

The Indo-European Attribute of Poseidon as the Water God

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Abstract

Generally Poseidon is regarded as the Greek sea god ; however, besides his maritime attribute, he seems to have closely associated with fresh water. As the myth of Amymone indicates, Poseidon produced springs which formed the Lerna River ; in addition, Amymone is concerned with water as the river and springs of her name imply. And as the myth of the Alban Lake suggests, Neptunus, the Roman equivalent of Poseidon, is also closely associated with fresh water. The etymology of Neptunus is interpreted as 'Nephew of Water'. The etymology of Poseidon also indicates that Poseidon seems to be concerned with water ; the **da*-component of Poseidon is explained as proto-I-E 'flowing water'. In eastern and central Europe, major river names such as the Don, the Dnieper, the Doniester, and the Donau have the **da*- component. These features imply that the etymology of Poseidon can be interpreted as 'Husband of Waters' indicating Poseidon as a fertility god, and similarly his seismic attribute is related with water ('earth water'). The Indo-European sky god Zeus is also associated with water sending the rain to fertilize the earth, which indicates that Zeus and Poseidon share the same role as a fertility spirit. Originally Poseidon was the Indo-European water god associated with fertility, and Poseidon seems to have acquired his maritime aspect in Greece. However, his etymology and various features concerning water designate that Poseidon firmly retained his original Indo-European attribute.

Introduction

One of the most famous stories of Poseidon is the conflict with Athena over the sovereignty of Attica. He produced a saltwater spring on the Acropolis of Athens with a blow of his trident. Then Athena came and made the first olive-tree grow. When Athena won the contest, Poseidon in anger flooded the Thriasian plain (Eleusis) and laid Attica under the sea (Apollod. 3.14.1). Poseidon was regarded as a powerful sea god ; he sends a flood and a sea monster when he gets angry. In Ethiopia he sent a flood and a monster to invade Ethiopia though the monster was killed by Perseus (Apollod. 2.4.2-3). Similarly at Troy, since Laomedon did not pay Poseidon and Apollo for their work (i.e. fortification of Pergamum), Apollo sent a pestilence, while Poseidon sent a sea monster with a flood (Apollod. 2.5.9). Poseidon is called the Flooder (Προσκληυστίης). He flooded the Argolid because Inachus and his assessors judged that the land belonged to Hera. She appeased Poseidon, and when the waters retired, the Argives built a sanctuary to Poseidon Prosclystius at the place where the tide receded. Similarly, Poseidon seems to have closely associated with fresh water (i.e. rivers and springs, etc.) as we shall see in the myth of Amymone, and this may indicate that

Poseidon also governed fresh water as the lord of water as well as the sea deity. Poseidon seems to have been allotted the sea rather late (*Il.* 15. 190-193), which indicates that his maritime attribute is secondary; the original Aegean sea deities such as Proteus and Nereus must have been overwhelmed by Poseidon¹⁾. Together with the equine attribute, Poseidon and fresh water seem to be closely connected, and this fact may indicate that Poseidon strongly retained the early Indo-European tradition.

