



Mythology of the Dardanelles

The name Dardanelles comes from Dardanus, mythical ancestor of nearby Troy. It was also called the Hellespont in ancient times. According to ancient writers, in mythology the name derives from Hele who fell from the back of the golden-fleeced ram while passing through the strait on the way to Colchis in the Black Sea. Despite unpredictable weather and swift surface currents, the Dardanelles has been a strategic water route and an object of conquest throughout history. Unlike the Bosphorus in Istanbul, there is no bridge today on the Dardanelles. In the 5 BC the Persian king Xerxes built a pontoon bridge which stretched from Abydos to Sestos for his war against the Greeks.

Hero and Leander – Byron’s poem

In mythology Hero and Leander were lovers. Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite, lived in Sestos, Leander lived in Abydos, on the other side of the Hellespont (Dardanelles). Every night, guided by a lamp placed by Hero, Leander swam across the strait to be with her. One night a tempest arose, the lamp was extinguished and Leander drowned; when Hero saw her dead lover she took her own life.

The story is the subject of Christopher Marrow’s unfinished poem “Hero and Leander” and Lord Byron’s “The Bride of Abydos”.

The winds are high on Helle’s wave
 As on that night of stormy weather
 When love, who sent, forgot to save
 The young the beautiful the brave
 The lonely hope of Sestos’ daughter

Actually this legend inspired Lord Byron to Swim the Hellespont in 1810. To commemorate this crossing he wrote a poem, “Written after swimming from Sestos to Abydos”

If, in the month of dark December,

Leander, who was nightly wont

(What maid will not the tale remember?)

To cross thy stream, broad Hellespont!

If, when the wintry tempest roared,
He sped to Hero, nothing loath,
And thus of old thy current poured,
Fair Venus! how I pity both!

For me, degenerate modern wretch,
Though in the genial month of May,
My dripping limbs I faintly stretch,
And think I've done a feat today.

But since he crossed the rapid tide,
According to the doubtful story,
To woo—and—Lord knows what beside,
And swam for Love, as I for Glory;

'Twere hard to say who fared the best:
Sad mortals! thus the gods still plague you!
He lost his labour, I my jest;
For he was drowned, and I've the ague.

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