

ATHENA TRITOGENEIA, POSEIDON'S TRIDENT AND EARLY SACRED TRINITY

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ABSTRACT. The name Tritogeneia likely means 'born of the Third', this Third one being the supreme god, the Most High. Poseidon (at least Poseidon Helikonios) was once such a god. He was the lord of the water that descended from heaven and a deity closely associated with the celestial pole. His trident is the symbol that indicates his celestial nature, and this symbol developed from a previous one – a raised hand with three fingers. This number of fingers signified the similarity with the dwellers of the sky – the birds, with their three toes in front.

KEYWORDS: Athena, Tritogeneia, Poseidon, trident, triads, mythology.

Athena is repeatedly called Τριτογένεια in Homeric poems (*Il.* 4. 515; 8. 39; 22. 183; *Od.* 3. 378), in Hesiod (*Theog.* 895; 924) and elsewhere. One may wonder whether Homer and Hesiod were aware of the meaning of the epithet they used, but one confidently concludes that the later Greeks were not. This follows from the variety of interpretations suggested in antiquity. To be sure, there was common agreement that the second part of the word meant 'born'. Concerning the first part, two main ideas were current. Some derived it from τρίτος, 'third', the others from the names Τρίτων or Τριτωνίς, identified either with a lake in Libya or with a stream in Boeotia or Thessaly or elsewhere.

Both versions figured already in the authors of the fifth century BC. The catalogue of Democritus' works composed by Thrasyllus included the title Τριτογένεια, "so called because three things, on which all human things depend, come from her" (D.L. 9. 46), that is, as we learn from other sources, to deliberate well, to speak well, and to do what is right (B 2 DK; fr. 822 Luria). We are also told that

“the Pythagoreans called an equilateral triangle Athena Coryphagenes (‘vertex-born’ or ‘crown-born’) and Tritogeneia, because it is divided by perpendiculars drawn from its three angles” (Plut. *De Is.* 381F). Some ancient authorities connected the name Tritogeneia with the third day of a lunar month (Schol. *Il.* 8. 39; the *Suda* s. v. Τριτομηνίς). It should be noted that relating Τριτογένεια to τρίτος implies metrical lengthening of the iota in hexameters. We have no ancient discussion of this point, but modern experts, including Paul Kretschmer and Pierre Chantraine, assume such a lengthening without hesitation.

Herodotus relates a supposedly local Libyan tradition according to which Athena was a daughter of Poseidon and the Tritonian lake (Τριτωνίς), though she gave herself to Zeus, who made her his own daughter (4. 180. 5). The name of the mother implies (though this is not explicitly stated) an explanation of why Athena is called Tritogeneia. That Athena was a daughter of the Tritonian lake is apparently hinted at in Euripides’ *Ion* (872). Pausanias is aware of the version reported by Herodotus (Paus. 1. 14. 6; cf. 2. 21.6); yet he relates Athena Tritogeneia to rivers named Τρίτων, one in Boeotia (9. 33. 7; cf. Strab. 9. 2. 18), another in Arcadia (8. 26. 6). Such rivers are also found in Crete (Diod. 5. 72. 3) and Thessaly (Schol. Ap. Rhod. 1. 109).

Many efforts to discern the meaning of the name Tritogeneia were undertaken in the nineteenth century. In nearly common opinion of the subsequent scholarship, the etymology is still unknown (Kruse 1939; Frisk 1960–1973, s. v. Τρίτων; Nilsson 1967, 347; Kirk 1985, 394 on *Il.* 4. 515). Only Kretschmer 1919, 38–45, followed (with reservation) by Chantraine 1968–1980, 1138 (cf. Cook 1940, 123 ff.), rather confidently derives the name from τρίτος in order to arrive (in a rather complicated way) at interpreting Tritogeneia as the *genuine* daughter of Zeus. Should we imagine, then, that there also was a deity with an unsupported claim for being daughter of Zeus? If Kretschmer’s sophisticated train of thought avoids a natural suggestion that Tritogeneia means ‘born of the Third’ or ‘born from the Third’, the reason is probably that no answer is given to the question who this Third one can be. However, an answer is available, though it comes from afar.