1. Poseidon and Amymone

As for the association of Poseidon with fresh water, the story of Amymone seems suggestive. According to Apollodorus (*Apollod.* 2.1.4; 2.1.5), the country of Argos was waterless because Poseidon had dried up all the springs offended at Inachus the river-god who judged in favor of Hera. Therefore, Danaos, king of Argos, dispatched his daughters in search for water. When Amymone, one of the Danaides, was searching in vain, a satyr attacked her but Poseidon appeared and throwing his trident he rescued her. The trident was firmly embedded in a rock. When Amymone pulled out the trident, three streams burst forth one from each hole, and the streams mingled and formed the Lerna River which never dries up even at the height of summer. Poseidon and Amymone became lovers, and she bore him a son Nauplios (the eponym of Nauplia) (*Fig. 1*)²⁾. Apollodorus describes the existence of the springs of Amymone at Lerna (*Apollod.* 2.5.2) and Pausanias also tells (*Paus.* 2.37.1; 5.17.11) that there is a river called Amymone near Mt. Pontinus in the Argolid. These facts evidently indicate that Poseidon and Amymone are closely related with fresh water. Similarly, springs are said to be sent by Poseidon; the deity begot the winged horse Pegasus (*Apollod.* 2.4.2), and the horse produced Hippokrene (i.e. the 'Horse's Fountain') on Mt. Helikon by the stroke of his hoof (*Paus.* 2.31.9; 9.31.3). Also, the spring of Peirene at Corinth was called the spring of Pegasus which is said to have flowed through the hoof of Pegasus (*Paus.* 2.3.5). Poseidon and the horse seem to have been closely associated with springs in Greece. In ancient times, the Argives sacrificed horses to Poseidon in the fresh water spring rising out of the sea (*Paus.* 8.7.2), and horse sacrifice, which made the horse drown in the river, is described in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 21.131f). Since it seems highly possible that the horse was introduced into the Greek mainland by the invading Indo-Europeans in the Middle Helladic period³⁾ and the earliest evidence of horse sacrifice is known in the Kurgan tumuli (Kurgan I) in the Black Sea region⁴⁾, the ritual of horse sacrifice must have been ancient and widespread among the early Indo-Europeans.

The myth of water and Neptunus, the Roman version of Poseidon, is also preserved in ancient Rome (*Livy*, 5; *Plutarch Camillus*; *Dionysius of Halicarnassus* 12, etc.). According to ancient authors, Rome was engaged in a severe struggle with Veii over the control of central Italy in the fourth century, B.C. In the tenth year of the war, the Alban Lake, a deep crater lake in the Alban Hills (*Fig. 2*)⁵⁾, suddenly rose abnormally during the canicular days⁶⁾, and finally the swollen lake rushed out from the banks and flooded the surrounding countryside. In this unexpected situation, the Romans sent a delegation to Delphi for oracular



Fig. 1. Map of Argolis

advice to appease the supernatural wrath of the lake. By the Delphic oracle, the Romans were warned that the waters of the lake must not be allowed to reach the sea, otherwise Rome would lose both the war and its sovereignty in Italy. Following the oracular advice of Delphi, the Romans diverted the overflow and distributed it in irrigation ditches. As a result, the Romans managed to overcome the crisis. The legend of the Alban Lake does not mention that the lord of the lake was Neptunus; however, the story may have originated from a lost cult myth of Neptunus⁷⁾ because according to most ancient authors (e.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus) in the Roman calendar, July 23, the date of the Alban Lake prodigy, coincides exactly with the date of *Neptunalia*, the annual festival of Neptunus, an occasion of which little detail is known to us⁸⁾. The prodigy occurred on July 23 seems to have been a reminiscence of the ancient mythological attachment to the *Neptunalia*⁹⁾. Furthermore, the Delphic oracle quoted by Livy (5.16.9-11) is considered to represent an ancient versified formula from the rite of the original Roman myth as implied by the rhythmic and alliterative

