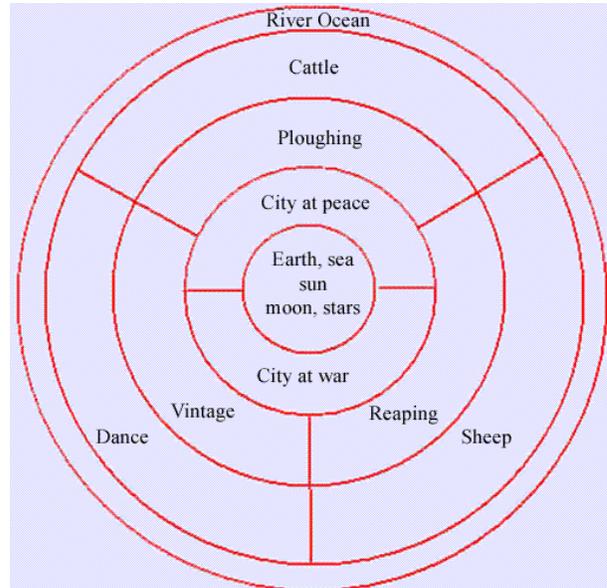


Excerpt from *Sleep Under Stone*

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Artist's rendering and diagram of images from the Shield of Achilles

The following excerpt is from *Sleep under Stones*, a narrative re-invention of the story of the fall of Troy. In Homer's *Iliad*, the myths of creation are told as living images on the magical shield of Achilles. In this version, Aclypsia, Troy's oracle priestess, blind with age and crippled from birth, tells an even older story of creation to her student, the young Laocoon, to teach him how to recognize the deep, invisible powers that link the human, spiritual, and natural worlds. In Homer's story, the human sphere is represented by two cities: The City of War, pictured in the ritual of animal sacrifice; and the City of Peace, pictured dancing. It is an ancient dance Homer describes, one practiced in Delos, Crete, and Anatolia – the Old Europe before the Bronze Age Hellenic world emerged. Aclypsia's images, scratched in dirt, hearken back that lost City of Peace and their sacred dance of life.



Aclypsia grasped her willow stick in her right hand, her signal to Laocoon that she was ready to be escorted. By now Laocoon was used to the temple custom of not touching. He was already two years into his training. At first it had been frustrating and pointless. How could he be expected to guide the old woman if he was forbidden to touch her? He forgot many times. But when he did, he found he wasn't punished or scolded, only gently reminded, as if he'd committed not a violation, but a small breach of courtesy. It was easier, he

discovered, to exert himself in the cause of courtesy than in blind observance of a temple rule.

As soon as the priestess was standing, the boy positioned his hand on the staff just below hers. Then, timing his movements to match hers, he guided her without actually leading her down the steps and along the short path to the temple house and its walled garden on the terrace below. The priests and priestesses of all six temples shared the garden, but here Aclypsia and her acolytes grew and tended the herbs and roots they needed for healing and for the monthly oracle ritual. In the afternoon sun, the air was fragrant with sage, thyme, henbane, rosemary. Red flowers of oleander and the even brighter scarlet of poppies stood out against the whitewashed wall of the garden.

Under the shade of an old fig tree in one corner of the yard Aclypsia stopped. Laocoon let go of the willow stick and unfolded the ox-hide stool he had been carrying in his right hand. Then he gently took hold of the stick again to help the old priestess to her place. His own was on the ground at her feet, his knees gathered in his arms and tucked up under his chin.

A breeze stirred the air, lifting and tossing the broad, three-fingered leaves of the fig. Laocoon watched the shadow patterns as they played. Sun and shadow flickered on the wall beside him and on the ground around his feet. Aclypsia took a deep breath which made Laocoon look at her, the announcement of the story she had promised.

But she did not speak. She only breathed, inhaling and exhaling deeply and slowly. Laocoon followed the play of light and shadow on her gown, on the brown, papery skin of her arms and hands she rested on her knees. The patterns flickered across her face.

Then he saw something he had not seen before. Or he thought he saw it. The light moved by itself, independent of the breeze, a shimmering vapor around Aclypsia's body. It was there and not there, outlining her form. Impulsively he reached toward her knee, touching the outer edge of that strange light.

"Tell me what you are seeing," he heard Aclypsia say, and he snatched his hand back to his side.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Only the light on your gown. I wasn't going to touch you."

"I know, boy. You have done nothing wrong. Tell me about this light you can see."

Laocoon hardly knew what to say. How could there be words for this? He couldn't even be sure of what he had seen. "There is a light around you. Shadows and light and wind in the leaves. That's all."

