Kaczyńska, Sadziński, Witczak 2019a, 9. Prepared by E. Kaczyńska

that some Mediterranean sirenians existed in ancient times, i.e. before a large-scale massacre of large marine mammals¹⁵.

The research hypothesis, according to which the sea monsters called τροχοί represented Mediterranean sea cows (extinct now), is supported by the following arguments:

1. Whales, dolphins and sharks are basically marine animals of the pelagic zone, which relatively rarely approach the sea coast. On the other hand, sirenians are large herbivorous mammals that live constantly in the shallow coastal zone. At the beginning of Chapter 13. 20, Claudius Aelian makes a clear distinction between giant monsters in the deep sea and the coastal large animals called *trokhai*.

2. All kinds of Sirenia are exceptionally sociable animals, swimming mainly in small family groups, numbering about 10 individuals, or more numerous herds (from 50 to 150 pieces). The sirenians usually merge into loose flocks during the day, and at night they separate and intensely feed in family groups¹⁶. Aelian's description clearly agrees with this behaviour.

3. The sirenians are herbivorous animals feeding on sea grass (fig. 3). They can barely get most of the body out of the water. However, they are clumsy and basically helpless on land (fig. 4)¹⁷. They come out of the water rarely and only in relatively safe places, i.e. located far away from areas inhabited by men. The herbivorous sirenians are timid animals, avoiding any fight. The opinion of Claudius Aelian that the sea monsters called τροχοί pose no danger to people is, therefore, not surprising.

4. The sirenians breathe air, so they have to come up quite often and stay on the surface of the water for a short while to collect air. Their head or back is then clearly visible. The modern sirenians, such as the dugong (*Dugong dugon* Müller) or the West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus* L.) (see fig. 3 and 4), feed on seagrass growing on the sea

¹⁵ It is commonly emphasized in zoological literature that people "hunted the sirenians from the earliest times, because they were very easy prey even for the primitive hunters" (Serafiński, Wielgus-Serafińska 1988, 370). Also Domning (1972, 187–189) suggests that Steller's sea cow, earlier widespread in the North Pacific, was exterminated by prehistoric hunters (ca. 15.000 or more years ago).

¹⁶ Serafiński, Wielgus-Serafińska 1988, 370.

¹⁷ Manatees sometimes wriggle partly out of the water on a muddy bank to feed.



Fig. 3. The dugong feeding on sea grass. Photo by J. Willem, 2008. Wikimedia Commons

bottom for several minutes (from 2 to 8), then emerge to draw air¹⁸, then return again to their recent feeding site and emerge again. It is worth noting that Steller's sea cows, the largest of the modern sirenians (reaching up to 8 m in length and 6 tons in weight), had a high displacement (draught) and, therefore, they were very rarely fully submerged. This is why some parts of their body were usually visible on the sea surface¹⁹.

5. All kinds of Sirenia and Cetacea (as opposed to fish, including large, viviparous fish) have hearing organs²⁰, therefore they react to the noise caused by ships. Fish do not pick up the sound but feel the vibrations caused by the object moving in the water.

6. Feeding or resting sirenians (and also dolphins), as opposed to other sea monsters, could be easily observed both from a ship's deck and from the mainland (especially from a high bank), because the places where they feed and stay are in the shallow coastal zones (up to around 6 m depth). It is not surprising, therefore, that Claudius Aelian is well-informed about the habits of the sea monsters in question.

¹⁸ Steller's sea cows (now extinct) emerged on average every 4–5 minutes and breathed air for some time: "When they [i.e. sea cows] raise their noses above the water, as they do every four or five minutes, they blow out the air and a little water with a snort such as a horse makes in blowing his nose" (transl. by W. Miller and J.E. Miller, see Steller 2011, 42).

¹⁹ "Dimidia pars corporis, tergus scilicet et latera eminent semper ex aquis" (Steller 1751, 324). The English version omits the Latin adverb *semper* 'ever, always, at all times, for ever', see Steller 2011, 43: "Half of the body – the back and sides – projects above the water".

²⁰ The sirenians have small earholes located at eye level.



Fig. 4. The dugong and the manatee. Prepared by H. Craig (in 1897). Wikimedia Commons

7. Large sea animals called *trokhai* (literally ‘wheels’²¹), despite the immense size of the body and huge mass, avoided collisions with ancient galleys or boats (or with oars) and already at the sound of oars submerged into the deep sea, making a characteristic circular motion. In the case of very large sirenians of this type, the behaviour is justified. The amount of displacement (draught) displayed in Steller’s sea cow hindered its full immersion, so from time to time it made a circular rotation around the longitudinal axis so that the skin on its back would not dry out²². Probably for the above-mentioned Mediterranean sirenians, this circular motion around its axis was so frequent and easily perceptible that it was – as the Roman writer of Praeneste claims – the basis for giving the name τροχός.