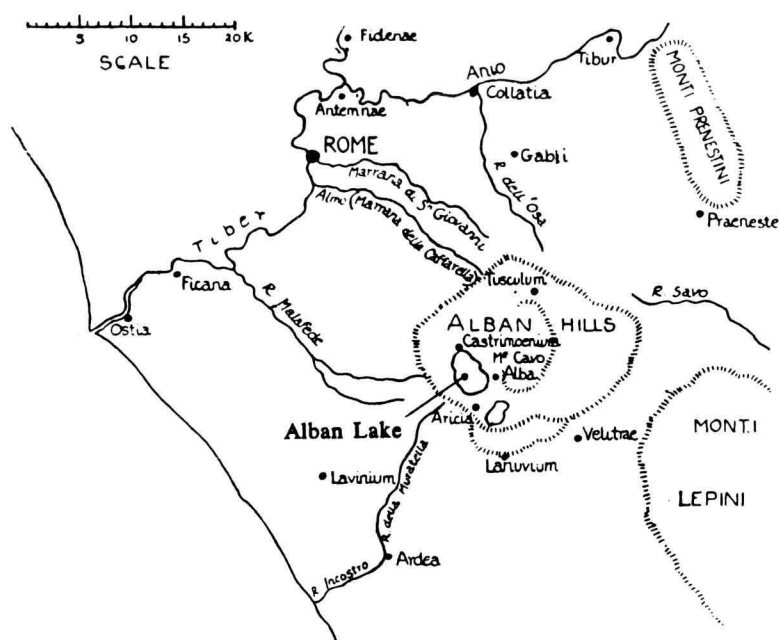


Fig. 2. Latium and the Alban Lake

characteristics¹⁰⁾. And this oracular phrase seems self-contained and is likely to indicate a ceremonial procedure implying what to do when furious volcanic water burst forth from the Alban Lake, that is, the lake of Neptunus¹¹⁾. Consequently, Neptunus and the Alban Lake myth are closely connected indicating Neptunus as the Lord of the Alban Lake, namely, the god of water. The etymology of Neptunus also suggests that the deity is closely associated with water. The term Neptunus is considered to have derived from I-E **nept-*, **nepot-* (i. e. 'sister's son')¹²⁾, and to have the same etymology as the Iranian *Apam Napat* which is interpreted as 'Nephew of Water'¹³⁾, attested by I-E **ap-* 'water' and **nepot*, though Neptunus seems to have lost the form for water like the Irish figure Nechtan. The reconstructed form **Neptonos*¹⁴⁾ for Nechtan denotes the close similarity with the Indo-Iranian *Nep(a)t-*, and this also suggests the relevance of Neptunus indicating Nechtan as the 'Nephew of Water'. This fact also indicates that the Greek equivalence of Neptunus, Poseidon, must be closely related with water.

The Iranian myth of *Apam Napat* is as the following¹⁵⁾: *Apam Napat* was a keeper of a sacred lake, *Vourukasa*, in which the *Xvarənah*, the luminous and fiery symbol of the Iranian royal power, was kept. The Turanian king *Frangrasyan* tried to claim the *Xvarənah* three times, but each time *Xvarənah* escaped by flowing out of *Vourukasa*. Finally *Xvarənah* and the water flowed into the sea in three channels and circled the earth. In the Irish version¹⁶⁾, *Nechtán* of the *Tuatha de Danann* was the keeper of a sacred well in which like the *Xvarənah* a mysterious burning essence was contained. Only *Nechtán* and his three attendants could approach without harm. One day *Nechtán*'s wife *Boand* drew near the well

to avoid the consequences of her adultery or to disprove the taboo by her beauty. She circled the well three times, then, three waves rose from the well mutilating a thigh, an eye and a hand of Boand successively. Boand fled to the sea, but the waters pursued her in three streams; eventually, she drowned and the streams formed the Boyne River (the eponym of Boand). As we have seen, the myths of Apam Napat and the Irish Nechtan represent close parallels in motif; both Apam Napat and Nechtan kept the sacred water, and this contained the luminous substance which was threatened three times, and finally the water forming three streams flowed out and formed a river or circled the earth. These close similarities evidently indicate that the two myths are closely associated with water and have the common Indo-European mythological theme as seen in the Greek myth of Amymone.

2. The Etymology of Poseidon as the "Water God"

Neptunus can be inferred to be related with water as the Alban Lake myth and the Indo-European **nepot-* component indicate. Similarly, Poseidon is supposed to be associated with fresh water. The name Poseidon has been interpreted to mean 'Husband of Earth', and the **da-* component was assumed as a pre-Greek name of the earth goddess *Ge*¹⁷⁾. However, as Burkert observes¹⁸⁾, it is impossible to understand the **da-* component as *Ge*, and an

