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## A Leap from the White Rock as *Remedium Amoris*

**Abstract:** A leap from the White Rock as *remedium amoris* presents a legend about the jump into the sea from the Leucadian Rock being supposed to heal anybody tormented by love. There was also Sappho who, driven by love for a certain Phaon, leapt off the White Rock of Leucas. It became the theme of a few literary works, including the lost comedy of Menander. The most familiar story about the poet's desperate step is transmitted by Ovid.

**Key words:** White Rock, Leucas, Sappho's leap

Unhappy, unrequired love has always troubled people. They made different attempts to overcome their misfortune. According to the legend, there was a way for the lover to forget and soothe the pain and move the suffering on the loved one. It was a border between consciousness and unconsciousness — the trance, fuddle and dream — and even between life and death. The jump from the Leucadian Rock possessed all of those properties. It was a “white rock”<sup>1</sup>, for white is the symbol of oblivion, which is united with absolute, beginning and end.<sup>2</sup>

Already in antiquity there was a problem with identifying λευκάς πέτρη, for there were more “white rocks” around the Greek shores. Where did the ones “sick of love” look for them, then? It seems no one can properly specify the location of this “magical” rock. Strabo in *Geography*, narrating of Acarnania, writes about Leucas: πέτρα γὰρ ἐστὶ λευκὴ τὴν χροῖαν, προκειμένη τῆς Λευκάδος εἰς

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<sup>1</sup> Λευκάς πέτρη, att. λευκάς πέτρα.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kopaliński: *Słownik symboli*. Warszawa 1990, s.v.

τὸ πέλαγος καὶ τὴν Κεφαλληνίαν, ὡς ἐντεῦθεν τοῦνομα λαβεῖν<sup>3</sup> suggesting that a white rock sticks out from Leucas island towards the sea and Cephallenia, and hence its name. Deucalion's story implies that the "white rock" is placed on Lesbos. He threw himself down the rock, emerged from the water safe and sound and won Pyrrha's heart.<sup>4</sup> His name Deucalion is a derivative of Leucalion, and his lover's name — Pyrrha derives from the name of the city placed on the western coast of Lesbos.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Charon of Lampsacos claims that Phobos, the founder of Lampsacos, threw himself down the White Rock located on the Smyrnaean Gulf's northern coast, near Phocaea.<sup>6</sup> There is also one more place where one could jump down the rock, namely, the white rock in Magnesia by the Lethaios River. The Lethaios River is a northern tributary of Meander, in south-eastern Lydia, where Artemis-Leukofryene temple was located. According to Zielinski<sup>7</sup> it was that rock Anacreon thought about while writing the poem:

ἀρθεις δηῦτ' ἀπὸ Λευκάδος  
πέτρης ἐς πολὺν κύμα κολυμβῶ μεθύων ἔρωτι.<sup>8</sup>

Also Homer mentions the White Rock in the last book of the *Odyssey*, describing Hermes' flight with souls:

ἦρχε δ' ἄρα σφιν  
Ἑρμείας ἀκάκητα κατ' εὐρώεντα κέλευθα.  
παρ δ' ἴσαν' Ωκεανοῦ τε ῥοὰς καὶ Λευκάδα πέτρην,  
ἥδ' ἐπαρ' ἡελίοιο πύλας καὶ δῆμον ὀνείρων  
ἦισαν.<sup>9</sup>

Maybe he led them that way so that they would have forgotten about their previous lives. If so, the Leucadian Rock would have had the same function as one of Hades' rivers — Lethe.<sup>10</sup> Whoever drank the river's water, lost all the memory of everything they saw and experienced on earth. The White Rock is a kind of land's end for the sailors and the first step of the journey from the known into the

<sup>3</sup> Strabo: *Geographica*. Vol. 2. Ed. G. Kramer. Berolini 1847, X 694.

<sup>4</sup> Ovidius: *Epistulae*. In: Idem: *Amores. Epistulae. De medic. fac. Ars amat. Remedia amoris*. Ed. R. Merkel. Lipsiae 1873, XV 167—170.