The chapter under discussion in Aelian’s thirteenth book clearly indicates that coastal sea monsters called *trokhai*, representing probably large Mediterranean sirenians (extinct now), were only found in certain bays

located near the Chalcidice Peninsula²³ and along the coast of Thrace.

Now let us move on to the lexical and microphilological questions. The Hesychian gloss †ἄβᾱ: τροχός, ἢ βοή is usually treated as unclear or even doubtful²⁴. Kurt Latte, the excellent editor of Hesychius’ lexicon, printed the so-called *crux philologorum* before the lemma, which indicates that he suspects that the original lemma is corrupted. Of course, Latte’s opinion is subjective and should be verified²⁵.

Hjalmar Frisk introduces the Hesychian gloss in question into his *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, quoting Specht’s opinion, according to which the latter sense βοή can be explained by a comparison of the lemma ἄβᾱ (correctly *ἄβᾱ) with the Homeric imperfect verb αἶε ‘called’²⁶. Specht thinks that three other Hesychian glosses are related as well: ἄβᾱσαι· ἐπιποθεῖ, θορυβεῖ (‘yearns for, makes noise’), †ἄβᾱρει· ὄδει

²¹ Gk. τροχός m. ‘wheel; circle, circular object’, also ‘a sea monster’, see *LSJ* s.v.; Montanari 1999, 2044; 2018, 2162; Diggle 2021, 1399.

²² Of course, the wheel-like rotation of the *trokhai*, described by Claudius Aelian, can be also differently understood, e.g. as a rolling motion around a transverse axis.

²³ Herodotus (6. 44) clearly confirms that the sea near the Chalcidice Peninsula and Mount Athos was full of sea monsters (θηριωδεστάτη). It seems probable that the Greek historian confirms the presence of the large sirenians called *trokhai* in the coastal zone.

²⁴ Latte 1953, 4; Latte, Cunningham 2018, 5.

²⁵ Note that Schmidt (1858, 5) prints the Hesychian gloss ἄβᾱ: τροχός, ἢ βοή with no *crux philologorum*.

²⁶ Frisk 1962, 2; Specht 1931, 120–121.

‘sings’²⁷ and also ἄβωρ· βοή ὡς Λάκωνες (‘battle-cry, as Lacones [use the word]’)²⁸. According to Frisk, Specht’s explanation is “[s]ehr hypothetisch”²⁹.

Robert Beekes translates the Hesychian gloss in question as ‘wheel or screaming’, but he gives no possible explanation for the former meaning. As to the latter sense he only refers to Specht’s explanation with no additional commentary³⁰.

In my opinion, the Hesychian gloss ἄββα· τροχός, ἢ βοή should be printed with no *crux philologorum*. The first pair ἄββα = τροχός is completely correct. Of course, the explanatory word τροχός must be connected with the zoological meaning ‘a large sea animal’, especially ‘a Mediterranean sea cow’ (and not ‘a wheel; circle, circular object’³¹). It can be suggested that the term ἄββα, pronounced [‘aba] or [‘ava], represents a Thracian ingredient in the Greek language³². It cannot be excluded that the Thracian zoonym ἄββα ‘a Mediterranean sea-cow’ represents an associative name, showing a possible dependence of the marine terminology on vocabulary related to land animals³³. It seems to derive from a native (purely Thracian) noun for ‘sheep’, cf. Gr. Hom. δῖς f. ‘ewe; sheep’, Lat. *ovis* f. ‘sheep’ (< IE. **ówis* f. ‘id.’ < PIE. **h₂éwis* f. *i*-stem ‘ewe, sheep’). Thus the Greco-Thracian term ἄββα originally denoted a “marine sheep”, i.e. an extinct Mediterranean animal feeding on sea grass, similar to the dugong (see fig. 3).

Also the latter meaning is easily explainable on the basis of the Greek lexical data, cf. Gk. Hom. αὔε impf. ‘called’. Alternatively, it is possible to derive Gk. dial. ἄββα f. ‘loud cry, shout’ from Proto-Greek **ḥábbā* and IE. **uābā* f. ‘id.’, cf. ON. *óp* n. ‘shout, cry’ (< PG. **wōpan* n.); OE. *wóp* m. ‘cry, wailing, weeping’; OSax. *wōp* m. ‘shout, cry’,

²⁷ Specht 1931, 120; Latte 1953, 7; Latte, Cunningham 2018, 8.

²⁸ A different reading is proposed by editors of the Hesychian glossary: ἄβωρ· [βο]ῆ ὡς Λάκωνες (Schmidt 1858, 11) and ἄβωρ· ἠὼς Λάκωνες (Latte 1953, 11; Latte, Cunningham 2018, 13).