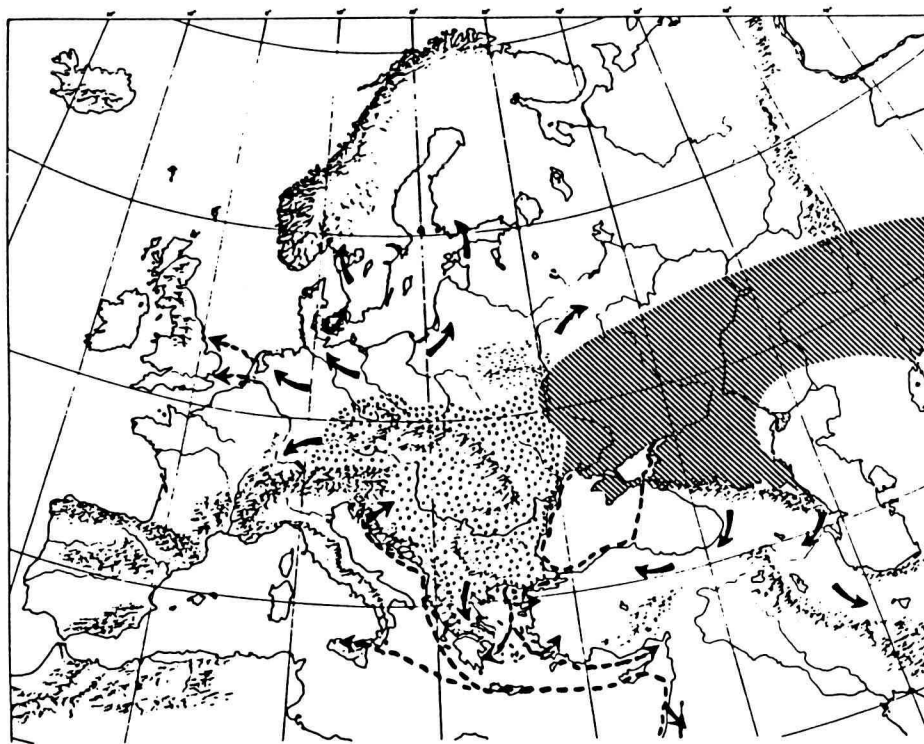


Fig. 3. Homeland of the Indo-Europeans (solid gray area)

interesting interpretation is suggested as for the **da-* element. It may be possible to interpret proto-I-E 'flowing water'¹⁹⁾. This fact is attested by Sanskrit *dānu* (i.e. 'river'), the Welsh river name Donwy (**danuuia*)²⁰⁾. Also the Ossetic word for 'water' is *don*, and major river names in eastern and central Europe coincidentally contain the proto-I-E **da-* element²¹⁾: for instance, the Don, the Donets, the Dnieper, the Dniester, the Danube (the Donau), and so on. The Scythians called the Dniester as *Danu nazdya* ('river to the front') and the Dnieper as *Danu apara* ('river to the rear')²²⁾; in addition, people who live along a river bank are called as *danavo* in Avestan²³⁾. As the river names in the Black Sea -Volga region indicate, the lower Dnieper-Volga region is considered to be the homeland of the Indo-Europeans; actually the early Indo-European cultures such as Majkop, Srednij Stog II and Jamna (Pit-grave) cultures flourished in the north Potic, north Caucasian, and the lower Volga steppes (Fig. 3)²⁴⁾. For example, the site of the later Mikhajlovka phase situated on the bank of the Podpil'na River near the Dnieper was heavily fortified with massive