There is a remarkable passage in the *Gylfaginning* of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*: “He saw three thrones one above the other, and there were three men, one sitting on each. Then he asked what the name of their ruler was. The man who had brought him in replied that the one that sat on the lowest throne was king and was called High, next to him the one called Just-as-high, and the one sitting at the top was called Third” (Faulkes 1996, 8).

Since it is clear from the context that the ‘men’ sitting on the thrones are the gods, and since ‘Third’ appears elsewhere as the name of Odin (*Grímnismál* 46. 4;

Óðins *nofn* 5), and since the throne of Third rises above those of both High and Just-as-high, one concludes that this Third is the god who is Most High.

On this analogy, if Tritogeneia means ‘born of/from the Third’ she is the daughter of Most High. Zeus and Odin are not only the heads of two historically related pantheons, but they also share the quality of being called ‘the father of all gods and men’ (West 2007, 173).¹ ‘Most High’ (Ἵψιστος) was among the cult names of Zeus (Cook 1925, 876 ff.). There is, moreover, a passage in which Most High is equated, perhaps occasionally, with Third. Pausanias mentions at Corinth three statues of Zeus that stood in the open air: “One had no surname, another they call Chtonius and the third Most High (Hypsistos)” (2. 2. 8). The supreme god and savior is called ‘third’ in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*; in his other play, the *Suppliant Women*, the poet speaks of ‘Zeus the Saviour, third’ (Ζεὺς σωτήρ τρίτος). The parallelism between two passages may seem impressive; however, it is not clear whether Aeschylus employs an old formulaic expression or his wording is due to particular contexts.² In any case, the combination of three major gods, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, one of them being supreme appears in a famous passage of the *Iliad* (15. 185 ff.). All this makes the interpretation of the name Tritogeneia as ‘born of/from the Third’ perfectly reasonable.

There are, nevertheless, several complications. First, even if one assumes the connection of the name with τρίτος, it is possible to understand the name as ‘Third-born’. Such an option is not meaningless; for one recalls the emphasis regularly made on the youngest of three brothers in European folk-tales, and Zeus is such in Hesiod (*Theog.* 457; cf. West 1966, 204; 293) and, again, we have in Hesiod a story of three consecutive rulers of the world – Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus. Therefore, Tritogeneia may be an epithet pointing to the supreme deity. One may consider then the striking similarity of the names Ἀθήνη and Óðinn.

Second, the interpretation of the name Tritogeneia that connects it with a stream or a body of water called Τρίτων or Τριτωνίς is not necessarily an outright invention (as Lippold 1911, 108 f. is prone to assume). The fact is that in Pseudo-Apollodorus’ account of the origin of the Palladium Τρίτων figures as the father of Pallas (3. 12. 3), which constitutes another link between Triton and Athena (frequently called Pallas Athena in Homer). Although the story is strange, it is diffi-

¹ Already Grimm 1854, 148 (note) employs Odin’s name Third to assume Zeus τρίτος and to account for Τριτογένεια. Although Grimm’s idea is mentioned by Usener 1903, 7, n. 1 and Gruppe 1906, 1143, n. 1 (cf. also West 2007, 260, n. 71), it seems to have never been developed.