²⁹ Frisk 1962, 2.

³⁰ Beekes 2010, 3.

³¹ Both these nouns with the oxytone stress (Gk. τροχός), as well as the abstract noun (with the barytone accent) τρόχος m. ‘running, race, course’, secondarily ‘place for running, hippodrome, racetrack’, derive independently from the Greek verb τρέχω ‘to run, hurry, move rapidly’ (Montanari 2018, 2144; Diggle 2021, 1399).

³² Also the dialectal appellative ἄβδία· θάλασσα ‘sea’ (*Et. Gud.* 4. 19; *DGE* s.v.) seems to represent an Ancient Greek loanword from a Palaeo-Balkan source, perhaps a Thracian one. See additionally the Hesychian gloss ἄβυδόν· βάθυ (adj. n.) ‘deep’, which is obviously related to the Greek term ἄβυθος adj. ‘with no bottom, bottomless, unfathomed’, also f. ‘the great deep, the abyss, bottomless pit’. It is uncertain whether the place name Abydos (Ἄβυδος), denoting a town on the Asiatic side of the Hellespont, derives from the adjective ἄβυδος or not.

³³ The Ancient Greeks and the Romans often transferred selected names of land animals to marine creatures, e.g. Gr. πάρδαλις ‘leopard’, also ‘snow leopard, *Panthera uncia* Schreber’ → Gr. πάρδαλις ‘sand tiger shark, *Carcharias taurus* Rafinesque’ (Strömberg 1943: 107; Kaczyńska, Witezak 2018: 48–50; 2020: 38–41); Lat. *vitulus* ‘calf’ → Lat. *vitulus marinus* ‘seal’, literally ‘sea calf’ (de Saint-Denis 1947, 117); Lat. *equus* ‘horse’ → MLat. (13th c.) *equinus cetus* ‘walrus, *Odobenus rosmarus* L.’ created under the influence of ON. *hrossvhalr* ‘walrus’, literally ‘horse whale’ (Delliaux, Gautier 2018, 177). There are many notable examples of this practice in modern languages, e.g. G. *Seeschwein* ‘dugong, *Dugong dugon* Müller’ (lit. ‘sea pig’); Latv. *jūrasgovs* ‘dugong’ (lit. ‘sea cow’); Port. *vaca marinha* ‘dugong’ (lit. ‘sea cow’); Sp. *vaca marina* ‘Steller’s sea cow, *Hydrodamalis gigas* Zimmermann’; E. *sea cow* ‘id.’; Pol. *krowa morska* ‘id.’ (lit. ‘sea cow’); Russ. *морская корова* ‘id.’.



Fig. 5. Neptune (or Poseidon) drives his sea-chariot pulled by hippocampi. A mosaic from Hadrumetum (North Africa, now Soussa in Tunisia), 3rd century AD. Photo by Asram, 2006. Wikimedia Commons

OHG. *wuof* m. ‘weeping, sobbing’ (< PG. **wōpaz* m.); Pol. *wab* m. ‘attracting wild game’ (< PSl. **vabjъ* m.), *wabik* m. ‘bird-call, decoy, allurement; a device for attracting game’, *powab* m. ‘charm, lure, attraction’; OPol. *powaba* f. ‘incentive, encouragement; the beginning of fun, a call for cooperation’; Cz. *půvab* m. ‘charm, grace’ (< PSl. **po-vaba* f. / **po-vabъ* m.)³⁴. All the Germanic and Slavic nouns derive from the Indo-European verb **uāb-* (< PIE. **ueh₂b-*) ‘to call, scream, moan / rufen, schreien, wehklagen’³⁵.

³⁴ Zaliznyak 1965, 173; Orel 2003, 470; Boryś 2005, 472, 675.

³⁵ Pokorny 1959, 1109; Mallory, Adams 2008, 355; Derksen 2008, 512; Rychło 2014, 121–132; 2016, 103–124; 2019, 20, 96. It is worth emphasizing that the verbal forms are exclusively attested in the Germanic and Slavic languages (cf. Goth. *wopjan* ‘to call loudly, call out’, *at-wopjan* ‘to summon’; OSax. *wōpian* ‘to bewail’; OE. *wēpan* ‘to weep’, E. *weep* ‘to cry, let tears fall from the eyes’; OHG. *wuoffen* ‘to bewail’, *wuofen* ‘to whine’; Russ. *vađumb* ‘to lure, decoy’; Cz. *vabiti* ‘to lure’; Pol. *wabić* ‘to call, decoy, lure, attract, entice’, Sloven. *vábiti* ‘to lure, invite’; Lehmann 1986, 409; Orel 2003, 470; Derksen 2008, 511–512). The East Baltic cognates (e.g. OLith. *vobyti* ‘to summon at court’, Lith. *vōbyti* ‘to attract, lure, tempt’, Latv. *vābīt* ‘to lure, tempt’) are commonly treated as probable borrowings from a Slavic source (Anikin 2011, 306; Smoczyński 2018, 1689). The Hesychian gloss ἡῤῥᾱβᾱ: [...] βοή, if related to its possible Germanic and Slavic cognates, seems to indicate the labial phoneme **b*, which was extremely rare in Proto-Indo-European. The existence of this phoneme can be confirmed by Germanic facts, cf. E. *weep* (where PG. **p* goes back to IE. **b*).

