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Abstract: In the story of Alexander the Great written by Diodorus Siculus there are some examples of bizarre occurrences which sometimes precede the historical events. One of the strangest was the appearance of the enormous sea creature – κῆτος – during the siege of Tyre. The same kind of thing appeared when Alexander's men were at sea, on their way to India's coast.

Key words: κῆτος, Diodorus Siculus, Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great is known to have been one of the greatest leaders in the history, and therefore, there are many recordings of his life and conquests. The history of his invasions is filled not only with actual facts, but also with some stories about supernatural occurrences, signs or dreams sent by gods. Among them are the stories about the ruler's divine genealogy, his direct connections with gods and how they provide Alexander with their protection. Thus, the divine omens were to show either the ruler demigod nature and the fact that gods help him to accomplish his goals.

One of the authors who wrote about the Macedonian ruler's history was Diodorus Siculus, flourishing between 60 and 30 BC. Siculus, whose biggest work *Bibliotheca Historica* contains 40 books (not all of them survived), wrote a universal history describing the times from the mythic past to his own contemporaries. Among many other vital historical events, his work records the life and deeds of Alexander the Great. The author described the Macedonian's career – from the war with Greece, through the invasion on the Persian empire, to the expedition to India

and his eventual death in 323 BC. Book 17 of *Bibliotheca Historica* (Diod. *bibl. hist.* 17 Vogel) reports the history of the conquest.

In two places – Tyre and Indian Ocean – Alexander’s men faced an unusual incident which was the arrival of a huge sea creature, known as κῆτος. These two events described by Diodorus are the renditions of historical events, although Siculus mentioned κῆτος in the mythological context too. In the fragment that presented the twelve labours of Heracles, the author described the myth of the Trojan princess Hesione. She was left on the rocks near the coast to be sacrificed to κῆτος and was saved from the beast by the hero. The historical context embraces two situations that happened during Alexander’s invasion of the East – in Asia Minor and near the coast of India.

First encounter with κῆτος happened during the siege of Tyre, big and bustling Phoenician city. Tyre had its crucial strategic position as the one of the most important cities and Alexander was determined to have it under control. He wanted to secure his dominions and not to leave the city which he believed would be restored to Persians after his withdrawal.¹ In 332 BC the Macedonian started to besiege the city – the siege had lasted seven months before it ended. He commanded his men to build a causeway in order to have a better access to the gates. The unfinished path became a place of fierce fighting, as the defenders’ missiles could target the enemy’s workers. Endangered people were working ineffectively, and as a result, the siege lasted longer and longer. Situation was quite difficult for Alexander’s forces.

Suddenly, something bizarre happened. Diodorus describes that unparalleled occurrence (XVII 41 Vogel): As the soldiers were fighting under the city walls, one of the larger waves had thrown a big creature κῆτος onto the unfinished causeway. The enormous animal stayed partly on the ground, partly in the water – and laid there for a while to the soldiers’ sheer terror. But, after some time, it slid back into the depth of the sea, harming no one. That is how Diodorus described the event:

ἐκ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ πελάγους ὁ κλύδων προσεπέλασε τοῖς ἔργοις
κῆτος ἄπιστον τὸ μέγεθος, ὃ προσπεσὼν τῷ χώματι κακὸν μὲν
οὐδὲν εἰργάσατο, τῷ δ’ ἑτέρῳ μέρει τοῦ σώματος
προσανακεκλιμένον ἐπὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἔμενε καὶ πολλὴν
κατάπληξιν παρείχετο τοῖς θεωμένοις τὸ παράδοξον, πάλιν δ’ εἰς
τὸ πέλαγος νηξάμενον εἰς δεισιδαιμονίαν ἀμφοτέρους
προηγάγετο.²

The author emphasizes the turbulence caused by the view of the creature size of which was incredibly huge. Those who had seen the phenomenon were taken aback by that visible and palpable gods’ omen.

¹ See also: R. Kulesza: *Aleksander Wielki*. Warszawa 2009, pp. 89–90.

² *Diodori bibliotheca historica* (lib. 1–20). Ed. F. Vogel, Leipzig 1888–1906 [repr. Stuttgart 1964], XVII 41, 5–6.

The very fact that κῆτος had shown itself in front of them perplexed all the soldiers – both fighting sides interpreted it as a sign of good fortune. Nevertheless, it appeared to be lucky only for Alexander's men – eventually, they managed to take the city. The fact that the marine creature evoked such positive connotations in the people's minds might seem strange. Apparently, κῆτος in mythology was a sign of Poseidon's wrath along with a pestilence. The god of the seas sent the monster to punish the humans for their sins (actual or alleged).