² In *Eum.* 758–760, the speaker (Orestes) mentions first Pallas and Loxias and then ‘that third god, the one who ordains everything, the savior’. In *Suppl.* 24–27, there also emerges a triad: gods on high, the earth-bound powers and Zeus the Saviour.

cult to find an artificial reason for making Triton the father of Pallas, so one may suppose that this came from tradition. Further, Hesychius explains the word τριτώ as ῥεῦμα, ‘stream’ (also as τρόμος and φόβος), and although the efforts of the nineteenth century scholars to connect the name of Athena (Ἀθήνη, Attic Ἀθηναία) with ‘water’ were not found convincing (Dümmler 1896, 2008), such a possibility is not out of the question, as it also remains for Germanic Wotan / Odin < *Wōðanaz. Furthermore, the *Theogony* speaks of Triton as a mighty god (931). He appeared very much such, equipped with the trident, in Accius (cited by Cicero, *Nat. D.* 2. 35), though one may think that the poet just made him a substitute for Neptunus=Poseidon. Triton in turn is associated with Poseidon and Amphitrite; the *Theogony* makes him their son (930); and many scholars assume that the names Ἀμφιτρίτη and Τριτογένεια are related.

Now, one compares both Ἀθήνη Τριτωνίς and Ἀθήνη Τριτογένεια with the Avestan Thraētaona Āthwya, who in turn corresponds to the Indian Trita Āptya. Thraētaona Āthwya and Trita Āptya are both described as slayers of a three-headed monsters. “Their first names, while not identical, are closely related, Thraētaona being a patronymic from Avestan *Thrita*, which is a perfect match for Sanskrit *Trita*, both being derived from P-I-E **Tri-to-*. This **Tri-to-* ... means literally *third*” (Lincoln 1976, 47; see also Macdonell 1893, 481 f.; Fowler 1947, 60). Āptya means ‘derived from the waters’ (Macdonell 1893, 473 f.), and Āthwya is commonly accepted to be the same as Āptya.³ All that may mean that the choice between relating Τριτογένεια either to watery Τρίτων or to Third is a wrong alternative. Even if we cannot rule out the possibility that the name of Trita had originally a different meaning and only in the course of time was interpreted as ‘the third’ by both the Greeks and Indo-Iranians,⁴ we can harmonize both versions. It is enough to assume that waters in question come from above, from the realm of Most High.⁵

One has to specify that not only Zeus, the god who sends rain, but also Poseidon is an appropriate father for Athena Tritogeneia. It can be shown that Poseidon (at least Poseidon Helikonios) had initially been the lord of the water that comes from heaven and a deity closely associated with the celestial pole. The main arguments are briefly as follows. Although the name Helikonios probably

³ Connection of Āptya and Āthwya with ‘water’ is sometimes denied (Lincoln 1976, 48).

⁴ However, it is no longer attractive to deny Indo-European origin of the word Τριτογένεια (as Zaizev 2004, 109).

⁵ According to Macdonell 1893, 487 and *passim*, “Trita in his original nature was the third or lightning form of the god of fire”. I find this essentially convincing, though I would rather speak of Trita as an independent personification of lightning; I believe that Athena in her original nature was such too.

derives from Helikon, the Greeks were not aware of the cult of Poseidon on the Boeotian mountain; and although a certain mountain in Boeotia was known by such a name, Helikon originally belonged to mythology and not geography. Helikon is the mountain of the Muses, who are interchangeably called either Helikonian or Olympian. Apollo directs the round dance of the Muses “upon highest Helikon” (Hes. *Theog.* 7). Another highest mountain, Indian Meru, is located under the celestial pole; celestial bodies and in particular seven stars of the Greater Bear rotate around this mountain. The name Ἑλικῶν is to be compared with the name Ἑλική for the Greater Bear (Arat. *Phaen.* 37, etc.), the most conspicuous circumpolar constellation. Ἑλική means ‘turning around’. Poseidon Helikonios is, then, the god of the sky that turns around the celestial pole. It is characteristic, further, that at the sacrifice to Poseidon Helikonios, young men drag a bull around (ἀμφί) the altar (*Il.* 20. 404) and that elevated places were reserved for Poseidon Helikonios in Attica (Jessen 1912) and Samos (Robert 1935, 477–481), which indicates the presence of the ideas of both rotary movement and elevation in the cult of this deity. It is also hardly accidental that famous temple of Poseidon at Aegae in Euboea was situated on a high mountain (Strab. 9. 2. 13). It is likely that the name of Poseidon’s Latin counterpart, Neptunus, is related to words like Greek νέφος (‘cloud’, ‘darkness’), Latin *nebula* (‘cloud’), Russian *nebo* (‘sky, heaven’), whereas the Sumerian Enki is an example of the god who is the lord of both celestial and terrestrial waters (Panchenko 2016a, 265 ff.; Panchenko 2016b, 262 f.).⁶