On the other hand, the Thracian sea-nymph Aba seems a divine half-animal person, some parts of her body taken from a Mediterranean *trokhós* (cf. the Hesychian gloss †ἄβα·τροχός). She belongs to the ancient mermaids, which are aquatic creatures with the head and upper body of a female human and the tail of a fish or a sea mammal³⁶. It is a well-known fact that numerous half-animal deities, including mermaids, appear in Poseidon's retinue, e.g. Nereids and Oceanids³⁷. There are many ancient representations of Poseidon and his retinue accompanied by sea monsters, e.g. ichthyocentaurs and hippocampi (see fig. 5)³⁸. Poseidon, the Greek god of sea and other waters, had numerous human, half-human and half-animal mistresses (e.g. Amphitrite, Arethusa, horse-shaped Demeter, Medusa, Thoosa) and many children from them. Some of his children had animal or monstrous shapes, e.g. he became the father of Triton (a half-animal sea god) with his wife Amphitrite; of the winged horse Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor with Medusa; of Arion, black-maned horse, with Demeter; of Polyphemus, one of the Cyclopes, with Thoosa; and also of Lamos, the king of the giant man-eating Laestrygones, with Iphigeneia.

The sea mermaid called Ἄβα (of Thracian origin), who was one of Poseidon's lovers, became the mother of Ergiskos, the eponymic founder of the Thracian city of Ergiska. Her name is evidently motivated by the Ancient Greek dialectal appellative ἄβα denoting 'a sea mammal called τροχός', attested only in the Hesychian glossary. This appellative represents a Thracian borrowing in Ancient Greek vocabulary. It is clear that the Thracians must have been familiar with the presence of Mediterranean sea animals (perhaps sea cows) called *trokhai*, existing in antiquity near the Thracian coast and the Chalcidice Peninsula.

In this paper I review afresh a rare myth devoted to the Thracian sea nymph Aba, who was one of Poseidon's mistresses. She gave birth to Ergiskos, the Thracian hero and the eponymic founder of the town of Ergiskē (now Çatalca, Turkey), located in East Thracia. It is suggested that the sea nymph called Ἄβα was originally a mermaid, having the female face and hands and the body of a large sea animal, possible a marine mammal. Her name is motivated by the Hesychian gloss †ἄβα·τροχός, ἢ βοή, which should be translated as follows: "aba: a large sea-monster or loud cry". The Greek dialectal term ἄβα represents a borrowing from the Thracian language and denotes a large sea mammal called commonly τροχός. According to Claudius Aelian (*NA* 13.20), the *trokhai* lived close to the coast. They were sea animals of immense size, but timid and, in general, did not pose a threat to people. Their attested distribution was limited to certain bays located near the Chalcidice Peninsula and along the coast of Thrace. It is not impossible that the Ancient Greek term τροχός (as well as Greco-Thracian ἄβα) denoted a Mediterranean species of sea cow (extinct now).

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³⁶ Cooper 1992, 159, s.v. Mermaid; see also *ibid.* 88, s.v. Dugong, 157, s.v. Manatee, 212, s.v. Siren.

³⁷ Barringer 1995, 141–145; Larson 2001, 7.

³⁸ The Ancient Greek iconography of unidentified marine creatures is carefully discussed by Boardman 1987, 73–84, and Papadopoulos, Ruscillo 2002, 215–222; see also Mayor 1985, 21–24 (with 11 figures); 1989, 17–23.

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Abbreviations

Cz. — Czech;	Lith. — Lithuanian;	PG. — Proto-Germanic;
dial. — dialectal;	MLat. — Medieval Latin;	PIE. — Proto-Indo-European;
E. — English;	OE. — Old English;	Pol. — Polish;
G. — German;	OHG. — Old High German;	Port. — Portugal;
Gk. — Greek;	OLith. — Old Lithuanian;	PSl. — Proto-Slavic;
Goth. — Gothic;	ON. — Old Norse;	Russ. — Russian;
Hom. — Homeric;	OPol. — Old Polish;	Sloven. — Slovenian;
IE. — Indo-European;	ORuss. — Old Russian;	Sp. — Spanish;
Latv. — Latvian;	OSax. — Old Saxon;	Toch. A — Tocharian A or East Tocharian.