

## Navigating the Divine: Sea Creatures in Greek and Indian Mythology

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### ABSTRACT

The sea has long been a potent image in mythology, symbolizing the immense unknown and the source of life, as seen in both Indian and Greek classical traditions. Indian mythology features various sea creatures like the Makara, Shesha, Timingila, Jalakanyas, and Uraga, each embodying cultural and spiritual beliefs, and symbolizing philosophical concepts. Greek mythology, with deities like Poseidon and epic tales such as the Odyssey, highlights the sea's role in heroic journeys and divine influence. This research explores how these myths reflect human experiences of transformation, chaos, heroism, and love. Questions addressed include: How do sea myths symbolize human challenges and transformations? What roles do sea deities and creatures play in conveying cultural values? The analysis reveals that sea myths from different cultures emphasize the unpredictable nature of life, the necessity of respect for natural forces, and the enduring human spirit in the face of divine and natural adversities.

**Keywords:** *Greek mythology, Odyssey, Makara, Virgil, Sea, Shesha, Scylla and Charybdis.*

### Introduction

In traditional mythology, the sea has long been a potent and evocative image representing the immense unknown and the source of life. The water was considered a legendary place in ancient societies, home to monsters and gods, dangers and adventures. It was regarded as a line dividing the known world from the enigmatic domains beyond, the intersection of divine influence and human comprehension. Numerous tales from Indian and Greek classical mythology highlight the importance of the sea. The Greeks revered the sea deity Poseidon as having great power over the waterways, horses, and earthquakes. His moods might bring tranquil waters or ferocious storms, symbolizing the ocean's dual role as a source of life and a force of destruction. In these myths, the sea often acts as a setting for heroic voyages and epic quests. "The myth of Herakles and Hesione is similar, the story of a man angering the gods and

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subsequently offering his daughter to a god-sent sea monster as an appeasement. This time, the offender was Laomedon, king of Troy, who failed to pay the gods Apollo and Poseidon their wages after contracting them to build his city's walls. The hero Herakles then saved his daughter in a similar manner." (Hornblower) In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus's protracted journey to home is a metaphor for the sea's role as a laboratory for human fortitude and resourcefulness. In these stories, the sea's capriciousness is a metaphor for life's unpredictability and instability, requiring respect and regard from those who venture under its surface. Similarly, Indian mythology, as depicted in ancient scriptures, features a variety of sea creatures that embody the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the time. These creatures often symbolize deeper philosophical concepts and play significant roles in the mythological narratives of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

### **Poseidon, Pantheon and Varuna: Divine Influence on the Seas**

Poseidon was one of Greek mythology's twelve Olympian gods in charge of the oceans, earthquakes, and horses. He was an essential figure in the pantheon as the god of the ocean, representing the sea's great might and unpredictable nature. Poseidon, known for having a fickle temperament, could exhibit mood swings that reflected the duality of the sea by appearing as either peaceful, quiet seas or fierce storms. Poseidon did not affect the weather alone. Besides, he was well known for his ability to create new islands and for his patronage of fishermen and sailors. According to the myths, Poseidon controlled his power over the water and marine flora and fauna with a trident, a kind of three-pointed staff used as a type of weapon. Moreover, Poseidon's place about other gods is another piece of evidence of his special status. Sooner or later, the meaning of Athens combined with the sea in ancient Greece should also include a discussion of Athena's battles against Poseidon for Athens' patronage. By telling such stories, Poseidon was used to shape the perceptions of the people who lived by the sea and depended on this life by representing the sea's mighty and even dreadful character.

Similarly, Indian mythology features powerful sea deities and creatures that embody the sea's complex nature. Varuna, the Hindu god of the oceans, parallels Poseidon with his dominion over the waters and the creatures within them. Varuna's vahana, the Makara, a hybrid creature with the body of a fish and the head of an elephant or crocodile, symbolizes the enigmatic and multifaceted nature of the sea. The Makara, like Poseidon's trident, represents the deep connection between the divine and the marine world.