The celestial pole is the centre of all celestial rotations and therefore can be and is repeatedly called by the ancients the vertex of the sky. Accordingly, the god associated with the celestial pole can be Most High. Everybody knows that Athena was born out of head of Zeus – ἐκ κεφαλῆς, according to Hesiod (*Theog.* 924),

⁶ More elaborate argumentation was presented at the conference “Indo-European Linguistics and Classical Philology – XXI” (St Petersburg 2017). As I found later, some of my ideas concerning Poseidon had been partly anticipated by O’Neil 1893–1897: “Mt. Helikôn, which like Helikê, the Great Bear, must derive its name from its revolution, for it is the vault of the heavens” (II, 629); Poseidon was originally “a central supernal god, the deity of the Universe ocean – not merely of terrestrial seas” (I, 78). 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). The idea of his celestial origin was, however, neglected (or even forgotten) in the twentieth century. Nilsson 1967, 450 objects even to the idea advanced by Wilamowitz 1931, 215 that Poseidon was a universal and once supreme god. However, Nilsson’s interpretation of Poseidon is hardly compatible with the image of a god who was the main deity of amphictyonies, regions and tribes. (The fact that Poseidon was such is another sign of his originally celestial nature.)

or ἐν κορυφῇ, according to Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo (309). We are told, however, by Harpokration (s. v. Ἴππια), who cites Mnaseas as the source of information, that Athena Hippias is the daughter of Poseidon and Koryphe, the daughter of Okeanos; and κορυφή means 'head, peak, summit, vertex'. We also recall that in the Libyan story reported by Herodotus (4. 180. 5) Athena is a daughter of Poseidon (and the Tritonian lake); and it is worth noting that cultic association of Athena with Poseidon is much stronger than with Zeus (Dümmler 1896, 2002).

While each of the names Τριτογένεια, Τρίτων and Ἀμφιτρίτη is possibly (but not certainly) related to the number three, Poseidon's most characteristic attribute is the trident. An influential idea connects Poseidon's trident with fishing tackle (Nilsson 1967, 451). Even though Aeschylus, who speaks of the 'fish-striking device' of Poseidon (*Sept.* 130), can be cited in support of this idea, it is nevertheless to be rejected. For one can hardly admit that a fisherman's god could have ever achieved that prominence which Poseidon attained among the Greeks; nor is there any parallel to such a development among the Indo-European or any other peoples. Moreover, a frequent type among the earliest representations of Poseidon's trident has nothing to do with three-pronged fork used for spearing fish; rather it has a form of a trilobate flower bud, the middle petal being repeatedly, if not typically, somewhat longer than those on both sides which are invariably of equal length (Walters 1892–1893, 16 ff.). Poseidon's trident appears several times in Homer, but in no case is it used to spear either fish or foe (Blinkenberg 1911, 52). Poseidon invariably holds the trident with both hands and he uses it to scatter the foundations of the Achaean wall (*Il.* 12. 27), to smite the rock of Gyrae (*Od.* 4. 506) and to stir up the sea (*Od.* 5. 291). The trident is such a powerful tool in the hands of Poseidon not because it had a correspondingly efficient prototype in human life, but because it is a special object in the possession of a powerful god. It was repeatedly proposed that Poseidon's trident was originally a thunder weapon (Usener 1905, 23; Blinkenberg 1911, 54 ff.; cf. Cook 1925, 786–798). The trident may indeed refer to a thunder weapon – most clearly in Syrian (Bunnens 2004) and Indian contexts (Blinkenberg 1911), and the Romans were well aware of the thunder weapon that had a shape of a trident (Usener 1903, 189). Moreover, Poseidon is the father of Pegasus, who carries thunder and lightning for Zeus (Hes. *Theog.* 286 et al.), and who is associated with Mount Helikon as strongly as Poseidon.⁷ But again, an early way of representing the trident as a sceptre