"Look at me," she said softly, though how she could tell he wasn't looking at her, he didn't know. He did as she instructed, shifting his position beside her slightly so that he could see her entire form without turning his head. She was

sitting very still, hands on her knees, back straight. Her head was tilted slightly upwards, and her eyes were closed. There was nothing there, and he was about to say that when he glimpsed it again – a current in the air that encircled the old priestess, first around her head and shoulders, then her hips and thighs, finally closing itself around her feet in one fluid, lambent stream of light, moving and not moving.

It made him think of Oceanos, the serpent river at the edge of the earth whose carved image he had just been studying on the front of the altar in the temple. Oceanos, Python, Ouroboros, Ophion. Aclypsia had smiled when he had spoken the names of the sea. *What is the symbol of earth and sea?* "A circle," he had answered.

Now here was something marvelous and new before him – a circle of light that came, it seemed from the sun – no, it came from the wind that moved the light, or did it come from her? From her breath? Light that moved and did not move like a river's current. *Why is the altar of the sea in the temple of the sun?* she had asked him. Was this what Oceanos was? A river of light, coiling and encircling the earth, set in motion, as this light was, by wind? breath? pneuma?

There was something here he almost understood, like a dream forgotten upon waking. And so, as he had been trained to do with such dreams, he kept silent and still. Perhaps the answer would come to the surface, would reveal

itself on its own, as long as he could resist probing it too much with his impatient thoughts.

Helios, he wanted to call it, for the sun. And then *Oceanos*, for the sea. But when he was finally able to speak, he felt unable to give it any name. Instead he heard himself saying vaguely: "A thing which has no beginning and no end."

"Yes," Aclypsia answered, exhaling as she spoke so that the sound of her affirmation lingered on her breath. She opened her blind eyes and smiled at the boy. "Good." And then the spell was broken. The mysterious light was gone, though the sun and shadows still played in the air around and between them, on the ground and on the wall of the garden.

"Laocoon, you are a true child of the sea," she pronounced. "I was right to chose you."

The boy dropped his head against his knees and clasped his arms tighter, hugging himself. As much as he longed for it, her praise embarrassed him, especially because this time it felt unearned. He had seen something, yes. But he didn't know what it meant. He felt even now the intimacy and the importance of this vision Aclypsia had shown him, but he did not understand it, nor did he know why his vague answer had met with her immediate approval. They sat together now without speaking while they listened to the wind in the leaves and the bustle of the citadel beyond the walls of the garden.

“How many names for silence do you know, my boy?” Aclypsia asked, breaking the comfortable quiet between them sooner than he wanted.

“A ‘full-of-questions’ silence, for one,” he said, aware that his answer sounded a little cranky. He had thought the riddles were for the temple; the garden was for stories.

“Yes, that’s a noisy one, but it is good. What else?”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “There is the silence of the grotto under the Eastern Tower.”

“Hollow and holy. Yes, I know that silence, too. Any other?”

Laocoon could think of ways that silence felt, but it was hard to think of names for these feelings, and besides, he didn’t really want to have to think about where these questions were leading. Instead of answering, he put his head down on his knees.

“My teacher, old Eurystheos, was a great priest and wise, but like you, careful of words.” Aclypsia said, after a long time. “My eyes tell me almost nothing about the world now, but my ears have taught me much about silence. Some silences are soothing like a white sand harbor where the grains are clear as light in your hand. Some silences are tense, angry like the air before a storm, or especially in the hours before the earth shakes. Some silences are fumbling and awkward, and some are full of humming and breathing and shuffling like a hushed crowd in the king’s megaron.”

"The way the temple sounds just before one of your pronouncements."

"If I'm lucky," she smiled.

"Priestess," he asked cautiously.

Yes, boy?"

"You asked me a riddle in the temple I couldn't answer. I know what you showed me just now, the light I couldn't name, I know that must be the answer, but I don't understand. I want to ask you, but I don't know the right words for asking."

"You and I don't need words for this. And only a teacher needs to know the right questions."

Her response was meant to encourage him, and it did, but it was also a reminder that this time in the garden was still part of his training. Laocoon must wait for her lead. As his guide in the mysteries of Apollo's temple, Aclypsia had the right to engage her pupil in question, but as listener-in-training, he was not allowed this privilege. He could answer, but he could not ask.

Then he remembered: "You said you would tell me a story."

"And so I will, now that you are ready." Aclypsia lifted her hands from her knees, moved her willow stick to her left hand and, leaning forward, swept a smooth space in the dirt before her feet.

Laocoon rose to his knees to see more clearly the designs she would use to illustrate her tale. This was to be a sacred story, and his listening required that he attend to each word, for even the smallest detail was important.

"In the beginning all was darkness," the old priestess began, and as she spoke, she scratched in the dirt a circle, symbol of earth. "Eurynome, first mother of creation whom we call Ge, lay beneath the vast, primal water and nothing moved.

