

Building Laomedon's Troy: A Northern Parallel

DMITRI PANCHENKO

*Saint Petersburg State University &
Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg, Russia*

Abstract: The strange servitude of Poseidon and Apollo to Laomedon who denies payment for construction of the wall of Troy and threatens the gods (*Il.* 7. 452–453 and 21. 441–457) can be explained in terms of the transformation of original motifs. Divine builders were originally busy with constructing the stronghold for the gods. Since the Olympian gods as shown by Homer no longer need a stronghold, the story of the glorious construction was relocated and combined with the motif known in folklore of a master and disciple working for a treacherous king.

We learn from two passages in the *Iliad* that Poseidon and Apollo once performed the laborious task of building a wall around Troy and they did so in service of Laomedon. They received no payment for their toil, and Laomedon even threatened to sell them as slaves to distant islands and cut off their ears with his knife. There is a small discrepancy between the two passages. In 7.452-453, both gods appear to have been working together. In 21.441-457, Poseidon claims that while he was busy constructing the wall, Apollo served as Laomedon's herdsman. Yet one should take into account the context of the latter passage. Poseidon, a champion of Achaean's cause, challenges in a rather humiliating way Apollo, the supporter of the Trojans. Therefore, it would be strange of Poseidon to speak of a task which they performed together through their joint effort. He points out instead that Apollo was treated by Laomedon as an ordinary slave. Two divine builders, Poseidon and Apollo, along with the mortal Aiakos, reappear in Pindar (*Ol.* 8. 31-46).

The poet of the *Iliad* does not say, however, what made the mighty gods become the servants of a mortal king and what the punishment of the latter was. It seems, moreover, that there was none, for we are told that on a later occasion Laomedon cheated Heracles. Because of this offence, Heracles destroyed Laomedon's city (*Il.* 5. 640 – 651), which makes Laomedon's escape from punishment for both his fraud and arrogance in respect to the gods even more striking. To be sure, later authors say that Poseidon sent a sea monster and Apollo a pestilence (*Apollod.* 2. 5. 9; *Ovid. Met.* 11. 194 ff.; cf. *Hygin. Fab.* 89), but on all accounts that just led to the confrontation between Heracles and Laomedon. Again, the scholiast to *Il.* 21. 444 maintains that the servitude of the gods was a punishment inflicted on them by Zeus for their conspiracy against him. The conspiracy is mentioned in the *Iliad* 1. 399 ff., where one finds only Poseidon, but not Apollo, among the participants; nor does the idea of such a punishment seem motivated. In sum, there was no authentic

tradition available to the ancients concerning why the gods agreed to work with Laomedon and how they avenged his hubris.

The surprising outcome of the story, or rather the absence of such, is something that especially calls for an explanation. I propose that we are dealing with the transformation of an original tale-type in which the reward of the builders was that they were allowed to escape from a treacherous king and the only punishment for the king was the failure of his plan (mighty kings are not likely to be punished except by gods, and such tales are relatively late and derive from specific social milieus). Stories of that kind are known in folklore. I cite an Irish one:

“Once upon a time there was a King and he wanted a tower built, so he sent for Gobán Saor. Gobán came and his son with him an’ built the tower. When the tower was nearly built Gobán got a wrinkle that the King was goin’ to make a prisoner of himsel’ and his son, for fraid that anyone would have another tower like it. He knew that he couldn’t get out, so he left them ignorant when he had the work finished and sent for the King wan day. He (Gobán) tould him that he wanted a special tool to finish the tower, an’ that his wife wouldn’t give it to anyone but himself or his son, for it was a secret; so either himself or his son would have to go home for it. You see, he wanted to let the wife know how the land lay. The King wouldn’t hear of either of them goin’, and said: “Wouldn’t a servant do?” Gobán said that that would never do, for no common person would be let handle the tool, but maybe he (the King) would let his soon go an’ he’d get it. The King agreed, and Gobán told the young prince how to get to his house, and to ask his wife when he got there for “The Crooked and the Straight,” and to be very careful bringing it back with him. The young man set out, an’ when he got to Gobán’s house there was great *fáilte* for him. He told his message, and the woman said she’d get the tool. She went to a big black chest an’ rose up the lid and stretched down for the tool. “Would you mind,” says she, “raichin’ for this tool, for I can’t get it?” The King’s son stuck his head into the chest, and when he did she up-ended him into it and clapped down the lid on him, and he couldn’t get out. Then she sent word to Gobán where she had him (the King’s son), and when Gobán went and told the King how he had him fixed, he had to let him go.”¹

Gobán (or Boban) Saor (the Builder) is a traditional character of Irish and Gaelic folklore. Although the particular story cited above was recorded in the twentieth century, it represents a tale-type which is very popular among the Irish and Gaels and which is also well-known in the Caucasus and has been documented among the Nepalese.² This type regularly combines originally two different, I assume, motifs. One has been styled *the encoded message*, while the other can be named *the builders escape the treacherous king who hired them*. To compare what we hear about Poseidon, Apollo and Laomedon with the story of Gobán, one finds in both

¹ Mac Gréine 1930, 262 f.