## **Epic Journeys: The Odyssey and Beyond**

A prevalent theme of the mythology of antiquity is the epic voyage of sailors on the high seas. Homer's *Odyssey* is the canonical story among them. The ten-year voyage of Odysseus from the Trojan War to his home is a monument of maritime adventure, reflecting the danger and excitement of such voyages. The sea in *The Odyssey* becomes either a natural or metaphorical battlefield, where the courage, ingenuity, and resilience of Odysseus clash with the monsters such as the Cyclops, the sirens, and the god of the seas Poseidon. Classical classics like *The Odyssey* also portray epic maritime voyages that combine adventure and divine intervention. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas must navigate dangerous waters and face legendary sea animals to create a new Troy. These stories highlight the sea's function as a transforming environment in which heroes confront the unknown, defy fate, and come out on the other side. "Another sea monster present in the mythology and literature of antiquity was the sea serpent. Although without a specific name and mythological origin, the sea serpent certainly appears, most notably in Virgil's *Aeneid* and several true-life historical examples." (Jaffe 4) These epic excursions underscore themes of tenacity, destiny, and the unwavering search for home and identity among the wide, untamed sea. They also serve as analogies for human existence's unpredictable and sometimes dangerous course. The sea is transformed in these tales from a place for valiant adventures to a testing ground for cultural and personal change.

In the Mahabharata, Bhima's encounter with the monstrous Timingila, a creature capable of swallowing whole whales, mirrors the perilous adventures of Odysseus. This encounter highlights Bhima's bravery and the enormity of his trials, similar to Odysseus's confrontations with the Cyclops and the Sirens. The Timingila is a monstrous sea creature mentioned in the Mahabharata. Described as capable of 'swallowing whole whales', (Timingila) the Timingila embodies the vast and terrifying power of the ocean. This creature is used metaphorically in the texts to represent overwhelming and insurmountable challenges. In the Mahabharata, Bhima encounters a Timingila, highlighting his bravery and the enormity of his adventures.

## **Monsters and Marvels: Sea Creatures in Myth**

Tales about sea monsters and wonders abound throughout classical mythology, reflecting ancient societies' intrigue and apprehension about the ocean's depths. Sea creatures such as the Sirens, whose mesmerizing melodies drove sailors to their deaths, represent the dangerous fascination of the sea. Their narrative illustrates the perils of temptation and the necessity of

exercising caution while surrounded by the erratic beauty of nature. Alexander L. Jaffe states, “From the Old Testament to Ovid, sources from throughout the ancient world show authors exercising both imagination and observation in describing these creatures. Mythology also played a large role in creating these beliefs, with such classic examples as Perseus and Andromeda or Herakles and Hesione”. (Jaffe) The terrifying creatures Scylla and Charybdis inhabit the narrow strait separating Sicily from Italy, posing an insurmountable threat to mariners. Sailors who dared approach were devoured by Scylla, a creature with six heads, and Charybdis, a gigantic vortex that could swallow entire ships. These animals serve as an example of the risky decisions and ongoing dangers that mariners must deal with. Other marvels demonstrate the ancients’ respect for the ocean’s enigmatic power, such as the deity Triton, son of Poseidon, who used his conch shell to calm the waters. These stories of exotic creatures show the sea as a place full of terrifying and incredible wonders, underscoring humanity’s never-ending drive to comprehend and dominate nature. Mair is of the view, “The Sea-monsters, mighty of limb and huge, the wonders of the sea, heavy with strength invincible, a terror for the eyes to behold and ever armed with deadly rage—many of these there be that roam the spacious seas...” (Mair 241)

The Makara is a mythological sea creature often depicted in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts. Described as a hybrid with the body of a fish and the head of an elephant or crocodile, it sometimes features the legs of a lion or the tail of a peacock. In the Rigveda, the Makara is mentioned as a creature of the waters. It is often seen as the vehicle (vahana) of the river goddess Ganga and the sea god Varuna. In iconography, the Makara is associated with gateways and thresholds, symbolizing the ‘God of love’. (Apte 328)