"Nothing, that is, except the eternal waters of the underworld which course through the coils of the great sleeping serpent, Ophion, Time-Without-Age." Now she added to the circle a dot in the center, which Laocoon took to be the coiled serpent in the belly of the earth, but which he also recognized as the symbol of Helios, Apollo, Sun.

"Deep inside the earth, the serpent shifted, and with that small movement, the first land parted the primal water's dark surface, heaving up like the back of a bull." Aclypsia lifted her stick from the ground and waved it in the air above them, tracing the two-humped outline of a bull's head and back. And as she did, Laocoon could see the air between them buckle and swell like the powerful surf off Cape Sigeum he had imagined as he had struggled with her riddle in the temple, and for the first time he understood why the Lord of the Ocean was sometimes pictured as a bull.

"This land that arose from Ophion's undulations, dividing the sea from the sky, was little more than a hump of rock," she continued. "But on that rock there grew a tree, and the roots of that tree reached down through the fathomless water and attached the rock to its mother, Eurynome, below. Then as the great serpent awoke from its sleep and began to uncoil itself in the bowels of the earth, the rock-island swayed on its long stalk above the water, dancing with Ophion's movement like a flower in the winds.

"The name of this drifting island was Delos, and here it was that the world began. Again and again the serpent turned and twisted," and now she traced another line, which began just inside the original circle and spiraled slowly inward in concentric rings, till the tip of her willow stick touched the dot in the center. She paused, clearing her throat in mock solemnity. Laocoon immediately heard the shift in her tone and looked up.

"Of course, some say the island was Kriti, some Kypros, but I have always been partial to Delos. What do you say?" she asked, and her serious face broke into a crinkly smile.

Laocoon realized he had been holding his breath tensely. He relaxed his shoulders, breathing easily again. "I say we stick with Delos," he agreed, smiling back. The boy also guessed that Aclypsia's pause was meant as a cue. They had reached the mystery at the center of her tale, and what was to come next was perhaps the most important lesson she had ever trusted him to learn.

"Now, boy, tell me the question you could not answer this morning."

"How is the sea the husband of the earth?"

"And the serpent's names you know already by heart?"

"Oceanos, Python, Ouroboros, Ophion."

"Ophion, Yes, good."

Laocoon forced himself to concentrate even harder on the drawing at his feet, the spiral within the circle, and the dot her willow stick pointed to in the center. The answer to the riddle must lie there. There, and in the part of the story Aclypsia would now reveal. He waited for her voice to take him back to the heart of it, where earth was a living thing, roused by the coursing waters of river and ocean to the first act of creation.

"Now Ophion rose up inside Eurynome who arched and shuddered," Aclypsia said, sitting up straighter on her stool. "Earth sat up and braced her knees. From the knot of their interwoven bodies, the vaporous Ether, Chaos, and Night were born." Aclypsia lifted her stick, tapping the air above Laocoon's head as she named each of Earth's first children, and Laocoon followed with his eyes.

"Great Ophion, Time-Without-Age, wrapped itself seven times around this gloomy fog, until it hardened into a single luminous shell," and the tip of the willow stick made seven loops in the air, coming to rest in the direction of the sun which had just dropped between the leaves of the fig and the garden wall.

Had Aclypsia been able to see, the rays would have been shining directly in her eyes.

"Finally the shape split open. Out poured Helios, radiant light, and all the visible world of appearance."

Aclypsia returned her stick to the dirt, wiggling a wavy line out from the middle of the circle, through the concentric spirals, till it pierced the outer perimeter. Now she scratched another circle around the earth on which she drew a head of a serpent, holding its tail in its mouth.

"You know, boy, the women of Delos tell this story by dancing." Aclypsia was speaking in her own voice now, not her formal story voice. She took up her willow stick, planting it straight on the ground between her feet, and rested both hands casually on the handle. Both boy and teacher relaxed.

"We call it Geranos, The Crane Dance, after the great crane that flies through the star-path in spring and summer – Cygnus, you call her, I think? – and for the flocks of white cranes the goddess rides when she returns to our island, marking the winter's end.

"Each woman takes hold of a red ribbon, and then they dance the crane's courtship, twisting to the left, then to the right, now toward, now away from the center. We say the dance honors Aphrodite of the white sea-foam, because the Geranos calls up the fertile powers of that goddess in the spring. But when we dance it, we are also telling the story of creation. The red ribbon that connects the

women forms the path of the great serpent Ophion, twisting and turning in the womb of Eurynome.

"They say the women of Troy once knew the steps to this dance, that they marked the path when first the walls were raised. And they say its magic keeps our enemies away. The women of Kriti dance the story, too. The Bee Dance in the spring, and I have heard some dance it with living serpents in their hands, though I have never seen this. I did once see the men and women of the Bull Court at Phaistos not long before I came here to Troy. They dance the story at dawn at midsummer. They leap over the horns of the bull as they dance, and when they are done, they decorate the bull's horns with flowers."