<sup>5</sup> T. Zieliński: *Szkice antyczne*. Kraków 1971, p. 523.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarchus: *Moralia*. Eds. W. Nachstädt, W. Sieveking, J.B. Titchener. Leipzig 1971, 255 A—E.

<sup>7</sup> T. Zieliński: *Szkice antyczne*. Kraków 1971, p. 522.

<sup>8</sup> Anacreon: fr. 376 *PMG*. Ed. D.L. Page. Oxford 1962.

<sup>9</sup> Homerus: *Odyssea*. Ed. G. Dindorf. Lipsiae 1910, XXIV, 9—13.

<sup>10</sup> J. Parandowski: *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian*. Londyn 1992, p. 147.

unknown world.<sup>11</sup> Surely there were rocks in Hades, however (according to the tradition) they were not white but red or black.<sup>12</sup> Morgan claims<sup>13</sup> that identifying λευκάς πέτρη with the dark rock in Hades is an erroneous assumption, for even ancient Greeks questioned its existence.

Bold but controversial hypothesis was formulated by a German archeologist Wilhelm Dörpfeld. He implies that Leucas and its white rocks is nothing more but Homer's Ithaka. It became an island after 7th-century BC Corinthians colonization, when a channel was dug between Leucas and the land.<sup>14</sup>

Summarizing Ptolemy Hephaestion's *New Story*, Photius<sup>15</sup> suggests that the rock was called after Ulysses' friend's name — Leukos, who came from Zakynthos. It is said that he was the one to build the Apollo's temple on Leucas. There was an annual festival of Leucadian Apollo taking place, during which criminals sentenced to death were thrown down the rock or other white rocks so as the waves of oblivion purified their sins. Claudius Elian writes about a high rock, Apollo's temple (Apollo was also called Aktion) on Leucas island, and jumping down the rock in the honour of god: Ἐν δὲ τῇ Λευκάδι ἄκρα μὲν ἐστὶν ὑψηλή, νεῶς δὲ Ἀπόλλωνι ἱδρύται, καὶ Ἀκτιόν γε αὐτὸν οἱ τιμῶντες ὀνομάζουσιν. Οὐκοῦν τῆς πανηγύρεως ἐπιδημεῖν μελλούσης, καθ' ἣν καὶ τὸ πῆδημα πηδῶσι τῷ θεῷ [...].<sup>16</sup> Also Photius<sup>17</sup> claims that Apollo in his temple in Argos, after Adonis' death, suggested Aphrodite (after she had told him about her love) to throw herself down the Leucadian Rock. It is said that Zeus himself used to sit on that rock whenever he wanted to be free from Hera's love. Aphrodite fulfilled the order and was set free from her love. It is not known who was the first one to put this "remedy" into use but some claim it was just Aphrodite. Many a man tried to do this after her. *The Library* mentions, among others, Artemisia, the daughter of Lygdamis, who fell in love with Dardanus (and he rejected her). She, after the oracle's advice, threw herself down the rock, died and was buried. Also Hipomedon of Epidamnos threw himself down the Leucadian Rock because of his one-sided love for a young boy. Rejected by the boy, Hipomedon killed him, after which he committed suicide. To the same bad end came Nicostratus (in love with Tetigeia), old Bulagoras (in love with Diodorus) and, last but not least, iambograph Charinus (in love with Eros, the eunuch). Before throwing himself down the rock, the poet had written such a iamb: "Drat! Seductive and unfortunate Leucadian Rock! Charine! Woe! A iambic muse you burnt by your futile words of hope! May Eupator fell in love with Eros like

<sup>11</sup> D. Wender: *The Last Scenes of the Odyssey*. Leiden 1978, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Aristophanes: *Ranae*. In: Idem: *Comoediae*. Vol. 2. Eds. F.W. Hall, W.M. Geldart. Oxford 1906, 470—471.

<sup>13</sup> J.D. Morgan: Λευκάς πέτρη. *The Classical Quarterly* 1985, Vol. 35, pp. 229—232.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Piszczek: *Mała Encyklopedia Kultury Antycznej*. Warszawa 1990, s.v.

<sup>15</sup> Photius: *Bibliothèque*. Vol. 3. Ed. R. Henry. Paris 1962, cod. 190.