### **The Sea as a Symbol of Transformation and Chaos**

The sea is a common metaphor for chaos and transformation in ancient mythology, representing the erratic elements that have the power to upend and remake life. Tales such as Odysseus’s Odyssey voyage, where the sea acts as a catalyst for his great inner transformation, eloquently depict this dual symbolism. Adversity has the transforming capacity because the stormy seas he navigates mirror the internal and external problems he must conquer. The chaotic character of the sea is also portrayed in stories of massive floods, like the Greek tales of Pyrrha and Deucalion, in which a divine flood wipes away all life on Earth, leaving only a few righteous people to repopulate it. This story of the flood illustrates the sea’s part in the cyclical cycles of decay and rebirth by symbolizing both regeneration and devastation. N. S. Gill says, “When

Jupiter sees that all life has been extinguished except for the ideal pious married couple—Deucalian (“son of forethought”) and Pyrrha (“daughter of an afterthought”)—he sends the north wind to scatter the clouds and mist; he calms the waters, and the floods subside.” (Gill) The wide, unpredictable expanse of the sea is used in these tales as a metaphor for life’s uncertainties and the possibility of change. It emphasizes that change frequently results from chaos, with the ocean acting as a strong, constantly evolving force that moulds fates and puts fortitude to the test.

Shesha, also known as Ananta, is a primordial serpent in Hindu mythology. According to the Puranas, Shesha holds the universe on his hoods and serves as the bed upon which Vishnu rests in the cosmic ocean. This multi-headed serpent is often depicted with thousands of heads and is associated with time and cosmic balance. *The Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana* describe Shesha as a symbol of eternity and infinity, representing the endless ‘cycles of creation and destruction’. (Manmathanatha Datta)

### **Heroism and the Sea: Human Endeavours Against Divine Forces**

Classical tales frequently portray the sea as a dangerous battleground where divine powers test human bravery. In the face of the vast, unpredictable might of the ocean, heroes like Odysseus and Jason represent the resiliency and inventiveness of the human spirit. Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus faces insurmountable obstacles from the gods, especially Poseidon, which turns his homeward trip into an elegy for human resourcefulness and fortitude. “Odysseus voyage to the fabulous western seas begins in the everyday world, as he leaves the ruins of Troy homeward bound, his ships loaded with booty from the sack of the city. As if that booty were not enough for him, he attacks the first settlement on his way, the town of Ismarus on the Thracian coast opposite Troy.” (Homer) Jason’s search for the Golden Fleece in *Argonautica* highlights the valiant battle against supernatural interventions and marine dangers. The sea serves as a testbed for bravery and tenacity, as seen by the Argonauts’ many encounters with terrifying monsters and perilous seas. These stories emphasize the idea of human endeavour in opposition to supernatural and natural forces, showing how bravery is developed by facing the unknowable and the unpredictable. In the face of supernatural adversity, the sea, in its limitless strength, serves as a platform for people to display bravery, inventiveness, and the unbreakable human spirit.

The theme of heroism against divine forces in Greek and Indian mythology highlights the sea as a testing ground. Shesha, the cosmic serpent, symbolizes the eternal cycles, akin to Poseidon's dominion. The Makara and Jalakanyas embody the sea's complexity and mystique, challenging heroes much like Greek sea creatures.

### **Love and Tragedy: Romantic Myths of the Sea**

Classic literature unsurprisingly often invokes the tragic love of romantic sea tales where the water is merely a backdrop to these moving, sadly doomed stories. An example of this would be the story of *Hero and Leander*. Every night Leander swims in the treacherous Hellespont to be with his love - a fellow hero and priestess of Aphrodite. But as fate would have it, their love story came to a tragic end when, during a stormy sea night Leander died after drowning, and hero jumped into the seas with grief. Moreover, in the story, water is also a symbol of Pyramus. This is a terrible end, despite not being near the sea. Besides a spring, they share an affection that love denies, and love accepts; they make a catastrophic mistake in translation, a word related to the concepts of water as both literal purifier and biblical justice. These stories illustrate love - and all of the inherent evils we must endure - as a connecting and separating matter, two things that can coexist on the same body of water. In legendary tales, the water, with its allure and peril, is a potent metaphor for the passionate yet sometimes tragic core of amorous endeavours.