The second encounter with κῆτος, and that time more than one, happened near the Indian coast. The expedition to India began in 327 BC.³ The land that was believed to be the edge of the world filled with secrets and miracles, became very popular theme for the authors of the Alexander's history praising it as an exotic and thus interesting theme.

India was known to have been the land inhabited by many tribes. Before Diodorus, their customs had been described e.g. by Herodotus in his *Histories*. According to Halicarnassian historian, the people who lived in India were very different from his compatriots and did the things that were uncommon amongst Greeks.⁴ India was inhabited by many tribes. Herodotus mentioned a few of them and wrote about the most peculiar ones; for example, some of them were eating only raw meat or plants and even were cannibalistic, and some made their living by selling gold sand.⁵

While mentioning India inhabitants and their customs in the chapter 105, Diodorus wrote about one tribe living near the coast – in the land called Gedrosia (Κεδρωσία). According to Diodorus, the people there used to eat “κῆτεα thrown at land” (ἐκβαλλόμενα κῆτη⁶). They also used the creatures's large bones and scales to build their houses. The ribs, which were particularly long, were placed on the top as a roof and covered with scales as tiles.⁷ Writing about those animals, Diodorus apart from κῆτος used the word ζῶον.

As the fleet of Alexander was near the Indian coast, the sailors saw the group of κῆτεα which emerged from the Ocean: τὸ δὲ παραδοξότατον, κῆτεσι πολλοῖς καὶ τὸ μέγεθος ἀπίστοις συγκεκυρηκέναι.⁸ Occurrence of the massive beasts filled the sailors with dismay and they started to panic. Everybody on the board feared that the ships would be attacked, and then, sunk. However, they managed to find a way to scare away κῆτεα. All the soldiers started to make

³ See: R. Kulesza: *Aleksander Wielki...*, pp. 161–165; K. Nawotka: *Aleksander Wielki*, Wrocław 2004, pp. 405ff.

⁴ Hérodote: *Histoires*. Vol. 1–9. Ed. P. Legrand. Paris 1932–1954: III 99–102.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Diod. Sicul. XVII 105, 5.

⁷ Diod. Sicul. XVII 105, 5–6: τὰς δ' ὀροφὰς ἐκ τῶν τοῦ κήτους πλευρῶν, ἐξ ὧν ὀκτωκαίδεκαπήχεις δοκοὶ κατηρτίζοντο· ἀντι δὲ τῶν κεράμων ταῖς φολίσι τῶν ζῶων τὰς στέγας κατεκάλυπτον.

⁸ Diod. Sicul. XVII 106, 6–7.

as much noise as they could: they shouted very loud, played horns or clanged with their shields. Alarmed by the disturbing sound, the creatures, called at that moment τὰ θηρία, decided to hide and depart disappearing in the sea.⁹ Their retreat was welcomed with the utmost relief.

Both of these encounters with κήτεα – Phoenician and Indian – ended well for Alexander's soldiers. In both situations the reaction of the people was similar. Near Tyre, they were surprised and frightened at first, but later took the very occurrence as a sign of good fortune, which resulted in their victory. During the expedition to India, the reception was quite the same: the fear as the animals emerged from the sea, and joy and relief when they swam away.

The three fragments in which Diodorus Siculus described κήτος in a historical context show the events that were probable. The scenes of the encounters with the creatures from chapters 41 and 106 seem to show the humans meeting the big animals, presumably some kind of whales. Chapter 105 contains enigmatic description of the large bones and scales of κήτος. The presence of scales could be questioned, as they can be found on the body of the fish, not sea mammals. The descriptions of κήτος might suggest that Alexander's men met rather some kind of whales not fish. But, Diodorus might have not known much about the nature of the animals the soldiers confronted with, or he might have decided to make the description of the savage inhabitants of India more interesting by adding bizarre and exotic descriptions of their unbelievable customs.

⁹ Diod. Sicul. XVII 106, 7: ταῦτα δὲ φοβηθέντας αὐτοὺς τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἀπελπίσαι τὸ ζῆν ὡς ἀντίκα μάλα μετὰ τῶν σκαφῶν διαφθαρησομένους, μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐξ ἀπάντων μιᾶς φωνῆς γινομένης καὶ διὰ τῶν ὄπλων πολλοῦ συντελουμένου ψόφου, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις τῶν σαλπίγγων ἐνιεμένων τῷ παραδόξῳ πτοηθῆναι τὰ θηρία καὶ δύναι πρὸς βυθόν.