

Late Indo-European Water Deity as Spearman: Greek *Triton* and Old English *gārsecg*

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IN A RECENT ISSUE of *Names*¹ Professor Frederic G. Cassidy speculated on the relationship between the two main meanings of the Old English word *gārsecg*: “spear warrior” and “ocean.” His discussion ranged from considerations of the etymologies of the constituents (*gār* “spear” and *secg* “warrior, man, follower”) to digressions on the Germanic deities – notably Woden – who might once have been candidates for the title “spearman.” Professor Cassidy also raised the question of whether or not folk etymology may have reshaped some other, possibly phonologically and morphologically dissimilar, word into the attested, self-explaining compound, but he ended the article by concluding that “in the case of *gārsecg* etymology produced no firm solution.”² The following brief observations, actually started some years ago when the author was doing a morpheme-by-morpheme analysis of *Beowulf*, may suggest that the “spear warrior” etymology reflects the original meaning and not a reshaping of an earlier form.

The Old English *gār*, derived from Indo-European **g^hais-* (earlier **g^hH₂eys-*) via (1) the regular Grimm’s Law shift of Indo-European *g^h* to Germanic *g*, (2) the change of West Germanic *ai* to Old English *ā*, and (3) the *s*-to-*z*-to-*r* shift usually subsumed under the Verner’s Law formulation, relates not only to the Old High German and the Old Saxon *gēr* and the Old Icelandic *geirr*, as pointed out by Professor Cassidy (who quotes Walde-Pokorny), but, outside of Germanic, also to the Old Irish *gái* or *gáe* “spear,” from earlier **gais*, a form borrowed (prior to the Early Old Irish loss of *s*) by both the Romans and the Greeks, as Latin *gaesum* and Greek *γαῖσον*³ or *γαῖσος* respectively, both meaning “javelin,” however, a javelin of a type not normally employed by the Greeks or Romans. Both of the latter groups possessed compounds of the mor-

¹ Frederic G. Cassidy, “Old English *gārsecg* — an Eke-Name?” *Names*, 20: 2 (June, 1972), 95–100.

² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³ Greek had an actual cognate of the Old English *gār*, namely *χαῖσος*, which had acquired the meaning “shepherd’s staff,” but this form has no relevance to the current discussion.

pheme formed by the additions of indigenous agential suffixes, namely, Latin *gaesātī* "warriors armed with the *gaesum*," and Greek γαισάται and γαισάτοι of similar meaning. Both the Romans and the Greeks apparently restricted their use of these words to the description of Celtic mercenary warriors so equipped.

Old Irish preserves a number of different words for "spear," and it is perhaps through a consideration of a second Old Irish morpheme, *triath* "spear," that one may find confirmation of the likelihood that the form *gārsecg* "ocean" did not take the form attested (i. e., with *gār* "spear" as a constituent) because of folk etymology. The Old Irish *triath* was not a simple, single-pointed javelin, such as the *gáe*, but rather a many-pronged spear, often occurring as a trident, yet occasionally having five, seven, or even nine prongs. Examples of such spears are well known and appear in those museums dealing with early Irish artifacts as well as in the archaeological literature of Ireland. The trident form, of course, is the one characteristically associated with the weapon carried by the Greek sea deity *Poseidon*. More to the point, however, the Old Irish word *triath* itself is a nasal-stem noun (*trethan* in the genitive singular), which, from a purely phonological point of view, could be an exact cognate of the Greek word Τρίτων "Triton," the name of the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite (Greek Ἀμφιτρίτη).⁴ It is not implausible to speculate further on the possibility that the *-trit-* of the last-mentioned name as well may also derive from the same source, meaning "spear." If then the Greek theonym Τρίτων and the Old Irish word for "many-pronged spear" are, indeed, cognates and not merely unrelated forms bearing phonological shapes that accidentally match the normal cognate equivalences, one has striking confirmation of the "spear" etymology for the *gār-* of *gārsecg*, which presumably followed the same tradition.

Although the Old Irish multidentical spear, the *triath*, often appeared in Irish land battles, as did the *gáe*, unlike the simple one-pronged javelin, it was also employed more frequently in a discrete and additional function, one for which it was particularly well adapted, namely as a spear for impaling fish. Different versions of multi-pronged spears have evolved in the tool repertoires of many primitive peoples who rely on fishing for their food supply, the single-pronged spear being far less effective because of the speed and slipperiness of the prey and the diffraction of light which makes it difficult to judge the precise position of the target when viewed from above at various angles with respect to the surface of the water.

⁴ The *a* of Old Irish *triath* was not pronounced but served merely as an orthographic device to signal that the following consonant was non-palatal. The *th* (phonologically the apical fricative /θ/) was the regular Old Irish development of Indo-European /t/ in this position.

The use of the *triath* as a fishing spear may suggest a line of semantic development whereby the **trit-* morpheme, either alone or in compound, ended up as the name of a body of water or of the sea deity pertaining to it. Lexical reconstruction has long since suggested to many scholars that the Proto-Indo-Europeans did not reside in the immediate vicinity of any sea or ocean coast since their vocabulary apparently lacked any words for very large bodies of water. One may postulate perhaps that some of these early Indo-Europeans seeing for the first time a fisherman, spear in hand, possibly standing in a boat on the waves, may have regarded him superstitiously as a sea deity – the personification of the sea or ocean itself, whence the “spearman”-to-“ocean” connection. This surmise, of course, is highly speculative, but the phonological equation of the Old Irish *triath* with the name *Triton* is impeccable. If the relationship is truly a cognate one, as suggested, one then has not only the confirmation and clarification of the *gārsecg* epithet, but also an etymology for the Greek theonym (or theonyms, if one counts *Amphitrite*) as well.⁵

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⁵ A much less certain, but nevertheless parallel, line of reasoning might analyze the *Nept-* of *Neptūnus*, the name of the Roman sea deity corresponding to the Greek *Poseidon*, as Indo-European **ni-* “down” (cf. Sanskrit *ni* “down”) and **pt-*, a zero-grade variant of the root seen in the Latin *petere* “aim a blow at, thrust at,” with the view that the spear fisherman must thrust downward, and with the whole word, perhaps, meaning something like “the one who thrusts down” (i. e., the spearman). The principle objection to this suggestion (and the reason why the possibility is not included as an integral part of this article), ironically enough, is precisely the phonological one which should long since have been leveled at the etymology still generally given – and accepted – for *Neptūnus*, specifically the question of explaining why a presumed *-i-* between the *n* and the *p* developed into an *e*. The traditional etymology connects the *Nep-* with a presumed Indo-European **neip-* “water,” seen in the Sanskrit *nepa* (with the Indo-European *ei* passing first to Indo-Iranian *ai*, then to Sanskrit *e*) or, in the zero-grade, in the Greek $\nu\pi\tau-$. This lack of an adequate explanation for an *i*-to-*e* shift in the *Latin* word, however, renders both etymologies – the one given here, meaning “the one who thrusts down,” and the old one, meaning “water” – dubious at best, but, needless to say, if there should be a plausible way of accounting for the phonological development, it would apply equally well to both etymologies. In that event, the present suggestion might possess the added attraction of fitting neatly together with the *gārsecg* and Τριτων derivations.