⁷ It can be shown that Pegasus striking with his hoof the top of Mount Helikon is functioning as the producer of lightning, that by bringing down from lofty Helikon the waters of Hippokrene he releases the pent up celestial waters, thus putting an end to the drought, and that this celestial horse was originally the personification of lightning. This true nature of Pegasus makes one realize why Poseidon, who brought Pegasus to life, ap-

crowned with a kind of flower bud instead of an iron or bronze fork seems to indicate that the trident originally was neither weapon nor tool, but a symbol.⁸ Since it was a symbol of a mighty (perhaps, the mightiest) celestial deity, it could have sometimes been taken to signify the thunder weapon.⁹

After all, there could be a rather simple reason for the emergence of the very idea of a sacred trinity and of the trident as its symbol. There are a number of representations of a three-fingered deity found in various places (Fig. 1–4). Perhaps, the earliest come from Neolithic site of Samarra, north of Baghdad (Herzfeld 1941, 21 Fig. 19; 26 Fig. 28; 30 Fig. 36; cf. 31 Fig. 38 from Harappa and Fig. 40 from *Musiān).

They reappear and are abundant on rock carvings of the Late Bronze Age Scandinavia (Fig. 2 – 3; cf. Fig. 4), by a few centuries earlier than Homer and Hesiod. The so-called Nordic Culture covered not only Scandinavian countries, but also some areas along the shores of the North and Baltic Seas and its contacts with the Aegean were repeatedly argued in the present author's recent publications (Panchenko 2010/2011, 39–43; Panchenko 2012; Panchenko 2016a, 217–233). The meaning of the symbolism behind the representations of a three-fingered deity seems easy to discern. Having three toes in front is a characteristic feature of many birds, and the birds are, in a sense, heavenly beings – just like gods.¹⁰ I propose that *Poseidon's trident is the symbol that indicates his celestial nature and that this symbol developed from a previous one – a raised hand with three fingers.*

pears so frequently and importantly as Poseidon Hippios ('of a horse'). His daughter Athena Hippiā identified by Pausanias (8. 47. 1) with Athena Alea, that is, 'hot, burning' seems just another personification of lightning. (I hope to present a detailed discussion of this issue in near future.)

⁸ Blinckenberg 1911, 53 does not see that what he calls weapon cannot be such ("The weapon of Poseidon is sometimes crowned with a trilobate lotus flower"). The representation he reproduces (Fig. 25) makes it clear (interestingly, Poseidon is shown there holding the trident with both hands – as in Homer).

⁹ The idea of treating Poseidon's trident as a symbol was influential in antiquity. Plutarch cites the view according to which it is "a symbol of the third region of the world, which the sea possesses, situated below that of the heaven and air; for which reason they also gave their names to Amphitrite and the Tritons" (*De Is.* 581 F); cf. *Serv. Aen.* 1. 133.

¹⁰ A similar interpretation was suggested by Golan 1993, 155. If there are some representations with four and not three toes, this only confirms the proposed association with birds since birds typically have three toes in front and one in back (as already Golan notes). Kristiansen 2018 also addresses the symbolism related to the birds and their feet, but his train of thought is different.