Jalakanyas, or water nymphs, and Jalpari, akin to mermaids, are described in various ancient texts as enchanting beings that inhabit rivers, lakes, and oceans. These creatures are often portrayed as beautiful maidens with the lower bodies of fish. *The Matsya Purana* and the Ramayana mention Jalakanyas, associating them with the divine and the mystical powers of water as 'Matsya Avtara'. (The Sacred Books of Hindus) They are known for their beauty and their ability to control the water elements, often aiding or hindering humans in their endeavors.

### **The Sea in Classical Poetry and Drama**

Classical poetry and play frequently include the sea as a rich metaphor, inspiration, and theme development source. The sea is a metaphorical world of change and adversity and a literal location for heroic adventures in epic poetry like Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Poets use their immensity and unpredictable nature to highlight the difficulties encountered by their main characters and the more general themes of fate, tenacity, and the human condition. He says:

Life's earliest years for wretched mortal creatures  
Are best, and fly most quickly: soon come on  
Diseases, suffering and gloomy age,  
Till Death's unpying harshness carries them off. (Virgil 18)

Playwrights like Euripides and Aeschylus frequently use nautical themes in Greek tragedy to heighten the dramatic tension and thematic depth. As individuals face their fates among raging waves and perilous coastlines, the sea becomes a place of danger and rescue. E. M. Blaiklock says about Euripides, “Norwood’s revelation of the poet’s symbolism is something more than a landmark in the exegesis of one great writer.” (Blaiklock 233) These pieces use the water as a dramatic background for human drama while exploring themes of hubris, mortality, and the whims of the divine. In classical literature, the sea is portrayed as a complicated metaphor that reflects the paradoxes and complexity of the human experience via poetry and play.

The sea appears as a powerful metaphor in ancient Indian poetry and theater, representing the complex feelings and intellectual thoughts of the era. The water plays a significant role in the ancient epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, capturing themes of solitude, exploration, and the sublime. In the Ramayana, the sea stands in for a strong obstacle that Lord Rama must go beyond to save Sita; it symbolizes both mental and physical difficulties. Building the bridge to Lanka (Rama Setu) is a symbol of both human tenacity and heavenly support. Similar to this, the water often represents the immense, unfathomable depths of existence and fate in the Mahabharata. The sea is also wonderfully endowed with emotional resonance by Kalidasa's poetry. The water serves as a communication channel between the lovers in his epic *Meghaduta*, emphasizing the subject of longing and the agony of separation. Classical Sanskrit plays like Bhavabhuti's *Uttara-Rama-Charita* and Shudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* (The Little Clay Cart) portray the sea as a place of discovery and trade, reflecting the socioeconomic environment of ancient India where marine trade was important. In addition, the sea is depicted in traditional Tamil Sangam literature as a source of both dread and veneration, as well as a place of the unknown. Poems from books like *Akananuru* and *Purananuru* often discuss the sea in relation to valiant deeds and heartbreaking partings.

Sea creatures like the Makara and Timingila in *Mahabharata* symbolize the unpredictable and transformative forces of nature. These creatures, often associated with deities like Varuna and Ganga, appear in epic narratives and symbolize the sea's vastness and mystery, enriching the

dramatic and philosophical dimensions of both literary traditions. Thus, both Greek and Indian classical literature use mythical sea creatures to explore the sea's profound symbolic and thematic significance.

### **The Influence of Classical Sea Myths on Later Literature**

Classical sea mythology had a significant and enduring impact on subsequent writing, influencing many works in a wide range of genres and historical periods. Ancient marine stories have inspired authors from the Renaissance to the present day, allowing them to explore universal themes and enhance their storytelling. In the case of the Renaissance, this meant a return of the sea to literature as readers sought a revival of classical mythology (e. g. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*). These poets draw lyrical water from a well somewhere in the sea of ancient myth, dense and replete in allusion, imagery. Back further still, the Romantics revived the sea-terror story in poems like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, both turning ancient heroics into something more complex and emotive than ever before. While the tales of today are more modernized and have darker undertones, classic sea stories still hold their own in modern literature shaping some of today's thoughts and themes. That ongoing dialogue with that history is one reason that sea stories still provide a deep and endless well of inspiration for fledgling writers grappling with the constant riddles of being human (in any age).

