

PROTOCOL OF THE (SEA) WATCH OR ACTION OF THE CROW'S NEST

Durational attention to the surface of significant bodies of water has characterized the daily practice of sailors, fishermen, whalers, and others whose livelihoods (or sensibilities) enjoin aquatic scrutiny. While such prolonged vigilance at the interface of atmospheric air and fluid forms has traditionally been a matter of strictly practical preoccupation of one sort or another (*Was that the flash of a dorsal fin? Is a storm coming on? Are the Phoenicians about to attack?*), the metaphorical registers of surface and depth — of the “merely superficial” as against the “truly profound” — perpetually haunt those who brood for any length of time over the waters. It is difficult to resist a sense that something of this problematic looms over (or is it under?) the reconstructed protocol below. Most of the italic phrases are interpolations. Duration of the phases seems to have varied, though the first appears to have been consistently longer than the others. There is some evidence that eyes were often closed in phase three. Experimentation is encouraged.

I. KEEP WATCH

Survey the surrounds; scan the water; read the surface.

II. PEER

Stay at the surface; look into the water; see what can be seen.

III. SOUND

Amphibiate; descend; water in water.

IV. FLOAT

Resurface; lose your gills.



THE OANNES SCRAP: *THE HYDROGRAPHIC HABITUS AND SEA-SURFACE ATTENTION, CA. 1800*

Readers of the PROCEEDINGS OF ESTAR(SER) will already be aware of the considerable efforts made by various scholars, collectors, bibliophiles, and editors to sift the historicity of that peculiar body known as THE ORDER OF THE THIRD BIRD. Despite the labors of ESTAR(SER) researchers, a great deal of uncertainty (and even some genuine confusion) persists concerning the nature and workings of THE BIRDS — a self-sequestering community that seems to function, at least in its modern incarnation, as a private association of adepts who convene to perform public and private rites of sustained attention to made things (often works of art). New documents bearing on the genesis, evolution, and practices of THE ORDER are continually coming to light, and we are pleased here to offer a brief discussion of a recently surfaced source. Details follow.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

In April of 2014, a small, folded coin-envelope (with ribbon closure) fell out of a copy of the 1722 Diaper and Jones edition of Oppian's celebrated *Halieuticks*, a volume belonging to the "W-Cache" collections. Within, the cataloging archivist discovered a single irregular scrap of laid paper (depicted opposite, in recto only). Initial research on this document strongly suggests that it should be interpreted as evidence of a *hitherto unattested practice of sustained attention, suitable for use in aquatic circumstances*. While further investigations into provenance, etc., are underway, a brief outline of current understanding of what has come to be called "The Oannes Scrap" is now in order. First, it will be worth noting that a flyleaf inscription in the Oppian volume — an English translation of a classical Greek poem about fish and fishing — appears to establish that the book once belonged to the notable American naturalist-philosopher Samuel Latham Mitchill (1764–1831), known for his interest in ichthyology, whaling, and other oceanic themes (and almost certainly associated with the Order of the Third Bird). Second, the scrap itself (which invokes Oannes, the amphibious god-monster-philosopher-merman of the Chaldeans, discussed by Berossus) has been torn from the illustration page accompanying the entry on "TIDES" in volume 13 of Dobson's *Encyclopaedia*, published in Philadelphia in 1798. Third, the initials "M.I.R.M." on the outside of the (period) envelope strongly suggests a connection to Mitchill's confidant, the fugitive Irish-American-Polynesian naturalist-explorer known as "M. I. Return Maycomb" (1764–1818?), who traced a meandering course at the peripheries of sea-knowledge and self-craft on the watershed of modernity¹. These bibliographical minutiae open way to (responsible) speculation of some moment. It seems likely that what we have to hand here represents a *Protocol for Attention to the Surface of the Sea*, a protocol perhaps drafted by Maycomb himself in the course of his years as an itinerant naturalist aboard whaling vessels in the American and English industries. As is well known, it was the condition of the whaler-seaman to spend untold hours in sustained mast-top vigilance, regarding the sea-surface for any trace of what might lie beneath. Meditative "immersion" in the surface itself — as hermeneutics and habitus — became, in this context, a form of life. It would appear, then, that Maycomb explored "Birdish" rites from the crow's nest in the first decade of the nineteenth century. More work is needed.

¹ On the biography of this remarkable figure, see volume 3 of *The Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century British Scientists*, edited by Bernard Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).



FIGURE: The Oannes Scrap (13 x 16 cm), as discussed opposite. The letters O, A, N, N, E, and S in the tide diagrams have been circled and linked to the flag array in the upper right corner of the torn page. The cipher (reading, in columns: I. 1943; II. 2435; III. 805; IV. 300) would seem to make use of the 1803 edition of Sir Home Popham's *Marine Vocabulary*, which yields: I. "Watch/ed/ing"; II. "Look into"; III. "Sounded/ing/es"; IV. "Float/ing, Afloat." This has been reconstructed and glossed overleaf as "The Protocol of the (Sea) Watch." Pencil annotations appearing on the verso of the Scrap itself afford several of the prompt phrases (e.g., "lose your gills"). Photo courtesy of Cisco Laertes.