² Y. Berezkin, E. Duvakin 2016, 37–40.

cases a king and two builders working for him and subsequently threatened by him. If Gobán is assisted by his son, it is correspondingly emphasized in the *Il.* 21. 440 that Poseidon is older than Apollo. Now, a working team of father (teacher) and son (disciple) refers to a standard situation involving a king hiring reputed professionals, but it is exceedingly strange to hire gods, for what kind of compensation could a mortal offer them? Furthermore, in the Greek version we do not have a story in the strictest sense, for a true story requires an ending. We have just an episode, and it is only natural that we are unaware of what brought it about (since that would have been the beginning of the story whereas the story is absent). I conclude that the Gobán and his son tale-type is older than the *Iliad*.³

Greek material lends this conclusion impressive support. I have in mind so famous a myth as the flight of Daedalus and Icarus. Like Gobán, Daedalus is a famous builder and Icarus is his son. Daedalus built the labyrinth for king Minos and became his captive, though it is true that ancient authors do not typically show awareness of the link between performing such an outstanding job as constructing the labyrinth and subsequent captivity. Daedalus provoked the wrath of Minos, they say, either because it was on his suggestion that Ariadne gave the thread to Theseus when he went into the labyrinth (Apollod. Ep. 1. 9–12) or because he fashioned the cow for Pasiphae's intercourse with the bull, by which she bore the Minotaur (Diod. 4. 77. 5; Hygin. *Fab.* 40). Neither of the two versions seems authentic. (1) The idea of using a thread does not require the genius of Daedalus, and by common logic, or rather the usual style of traditional stories, there is one remarkable object in conjunction with one person (*the thread of Ariadne*) and not with two. (2) Daedalus was employed by Minos to build the labyrinth, and the labyrinth was built to hide the Minotaur; Minos' wrath, then, comes strangely late. The simultaneous presence of such two versions shows that the original one was not known. There is also no indication in the ancient sources that Icarus assisted his father in his work. However, one has to bear in mind that Greek myths resulted from the interaction of two very different cultural epochs, the Mycenaean and that of the Dark Ages, on the one hand, and the interaction of various ethnic groups that entered the Aegean in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, on the other. Under such circumstances, many original motifs assumed a new shape. Since there exists such a tale-type as the famous builder with his son working for a treacherous king, the story of Daedalus, Icarus and Minos originally belonged, I conclude, to this type.

How could it happen that gods such as Poseidon and Apollo became the builders? Another northern story helps to suggest a plausible explanation. Odin and his brothers, Snorri Sturluson says, “made for themselves in the middle of the world a burg, which is called Asgard, and which we call Troy. There dwelt the gods and their race” (*Gylfaginning* 9; R. B. Anderson's transl.). I infer from this that in the original story the divine builders constructed a stronghold not for a mortal king but for

³ The fascination with the building craft also points to an earlier epoch, such as Late Bronze Age for Europe. Since in that epoch and a few subsequent centuries ethnic and military groups moved mostly from northwestern and central Europe in an eastward direction, including the Caucasus, I speak of a “northern parallel” to the passages of the *Iliad*.