<sup>16</sup> C. Aelianus: *De natura animalium libri 17*. Ed. R. Hercher. Lipsiae 1864, 11, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Photius: *Bibliothèque*..., cod. 190.

that!” His jump ended up with his death, not because of waves but pain, for he had broken his leg before. Also Rhodope from Amizena, in love with two young men (Antiphon and Cyrus, the twins, king Anotiochus’ guards), threw herself down the White Rock. Furthermore, Photius mentions Makaes from Butrothion, who threw himself down the rock four times before he succeeded in his effort (hence his nickname, “the White Rock”). Also Nireus from Catania is mentioned by the writer. Nireus, in love with Attic Athena, threw himself down the rock and landed in the fishing net where he found a chest filled with gold. He wanted to sue for the treasure but Apollo dissuaded him from doing so.<sup>18</sup>

Women trying to heal themselves in this way usually died due to the force of their collapse. Men, due to stronger body, managed to survive more often. Sometimes feathers or even birds were bound to their bodies, in order to make the fall into the water finer and slower. The ones who survived were caught out of water by a fishing boat crew that used to wait nearby.<sup>19</sup>

According to the legend, also Sappho made use of the “love remedy.” Strabo (after Menander’s *Leucadia*) writes that it was Sappho who first jumped down the rock:

Οὐ δὴ λέγεται πρώτη Σαπφώ,  
(ὥς φησιν ὁ Μένανδρος)  
τὸν ὑπέρκομπον θηρώσα Φάων,  
οἰστρῶντι πόθῳ ῥῖψαι πέτρας  
ἀπὸ τελεφανοῦς· ἀλλὰ κατ’ εὐχὴν  
σὴν, δέσποτ’ ἄναξ —<sup>20</sup>

Sappho and the legend about her cast into the sea was described not only in New Comedy (the representative of which was Menander), but also in Middle and Old Comedies.<sup>21</sup> The reason of Sappho’s deed was Phaon, about whom nothing certain can be said. His name means “bright” and “shiny.” Probably it was a fictional character. According to many legends, he was either a fisherman, poor shepherd, a sailor or a carrier. Because he did not take any money from Aphrodite (turned into an old woman) for the carriage, she gave him youth and a special mixture luring women to him.<sup>22</sup> Servius writes that Aphrodite presented Phaon with an

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> E. Dodwell: *A Classical and Topographical Tour Through Greece*. Vol. 1. London 1819, pp. 52—53.

<sup>20</sup> Strabo: *Geographica*. Vol. 2. Ed. G. Kramer. Berolini 1847, X 694.

<sup>21</sup> “So little is known about the content of the lost comedies, that only from their titles one may assume that Sappho was a subject of great interest among comedy writers [...] Six titles *Sappho* (by Ameipsias, Antiphanes, Euhippos, Timocles, Amphis and Diphilos), two titles *Leucadia* by Menander and Amphis and two titles *Phaon* by Plato the comedian and Antyphanes prove that interest.” (A. Szastyńska-Siemion: *Muza z Mityleny: Saffona*. Wrocław 1993, p. 114). Trans. mine.

<sup>22</sup> S. Stabryła: *Śpiewaj mi muzo. Cztery opowieści o poetach greckich*. Katowice 1986, p. 86.

alabaster box with a cream inside, which made all women fell in love with him. One of the women, whose name is not mentioned, threw herself down the Leucadian cliff: *feminas in sui amorem trahebat, in quis fuit una, quae de monte Leucate cum potiri eius nequiret abiecisse se dicitur*.<sup>23</sup> Young was Phaon and elder was Sappho, so he betrayed her and abandoned her. So Sappho, for the dream about love and youth was over, drowned herself during her way to Sicily, following the path of her lover.