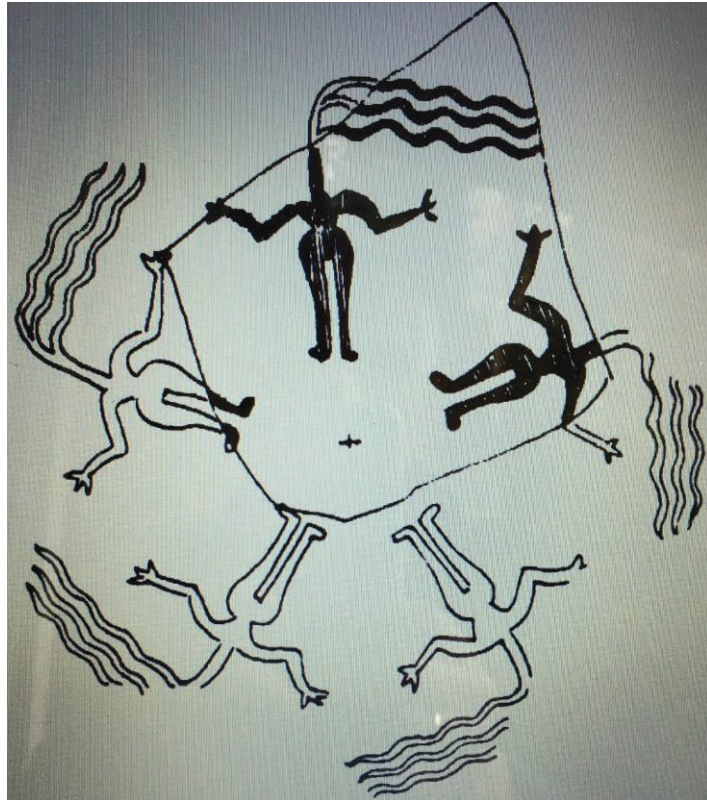


Fig. 1. Painted pottery from Samarra, Iraq (after Herzfeld 1941, 30 Fig. 36)



Fig. 2. Carving from Skjeberg, Norway (after Gelling, Davidson 1969, 54, Fig. 23)



Fig. 3. A carving from Bohuslän, Sweden (after Bradley 2006, 383, Fig. 8)