Aclypsia seemed lost in her own memories, but Laocoon enjoyed moments like this with his teacher. He had not traveled, except once to the island of Tenedos around the cape. Her stories of the island people enchanted him, bringing to life scenes he sometimes glimpsed on the coins and painted urns petitioners brought their offerings in, glimpses of the wider world beyond the Troad, just as her sacred stories brought to life the unseen world he must learn to recognize all around him.

"Now, it came to be," the priestess said, returning to her formal story-voice, "that Time-Without-Age, who set the whole creation in motion, became not one, but many serpents, its energy pulsing and animating the waters of the sea, the winds of the air, and all the appearances that Helios' light had revealed."

Aclypsia began to draw in the space between the original circle and the outer form of the serpent, fanciful stick figures of animals, trees, birds, and humans dancing together on the rim of the earth. As she drew, she playfully hummed the Geranos music, quite off-key, which made Laocoon laugh.

"One of Ophion's visible forms is xanthina, the serpent you are learning to handle, Laocoon, and the python who sometimes sleeps in the temple or lies hidden in the cracks of rocks and backs of caves. Ophion lives in the River Scamander, in the little Simois, and in their hidden channels under the ground. Mount Ida is full of the serpents of the earth bursting out of her sides in the form of springs. It lives in the currents of the wind and sea, which you call Poseidon, and which can take a ship swiftly to far-off lands. And it lives as Oceanos in the vast waters that encircle the earth.

"It lives in each of us, too, in the rivers of our veins, in our sinews, our blood which binds us to the earth and sea and air, and in our breath. You saw it just now in the light and shadow, and in that other light which you saw, but could not name. 'A thing which has no beginning and no end,' you said. Do you remember?"

"I tried to find the name, but it couldn't fit "

"That's right. You didn't know then as you do now that Ophion is also 'Time-Without-End.' So you see, my boy, the right words come when you see without the mind's knowing.

"Now, when this current that surrounds a person is strong," Aclypsia continued, "it can protect him. It may be you have felt this when you hold the serpent in your hand?"

"Yes, that's when you say I have made the serpent welcome."

"Welcome. Yes, as men and women make it welcome. Sometimes it overflows its boundaries like a rain-swollen stream, and then we call it Eros, desire, pulling two bodies into one, remembering how from its first uncoiling, life began. But it is not always a friendly thing. When the current is disturbed or broken, we become vulnerable. We may weaken and lose our power."

"Is that why you and I may not touch each other?"

Aclypsia was pleased by her pupil's insight, despite the unorthodoxy of his interrupting question. "Yes, that courtesy you speak of is a way of acknowledging and respecting the serpent energy that empowers us. But touching isn't wrong. Only when a priest or a priestess or an acolyte is engaged in ritual is it unlucky to disturb the serpent energy around them. And when one of us is in trance, the touch can be dangerous, even lethal.

"Once when I was an acolyte, a visiting petitioner had missed the appointed day of the oracle and had been forced to wait until the next month. He had come to Delos from over the sea to the north, from a country beyond Thrace, a journey of many months, and grew impatient to hear the god's message he had traveled so far to receive. He seized the hand of the priestess when she was deep

in trance. Instantly she fell to the ground. Then she began convulsing as if the serpent were coursing through her body. When the seizure was over, her breath had stopped. After that no petitioner in Delos has ever been allowed to be in a priestess's presence. Her pronouncements are written down and delivered by priests or acolytes of the temple."

Laocoon ducked his face behind his knees till only his dark eyes peered over the edge. He hugged himself tight, pulling his legs closer to his chest. The priestess sensed his uneasiness. She had not meant to frighten him, only to clarify the unseen power of the serpent energy she had given him his first vision of today.

"It is hard to grow up without human touch, isn't it, Laocoon?"

The boy didn't answer, but pressed the side of his face against his knee, rubbing his cheekbone hard back and forth across the woolen weave of his gown, as if the little pain this act provoked might erase his fear, might make up for the human touch his fingers itched for.

"I know," the priestess answered for him. "But, as I have said, touching is not forbidden. We are human, after all. Here . . ." and with this Aclypsia reached out one hand, palm up, in the boy's direction. "Give me your hand."

Laocoon was surprised. He unclasped his own hands, wiped the sweat from his palms on his gown. Then, tentatively, just as he might approach one of the temple serpents, he leaned forward on his knees, extending his hand slowly

toward her outstretched one. As soon as his palm touched hers, she closed her fingers tight around it, pressing the boy's hand affectionately.

Tears sprang into Laocoon's eyes, making him feel very un-priestly. He blinked and shook his head to send them back, glad his teacher's blindness prevented her from seeing them. The priestess inclined her head toward his.

"Tears come to us like sacred springs, my dear boy," she whispered, as if she had read his thoughts. "And they are no less holy."