

‘Theocritus and the Sea’

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Hellenistic Alexandria, as the cosmopolitan capital of the Ptolemaic empire, drew travelers from the far corners of the Mediterranean, traders, craftsmen, immigrants of all sorts, and amongst them the poets who oversaw that great symbol of Alexandria’s primacy amongst cities, the Museum. Not only had these poets themselves been drawn from diverse regions, bringing with them their dialects and local modes of song, but they were, as Nita Krevans has argued in the case of Theocritus, intensely aware of the regional origins of other poets, be they literary progenitors or contemporary rivals.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore somewhat surprising that one finds in Theocritus a deep ambivalence towards sea travel, though it is not immediately apparent.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will argue that Theocritus’ aversion to sea-faring is a product of his association of sea travel with poetic *agones*, something that his ‘low’ country poems seek to avoid. Rather, Theocritus seeks to replace the boundary between land and sea with that between city and country, where the poetic exchanges (*boukoliasmoi*) between shepherds and their pedestrian visitors can repudiate any claims to ‘high’ poetic endeavors; Yet the poetic cross-pollination of the sea can no more be avoided in the Idylls of Theocritus than his young Cyclops can avert the coming of Odysseus, and it is when the opportunity for travel offered by the sea is made evident, I argue, that the loftiest aims of Theocritean poetics can be best appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> Krevans, N. “Geography and Literary Tradition in Theocritus” *Seventh Idyll’ ClAnt* 3, 1984, 1-39.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Fantuzzi has called this ambivalence Theocritus’ ‘phobia di mare’ Fantuzzi, M. “Eutopia letteraria ed eutopia scientifica. L’habitat marino in Teocrito ed in Arato” *QS* 9, 1983, 189-208.