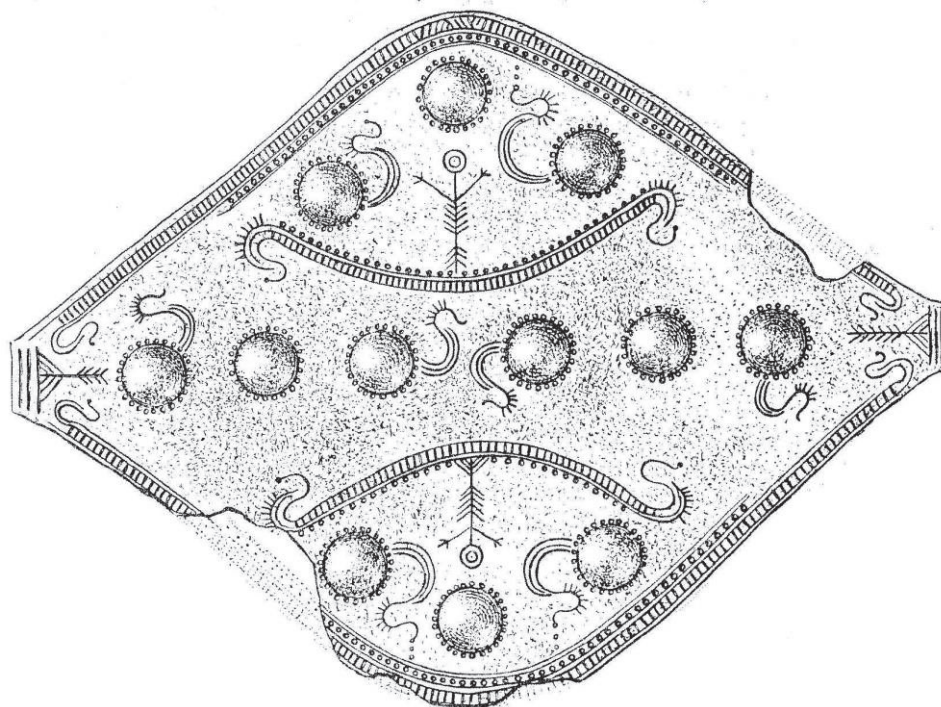


Fig. 4. Bronze buckle from Radolinek, Poland (after Sprokhoff 1955, 73, Abb. 35:5)

Some readers may be surprised that the Greeks did not really know what the attribute of Poseidon meant and that I am bringing evidence from the distant regions to recover its original meaning. However, one has to take into account what happened during the Dark Age of Greece. It was not only a period of social and cultural decline that followed the destruction and abandonment of many sites, which was enough to cause the rupture of many links with the past. It was also a period of a lasting movement of population. All (or nearly all) areas of what eventually emerged as the Greek world around the Aegean Sea received new settlers. The Dorians invaded the Peloponnese, the Ionians came to Attica, the Aeolian inhabitants of Boeotia descended from Thessaly, the eastern shores of the Aegean and the islands like Rhodes and Crete became Greek through colonization. Along with several other scholars, I believe that many of the newcomers were not originally the Greeks, that they became such only in the Aegean, through adopting the Greek language. Yet it is not necessary to share this view in order to imagine how much fusion and confusion in the realm of traditions and religious notions could have taken place during the Dark Age. For it has been established beyond any reasonable doubt that in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age the Aegean shared in the so-called metallurgical koine, in the wide spread of a new burial practice and the use of certain graphic symbols, all common to many parts of Europe (Bouzek 1985; Bouzek 1997; Uckelmann 2005). Here is an illustration pertain-

ing directly to a trinity motif, though not necessarily precisely the trinity under discussion. Pelasgus, the first man (Paus. 8. 1. 4), born before the moon (Paus. 2. 4. 4), is said to have been a son of Triopas (Paus. 2. 22. 1), that is, of the Three-Eyed One.¹¹ Both the origin of the Pelasgians and their language (whether Indo-European or not) are a matter of unending debate which we need not address here. Again, Herodotus' claim that the Ionians and Aeolians were originally the Pelasgians rather than the Greeks (1. 56; 7. 94–95) may display his Dorian bias, but there must have been something to make such a claim publishable.

To conclude, the interpretation of the name Τριτογένεια remains admittedly uncertain, though its likely connection with τρίτος is now supported. All our considerations point to the vertex of the sky rather than to a local stream in Boeotia or elsewhere.¹² Poseidon's trident is a symbol fit for a god who like a bird feels at home in the sky – and especially fit for the Most High god who is associated with the vertex of the sky that appears at night as the celestial pole. This offers an insight into the origin of the sacred trinity. In his influential (and most valuable) study, Hermann Usener explains the significance of the number three in terms of difficulties of counting so that the number three became the expression of plurality for primitive people; he explicitly denies the possibility of the symbolism behind the phenomenon (Usener 1903, 347 ff.; cf. Lease 1919). The universality of such an account is, however, problematic: “Indo-Europeans are predisposed to triads, whereas many North American Indian societies tend to organize reality in terms of the number four, and several favor the number five” (Hansen 2004, 307). More importantly, Usener's approach neither offers nor implies any explanation of the *sacred trinity*. I suggest that *the number three became sacred because it pointed to the dwellers of the sky*. To be sure, there remains much to explore.¹³

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¹¹ See Dynda 2014 for related topics.

¹² Even if the names Tritogeneia, Triton and Amphitrite derive from τρίτω = ῥεῦμα, this ῥεῦμα, this stream is likely to be that imaginary one which moves the celestial bodies.

¹³ I am grateful to Richard Martin for improving my English.

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