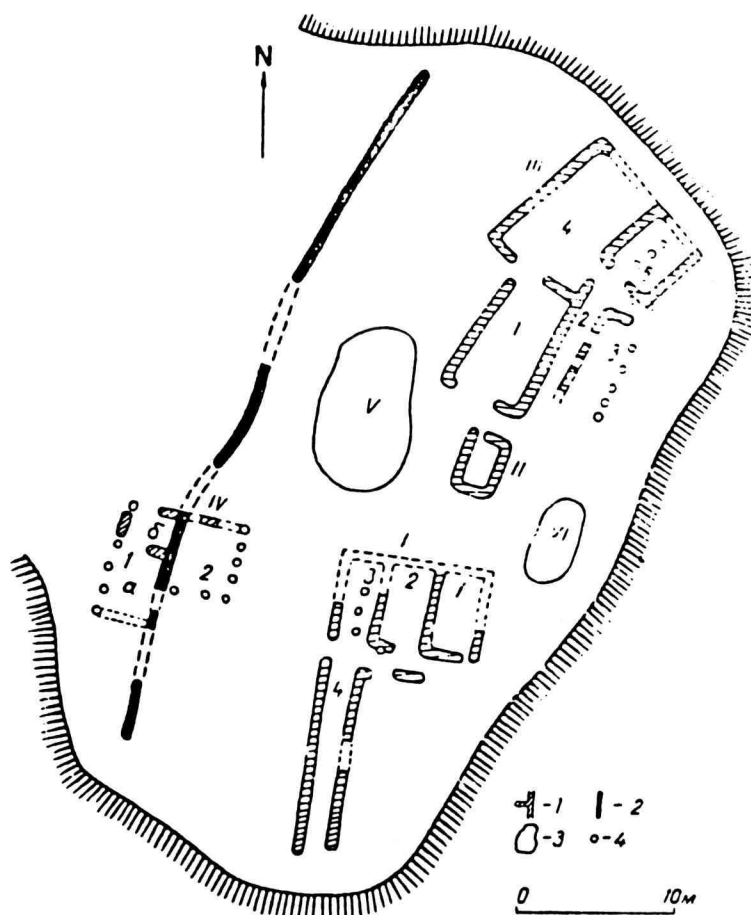


Fig. 4. Site of the Later Mikhajlovka

Cyclopean walls about a height of 3 meters surrounding the settlement from the inland side (Fig. 4)²⁵⁾. Large rectangular houses of the site built on stone foundations are presumably chieftain's dwellings. Along with Kurgan graves (Fig. 5)²⁶⁾, these features clearly indicate the main characteristics of the early Indo-Europeans in the Pontic region. Thus, it seems highly possible that the proto-I-E **da-* component is shown in the foregoing river names, and it is also possible to suggest that the appellation of Poseidon, which seems to contain the **da-* component, means 'Husband of Waters' indicating Poseidon as the lord of fresh water since Poseidon is evidently related to water as seen in the myth of Amymone, and actually Poseidon was the husband of Amymone as the myth implies.

As Poseidon's epithet *ἐνοσίχθων* 'Earth Shaker' (*Il.* 13.34; 15. 184, etc) indicates, he is attributed to all earthquakes, and this suggests that Poseidon has the attribute of an earthquake god likewise. This seismic attribute, which is exclusively for Poseidon and not shared by other Greek deities, is also explained in the context of water. Aristotle (*Arist.* 396, B. 16) mentions that earthquakes are caused by the action of water, and in ancient Greece, the volcanic eruptions seem to have been attributed to water²⁸⁾. In the Peloponnese, where the rivers run in underground channels, Poseidon is called ('holder of Earth')²⁹⁾ representing the god as the ruler of earthquakes. Consequently, it seems certain that Poseidon, earthquakes, and water ('earth waters') are closely concerned, and this fact also denotes that Poseidon was mistakenly regarded as a kind of earth god because of his seismic and 'earth waters' attributes.

As we have seen in the story of Amymone, Poseidon produced three springs which formed the Lerna River, and as the river and springs of Amymone indicate, she is associated with fresh water as well as Poseidon. This fact may be possible to suggest that Amymone