themselves and the other gods.⁴ If the gods were dwellers of the sky and if their stronghold was in the middle of the world, this points to its location at the (northern) celestial pole, as the centre of all visible celestial rotations. This may indicate the relevance of both Poseidon and Apollo. The *Iliad* mentions Poseidon Helikonios (20. 404). There are two parties among scholars: one derives this name from the Achaean city of Helikē and the other from Mount Helikon in Boetia, although I believe that the truth lies elsewhere. The name Helikonios is to be compared with the name Helikē for the Greater Bear (Arat. *Phaen.* 37, etc.), the most conspicuous circumpolar constellation. Helikē means ‘turning around’. Poseidon Helikonios is the god of the sky that turns round the celestial pole. If his name derives from Helikon rather than directly from Helikē,⁵ this is not an objection to such a conclusion; moreover, the connection of Poseidon Helikonios with a high mountain confirms it (see also below). It is neither a big surprise that Poseidon, a sky-god, became in the course of time the sea-god. The water of paramount importance for agricultural population comes from the sky. Hence the Lord of the Sky and the Lord of Water can easily be one and the same god. Sumerian Enki was indeed such a god.⁶ Interestingly, his name means the Lord or the Husband of Earth and an etymology with precisely the same meaning was proposed for the name of Poseidon.⁷ Even if one prefers to take this name to mean ‘the Lord / Husband of waters’⁸ or ‘Zeus in water / drink,’⁹ Poseidon can still be compared with Enki and can still be located in the sky. When Zeus replaced Poseidon as the god of the sky and rain, Poseidon, as the Lord of Water, became the Lord of the Sea.¹⁰

Now, one may trust Hesiod that he once met Helikonian Muses who taught him his art of poetry. I suggest, however, that Mount Helikon was named after the circumpolar realm, the realm of the gods. During the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages the gods in several parts of Europe and in the Aegean increasingly became human-like beings.¹¹ They accordingly abandoned their dwelling places in the sky and moved to high mountains, like Olympus, and it is characteristic that all such mountains are located in the north, initially (I propose) right below the celestial pole. As Musagetes, Apollo directed the round dance of the Muses “upon highest

⁴ A different and detailed story about constructing the citadel for the gods appears in the *Gylfaginning* 42. The citadel is called now Midgard (‘middle yard’). A master (a giant, unnamed) and his helper (a stallion) are present. The gods initially accept the master’s inappropriate demand for remuneration since they believe that the work cannot be finished by agreed deadline. When they realize that they were mistaken they find a tricky way to prevent his finishing the construction in time. As a result, the master is deprived of wages and subsequently killed. One can see that this story employs the motifs we are dealing with here, but in a peculiar way. Its secondary character is suggested by the fact that the master has no name (though his stallion does).

⁵ Nilsson 1967, 447, Anm. 6.

⁶ Panchenko 2016, 262 f.

⁷ Kretschmer 1909, 27 f.; cf. Burkert 1985, 136 and 402, n. 2.

⁸ Scott Littleton 1973.

⁹ Cook 1903, 175 f.; see also Nilsson 1967, 445 f.

¹⁰ It has been acknowledged by many students of Greek religion that Poseidon's connection with the sea is secondary (see, for instance, Burkert 1985, 138 and n. 37), yet they do not place him in the sky.

¹¹ Larsen 1955.

Helikon” (Hes. Theog. 7),¹² that is, the rotation of the luminaries around the celestial pole.¹³ He also possessed the impressive skill of playing music, and his role in building the wall of Troy may be like that of Amphion (“the one who goes round”) who assisted Zeth in constructing seven-gated Thebes by playing music that set stones in movement.¹⁴

Yet the Olympian gods, as shown by Homer, have no enemies from which to defend themselves by means of an impregnable wall. Therefore, the construction of such a wall by Poseidon and Apollo lost its significance and if their glorious deed was not to be forgotten, another stronghold had to become the object of their work. Perhaps it retained the old name,¹⁵ but the traces of adaptation are visible. The wall constructed by the gods to make the city incapable of being destroyed (*Il.* 21. 447) did not prevent Heracles from capturing Laomedon's Troy (*Il.* 5. 640-642; to meet this inconsistency a mortal assistant to the work of gods, Aiakos was later introduced, for otherwise the city would have been impregnable, as a scholiast on Pind. *Ol.* 8. 31-46 explains. Relocation of the stronghold was combined with the motif of a master and disciple working for a treacherous king. Yet it is remarkable how the poet of the *Iliad* created out of displaced motifs a picture that strikes one's imagination with its grim character of Laomedon and once almighty persons that appear nearly helpless and humiliated.¹⁶

¹² Note also that Hesiod interchangeably calls Muses either Heliconian or Olympian.

¹³ For celestial aspect of Apollo see Panchenko 2006, 30–35.

¹⁴ Singor 1990, 409 is right to note that seven-gated Thebes are related to the labyrinth, “which in its turn suggests the city of Troy.”

¹⁵ For the argument that Troy came from myth while Ilium came from history see Panchenko 2013, 110 – 118.

¹⁶ I am grateful to David Konstan for the comments on the draft of this paper and to Michael Freese for correcting my English.

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