Neopythagoreans also contributed to the legend of Sappho's death, whose interpretation of the myth was purely symbolic. They portrayed a woman falling down the Leucadian Rock directly into Apollo's arms, which was meant to be a symbol of releasing human soul from the body, longing for eternal life and elation of the music of spheres.<sup>24</sup> In April 1917 one of the most important archeological discoveries in recent years was made. It was a huge hall with passagess, fifty feet underground, near Porta Maggiore in Rome, called "an underground basilica." Mysterious passage, mystic character of the decorations, symbols and eschatological objects lead to a conclusion that it was a place of meetings and worship for pagans. It is possible, that one of the hall's reliefs had a special meaning of cult for worshippers visiting this place. However, it seems that the artist's intention was to portray Sappho's jump, by which she set herself free from unrequited love. On the right side there is a rocky cliff, from which a woman in clothes fitting close to the body comes forth. She is raising her right hand, holding a hem of cloth covering her head and waving in the wind. In her left hand there is a lyre. There is also an Eros standing behind her, who seems to be gently helping her by her jump. And there is sea beneath, realistically painted, as if the waves were moving. And finally, there is Triton partly emerging from the water. The woman jumps towards Apollo — the god of sun, which is interpreted as the soul's journey to a better life.<sup>25</sup>

In Ovid's *Sapphos Letter to Phaon* the poet complains about Phaon's absence, nothing is enjoyable for her anymore. She reproaches her lover, grieves for her beauty and age and accuses the nature of being cruel. It was the nature which took away her father, exposed her brother to loss of property and shame, then gave her a burdensome daughter and finally an unworthy lover. She cannot forgive Phaon his sudden leaving. She describes what she felt when she learnt that her lover had abandoned her. Then she mentions her dreams about Phaon and places they used to visit together. In one of her dreams, a Naiad appears by the spring giving her an advice:

*'quoniam non ignibus aequis  
ureris, Ambracia est terra petenda tibi.  
Phoebus ab excelso, quantum patet, adspicit aequor —*

<sup>23</sup> Servius: *In Vergilium Commentarius*. Ed. G. Thilo. Lipsiae 1878, 3, 279.

<sup>24</sup> J. Mosdorf: "Z legend o Safonie." *Meander* 1975, Vol. 5—6, pp. 213—214.

<sup>25</sup> C. Densmore Curtis: "Sappho and the Leucadian Leap." *American Journal of Archaeology* 1920, Vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 146—150.

*Actiacum populi Leucadiumque vocant.  
hinc se Deucalion Pyrrhae succensus amore  
misit, et inlaeso corpore pressit aquas.  
nec mora, versus amor fugit lentissima mersi  
pectora, Deucalion igne levatus erat.  
hanc legem locus ille tenet. pete protinus altam  
Leucada nec saxo desiluisse time!*<sup>26</sup>

Crying and scared Sappho promises to fulfill nymph's orders and offers her lyre and two songs to Phobos. She asks Cupid for protection and dreams about Phaon's homecoming. In case he does not want to come back, her letter will tell him that jumping into the Leucadian water was her remedy. It is not sure, however, if she dies in the water. From the nymph's advice it can be assumed that she, like Deucalion, will end up unharmed and uninjured, and her goal — to lose her passion — will be achieved. Although the letter does not explain Phaon's reasons for escaping Lesbos, it does provide the most important information about Sappho's jump, her late love for Phaon, charges against her and various versions of the legend developing through the ages.

The subject of rock, jumping and sea is visible in many more pieces of art and literature. Like any other remedy, jumping down the rock was helpful for some people but not for others. Sometimes it resulted in death, another time it soothed a broken heart. Maybe the effectiveness of the "remedy" depended on how much faith was put in it or how deeply in love one was. Maybe the stories of people who died in waves of oblivion were meant to vary their lives and make their death memorable and spectacular. Maybe the stories were created by future generations to fill gaps in incomplete biographies or to extol the rocky seashores and attract people to them. The legend which has lasted for so many centuries should have some grain of truth, or maybe people just wanted to believe that there was still something that could do away with unwanted feelings. The rock, the sea and the jump might have been helpful, for coasts, rocky cliffs, mountainsides and water have always been indelible symbols of Greek landscape. So it was easier for the Greeks to believe that things which had always been present in their lives will soothe their pain.

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<sup>26</sup> Ovidius: *Epistulae*. In: Idem: *Amores. Epistulae. De medic. fac. Ars amat. Remedia amoris*. Ed. R. Merkel. Lipsiae 1873, XV 163—172.