

Apollo's Gallic Muses?

In book three of the *Chorographia* (3.48), Pomponius Mela describes an oracular cult overseen by nine maritime priestesses (the Gallizenae: the Gauls of Sena). The nine women serve a Gallic divinity off the Ossismican coasts at the island of Sena (Sein, Pointe du Raz, Finistère, off the coast of Brittany), a known hazard for mariners owing to the currents for which the area is notorious (*raz* is Brettanic for “sea-current”) together with reefs that extend thirty or so miles westward from the island into the *Chaussée de Sein*. Remarkable for their virginity and purity, the priestesses are able to rouse the seas and winds with their chants, and they can transmogrify into “whatever animals they wish.” In addition, they allegedly can heal “whatever is incurable among other peoples.” Furthermore, the unnamed Gallic deity, to whom the Gallizenae are devoted, oversees a pilgrim cult to which sailors and others come in order to consult the priestesses. The Gallizenae subsequently share their proprietary knowledge only with pilgrims who make the dangerous journey by sea to their abode.

Mela's maritime priestesses are otherwise unattested (Silberman 1988: ad loc.). Attempts to link the Gallizenae with Druidism, however, have been posited but uniformly lack documentation and are unconvincing (e.g. MacKillop 2004: s.v. Gallizenae). Their number and chastity, nonetheless, evoke the tradition of Apollo, the poetic god closely associated with the nine muses, minor deities of poetic inspiration, who accompany him at Mt. Helicon. Like the god of Sena, Apollo was an oracular deity who spoke through undefiled women (e.g., the Pythia at Delphi, the Cumaean Sibyl, and Cassandra). Apollo was also a god of “colonization” whose oracular shrine at Delphi on the slope of Mount Parnassus was, like Sena, remote and difficult to approach.

The transformative nature of the Gallizenae, furthermore, aligns with the metamorphic Greek sea-deities, including the Nereids and the old men of the sea. Nereus' daughter, Thetis, for example, transformed into a lion, a snake, and other creatures, in her attempt to avoid Peleus' embraces (see Hesiod, *Theogony* 240-244; Homer, *Iliad* 1.358, 18.36, 24.60; Pindar, *Pythian* 3.92; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.11; Berlin, Antikensammlung F2279). The god of Sena held sway over the sea, and he communicated exclusive information through his priestesses, data which could be shared only with pilgrims to his sacred precinct. It is tempting to correlate the god and his cult to the Dioskouroi or other protectors of sailors at sea, especially the *Theoi Megaloi* who were worshipped by pilgrims seeking initiation at Samothrace, and also Apollo who was invoked as *Aktios* (of the shores), *Ekbasios* (of landings), and *Neosos* (protector of ships).

In this paper we shall consider the Gallizenae and their unnamed divine patron in order to tease out comparanda with Greco-Roman traditions of pilgrimage, oracular cults, maritime saviors. We shall focus particularly on the similarities between the Gallizenae and the Greek Muses, deities of inspiration who remembered all things that had occurred (and some events that were yet to occur). The Muses of Greco-Roman lore were often, but not uniformly, envisioned as virginal. They bestowed on their worshippers not just artistic inspiration but also healing (Pindar, *Nemean Ode* 4. 2; Stesichorus, Fragment 192 = Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a) and wisdom (Pindar, *Paeon* 7). Finally, owing to their knowledge of the stars, the Muses could help those who travel by sea (Virgil, *Georgics* 2. 477-478). Mela's short notice is thus replete with detail, and it poses intriguing questions regarding comparative religion/mythology and cultural exchange.

Bibliography

- MacKillop, J. (2004), *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford).
Silberman, A. (texte établi, trad. et annoté) (1988), *Pomponius Mela: Chorographie* (Paris).