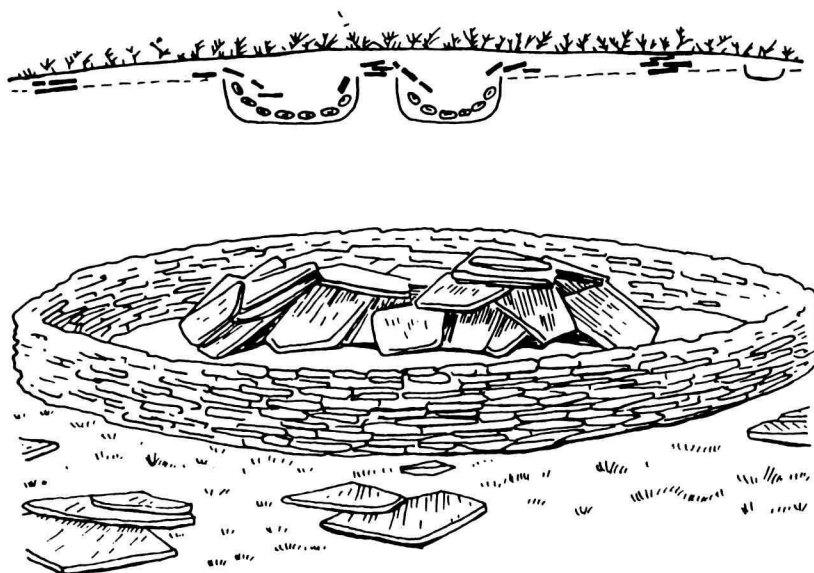


Fig. 5. Kurgan Tumulus at Afanasievo

herself was the personification of water³⁰⁾. This fact exactly coincides with the etymology of Poseidon indicating the god as 'Husband of Waters', that is, husband of Amymone. Moreover, the Danaides were to spend eternally filling a sieve with water in Hades as the punishment for killing their husbands. This myth also implies that the Danaides are closely related with water³¹⁾; furthermore, together with their father Danaos, the term Danaides seems to have the proto-I-E **da-* element. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the Danaides, namely Amymone and her sisters, are Indo-European fountain-nymphs since the persistent connection of the Danaides with fresh water is obviously represented³²⁾. Concerning fountain-nymphs, maidens in *Rig Veda* may be inferred to represent the same aspect as the Danaides. Emitting effulgence, Apām Napāt lives in the waters surrounded by young maidens (i.e. the waters) who purify him³³⁾. Actually he is regarded as the brilliant divine essence of waters. Although the myth of the Danaides does not indicate that they are the waters, the story of Amymone and the etymological feature of the Danaides can be inferred that they are the same kind of young maidens; this indicates that actually the Danaides are also the waters. This fact may suggest that the context of the Amymone myth is not unique in Greece; rather the basic component of the mythological theme seems to have originated in the common proto-Indo-European myth as seen in the Iranian Apām Napāt and the Irish figure Nechtan³⁴⁾.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Poseidon is closely associated with water; similarly, Zeus is considered to be related with water. The term Zeus derived from an Indo-European root meaning "to shine", and obviously Zeus rules the shining sky; he is the Indo-European god of the sky and weather and this deity is known among various Indo-European peoples from early history; the Roman Diespiter (Jupiter), Indic *Dyaus pita*, Baltic *Dievas*, German *Ziu*, Anglo-Saxon *Tiw*, etc³⁵⁾. As the sky god, Zeus sends the rain as his epithet *ὄμβριος* implies, and the rain is associated with the fertility of the earth. Furthermore, the close connection between Zeus and the rain (i.e. water) indicates that Zeus and Poseidon share the same attribute as a fertility spirit since Poseidon Gaiaochos sends springs and rivers to fertilize the earth. Also, the trident of Poseidon is suggested to have been the thunderbolt of Zeus³⁶⁾. These facts indicate that Poseidon is an individualized form of Zeus³⁷⁾, and as Greek mythology implies, a part of the domain of the Indo-European sky god must have been allotted to Poseidon during and after the migration of the Greeks. The equine attribute of Poseidon seems to have originated from a pastoral stage when the early Indo-Europeans lived in the Pontic-Volga steppe region. Thus as his etymology, which is interpreted as 'Husband of Waters' attested by the Indo-European **da-* component, indicates Poseidon was originally regarded as a water deity associated with fertility. But when the Indo-Europeans invaded into the Greek mainland devastating the indigenous cultures, Poseidon must have acquired the maritime aspect, and it became dominant in Greece. While, the original attribute of Poseidon as the water deity concerned with fertility was reduced; however, as his etymology

and the myth of Amymone clearly indicate, Poseidon strongly preserved his earliest vestige as the Indo-European water god.