Classical sea tales had a significant impact on later Indian English literature, bringing historical stories into modern settings. These myths are a major source of inspiration for authors that study themes of exile, identity, and human resilience, such as Raja Rao and Amitav Ghosh. The *Hungry Tide* by Ghosh eloquently mirrors the sea's mythological connotations from ancient epics, depicting the Sundarbans as a magical, transformational terrain full of adventure and revelation. In these contemporary pieces, the sea frequently represents the meeting point of tradition and modernity, the past and present, and the eternal human search for purpose in the face of nature's immense and unpredictable powers. Indian English literature keeps evoking the rich fabric of cultural memory by combining traditional sea stories, which helps the old tales resonate with modern audiences and enriching the narrative depth of modern storytelling. Uruga, meaning "serpent," is used to describe serpent-like sea creatures or dragons in ancient Indian scriptures. In the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Urugas (Ayyangar 64) are depicted as powerful and wise beings capable of controlling weather and water. They are often guardians

of treasures and possess deep knowledge and wisdom. These creatures symbolize transformation and the hidden depths of the natural world.

### **Conclusion: The Enduring Power of Sea Myths**

The sea's deep influence on human imagination and storytelling is shown by the sea myths' ongoing influence in both Indian and English literature. Old Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* use the water as a metaphor for great difficulties and divine help. The sea voyage to Lanka, as portrayed in the *Ramayana*, is a metaphor for the battle against overwhelming difficulties and the desire for reunion. Like this, the water often serves as a metaphor for the secrets of life and fate in the *Mahabharata*. These tales are enhanced by Indian folklore and Tamil Sangam poetry, which depict the sea as a realm of danger and provision that is intricately linked to human emotions and valiant expeditions. From the epic journeys in Homer's *Odyssey*, which impacted many English writers, to the stormy seas in Shakespeare's plays like *The Tempest*, which symbolized both chaos and the hope of redemption, the sea has been an equally potent image in English writing. Romantic writers, like Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," depict the sea as a mysterious power that can induce profound metamorphosis and introspection. The sea is explored in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* as a huge, enigmatic element that reflects the depths of the human spirit. Both literary traditions illustrate the water's perennial fascination as a source of inspiration and contemplation by using sea tales to explore themes of adventure, the unknown, and the human condition. These timeless legends highlight the sea's function as a potent, universal symbol of both life's perils and its boundless possibilities.

The sea myths in both Indian and Greek classical traditions underscore the sea's symbolic representation of the unknown, transformation, and life itself. Indian mythology, with its rich tapestry of sea creatures like the Makara, Shesha, Timingila, Jalakanyas, and Uraga, encapsulates deep cultural and spiritual beliefs, illustrating the complex interplay between humans and the divine. Similarly, Greek mythology, through the tales of Poseidon, Odysseus, and other maritime heroes, highlights the sea's dual role as a source of life and a formidable force of nature. These myths collectively reflect the universal themes of human challenges, transformation, heroism, and love. They emphasize the need for respect towards natural forces and the resilience of the human spirit in overcoming divine and natural adversities. The timeless nature of these myths continues to inspire and resonate, illustrating the perpetual human fascination with the mysteries and power of the ocean. Papadopoulos, John K., and D. Ruscillo

think, “Sea full of cooperating sea monsters ready to mete out death in a single gulp.” (Papadopoulos) They convey the wonder and veneration that ancient cultures had for the sea while touching on universal themes of hope and despair, tragedy and victory, love and loss. Sea stories remain a major source of creative inspiration in literature, art, and popular culture, constantly being recreated and reinterpreted for modern audiences. Sea myths’ continuing potency will survive as a tribute to the eternal mysteries of the deep as long as the ocean captures our imagination and challenges our comprehension.

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