Notes

- 1) Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), p. 131.
- 2) *Pausanias Description of Greece* tr. by W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge and London: Harvard Univ. Press & William Heinemann), Vol V, Pl. 3.
- 3) S. Bökönyi, "The Earliest Waves of Domestic Horses in Eastern Europe," *JIES*, 6 (1978), p. 54.
- 4) M. Gimbutas, "The First Wave of Eurasian Steppe Pastoralists into Copper Age Europe," *JIES*, 5 (1977), p. 286.
- 5) Leon Homo, *Primitive Italy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 74, Fig. 3.
- 6) Georges Dumézil, *Camillus* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 25. See also C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology* 3rd ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 238.
- 7) Jaan Puhvel, "Aquam Exstinguere," *JIES*, 1 (1973), p. 382.
- 8) C. Scott Littleton, "Poseidon as a Reflex of the Indo-European 'Source of Waters' God," *JIES*, 1 (1973), p. 427.
- 9) J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, p. 280.
- 10) J. Puhvel, "Aquam Exstinguere," p. 384.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- 12) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 425. See also Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1973), p. 216.
- 13) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 425.
- 14) *Ibid.*; J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, p. 279.
- 15) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 425.
- 16) *Ibid.*, pp. 425-426.
- 17) H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York: Dutton, 1959), p. 63; W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 98.
- 18) Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 136.
- 19) S. Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 434.
- 20) *Ibid.*
- 21) *Ibid.*; M. Gimbutas, "Primary and Secondary Homeland of the Indo-Europeans," *JIES*, 13 (1985), pp. 199-200.
- 22) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 435. See also M. Robbins, "The Assimilation of Pre-Indo-European Goddesses into Indo-European Society," *JIES*, 8 (1980), p. 21; J.P. Mallory mentions (J.P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 78) that the word *danu* means 'river' in Iranian.
- 23) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 434.
- 24) M. Gimbutas, "Proto-Indo-European Culture: The Kurgan Culture during the Fifth, Fourth, and Third Millennia B.C." in G. Cardona ed. *Indo-European and Indo-Europeans* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 193, Fig. 27. See also J.P. Mallory, *Ibid.*, p. 211, Fig. 112; M. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 13 (1985), p. 190, Table 1; p. 198, Diagram 2; M. Gimbutas, *JIES*, 5 (1977), p. 280, p. 312.

- 25) M. Gimbutas, *Indo-European and Indo-Europeans*, p. 167, Fig. 9.
- 26) J.P. Mallory, *Ibid.*, p. 224, Fig. 123.
- 27) Indicating the importance of epithets, Farnell mentions in *The Cults of the Greek States* Vol. 4, p. 3 (New Rochelle : Caratzas Brothers, 1977) that "if the cult is specialized by some peculiar title, such as Poseidon *Ἰππιος* or *Φράτριος*, this may be a fact of considerable significance. Such titles are rarely broadcast throughout the Greek states, but are found sporadically and often seem to emanate from a particular centre."
- 28) Farnell, *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 29) M. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion* (New York : Norton, 1964), p. 120.
- 30) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 431.
- 31) M. Robbins (*Ibid.*, p. 20) says that "a stream may have become personified as the goddess *Danu* mother of the archwithholder of the waters."
- 32) Rose, *Ibid.*, p. 284, n. 59 : Robbins (*Ibid.*, p. 20) also suggests the eponymous goddess **Don-* became the parent of the Danaides in Greece.
- 33) P.K. Ford, "The Well of Nechtan and 'La Gloire Lumineuse'" in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* G.J. Larson ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London : Univ. of California Press, 1974), p. 68.
- 34) Littleton, *Ibid.*, p. 431.
- 35) Burkert, *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126 ; Gimbutas, "The Kurgan Wave # 2 (C. 3400-3200 B.C.) into Europe and the Following Transformation of Culture," *JIES*, 8 (1980), p. 305 ; Benveniste, *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 36) A.B. Cook, *Zeus* (New York : Biblo and Tannen, 1965), Vol II, p. 794.
- 37) *Ibid.*, p. 582 ; Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, p. 132.

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- . "The First Wave of Eurasian Steppe Pastoralists into Copper Age Europe." *JIES*, 5 (1977), 277-338.
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