

H.P. Lovecraft: The Call of Cthulhu [1928]

1. Narrative Framing

Legend

fictional document

textual account (= actual text)

narrated account

Manuscript of the late Francis Wayland Thurston (found among his papers)

1926/27: *Discovery/Inheritance* of »one box which I found exceedingly puzzling, and which I felt much averse from shewing to other eyes« (37) and *investigation of its contents* (bas-relief and accompanying writings (»disjointed jottings, ramblings, and cuttings« (37)), esp. the »main document«, further newspaper cuttings) and *of its contexts*

Frame narrative (with framing reflections):
»accidental piecing together of separated things« (36)

main/principal manuscript of Prof. Angell (headed »CTHULHU CULT«, divided into two sections

other manuscript papers: »brief notes, some of them accounts of the queer dreams of different persons, some of the citations from theosophical books and magazines [...], and the rest comments on long-surviving secret societies and hidden cults« (38)

newspaper cuttings: allusions »to outré, mental illnesses and outbreaks of group folly or mania in the spring of 1925« (38), esp. night of March 22.–23.

queer clay bas-relief
figure of Cthulhu
hieroglyphics

**1925. Dream and Dream
Work of Wilcox**

Wilcox visits Prof. Angell
Wilcox visits Angell, shows him the bas-relief and tells him of his dreams

**Wilcox dreams and
creates the bas-relief**

further regular (often daily) visits and reports; Wilcox's illness and recovery

Narrative of Inspector John R. Legrasse (1908)

Legrasse attends the conference of the Archaeological Society and presents a strange figure from a »supposed voodoo meeting« (43); only Prof. Webb knows something about it.

Webb in West Greenland (1860): encounter of a single esquimaux tribe; making a »careful phonetic copy« (44) of »certain queer hereditary rituals addressed to a supreme elder devil or *tornasuk*« (43) around a »fetish« (43)

Legrasse arrests a swamp cult in the South of New Orleans (November 1907): He finds the figure presented at the conference and learns from the prisoners of the Cthulhu cult.

Old Castro (one of the prisoners, an old mestizo »who claimed to have sailed to strange ports and talked with undying leaders of the cult in the mountains of China« (48)) explains the context of the Old Ones in more detail.

Thurston investigates further and searches for the persons linked to the found documents

Thurston searches for and finds Wilcox;
gets convinced of his honesty

Thurston seeks Legrasse out and has a look at the statuette;
questions some of the prisoners (Old Castro is already dead);
what he hears and sees confirms the notes of Angell

**Thurston finds a report
about an incident at sea**
which is related to his
previous findings

**Sydney Bulletin
April 18, 1925**
The report »Mystery
derelict found at Sea«
informs about the
Cultist ship *Alert* and
its attack on the
schooner *Emma*

**Thurston investigates in
New Zealand (Dunedin /
Auckland) and Sydney**

Thurston travels to Oslo
in order to **question to
Johansen;**

**Johansen's manuscript
of »technical matters«**
tells of finding R'lyeh
and escaping Cthulhu

I. The Horror in Clay

II. The Tale of Inspector Legrasse

**III.
The Madness from the Sea**

2. Texts

Text basis: Lovecraft, Howard Phillips: The Complete Mythos Tales [2015], Barnes & Noble: New York 2016 [978-1-4351-6255-6].
Read online: <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cc.aspx>

Framing reflections

in the beginning: »Theosophists have guessed at the awesome grandeur of the cosmic cycle wherein our world and human race form transient incidents. The have hinted at strange survivals in terms which would freeze the blood if not masked by a bland optimism. But it is not from them that there came the single glimpse of forbidden aeons which chills me when I think of it and maddens me when I dream of it. That glimpse, like all dread glimpses of truth, flashed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things – in this case an old newspaper item and the notes of a dead professor.« (36)

in between: »[...] I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and space, and of those unhallowed blasphemies from elder stars which dream beneath the sea, known and favoured by a nightmare cult ready and eager to loose them on the world whenever another earthquake shall heave their monstrous stone city again to the sun and air.« (56)

in the end: »Cthulhu still lives, too, I suppose, again in that chasm of stone which has shielded him since the sun was young. His accursed city is sunken once more [...] He must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or else the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy. Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come [...]« (60f.)

queer clay bas-relief

Appearance of the bas-relief: »a rough rectangle less than an inch thick and about five by six inches in area; obviously of modern origin« (37)

Design of bas-relief and writing: »Its designs, however, were far from modern in atmosphere and suggestion; for although the vagaries of cubism and futurism are many and wild, they do not often reproduce that cryptic regularity which lurks in prehistoric writing. And writing of some kind the bulk of these designs seemed certainly to be; though my memory, despite much familiarity with the papers and collections of my uncle, failed in any way to identify this particular species, or even to hint at its remotest affiliations.« (37)

Design of bas-relief and writing: »Above these apparent hieroglyphics was a figure of evidently pictorial intent, though its impressionistic execution forbade a very clear idea of its nature. It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted the whole which made it most shockingly frightful. Behind the figure was a vague suggestion of a Cyclopean architectural background.« (38)

Elements of Wilcox's dream: »unprecedented dream of great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror. Hieroglyphics had covered the walls and pillars, and from some undetermined point below had come a voice that was not a voice; a chaotic sensation which only fancy could transmute into sound, but which he attempted to render by the almost unpronounceable jumble of letters, >Cthulhu fhtagn<. [...] startling fragments of nocturnal imagery whose burden was always some terrible Cyclopean vista of dark and dripping stone, with a subterranean voice or intelligence shouting monotonously in enigmatical sense-impacts untranscribable save as gibberish. The two sounds most frequently repeated are those rendered by the letters >Cthulhu< and >R'lyeh<.« (39f.)

figures discussed on the archaeological conference 1908

figure found by Legrasse: »The figure [...] was between seven and eight inches in height, and of exquisitely artistic workmanship. It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. This thing, which seemed instinct with a fearsome and unnatural malignancy, was of a somewhat bloated corpulence, and squatted evilly on a rectangular block or pedestal covered with undecipherable characters. The tips of the wings touched the black edge of the block, the seat occupied the centre, whilst the long, curved claws of the doubled-up, crouching hind legs gripped the front edge and extended a quarter of the way down toward the bottom of the pedestal. The cephalopod head was bent forward, so that the ends of the facial feelers brushed the backs of huge fore paws which clasped the croucher's elevated knees. The aspect of the whole was abnormally life-like, and the more subtly fearful because its source was so totally unknown. Its vast, awesome, and incalculable age was unmistakably; yet not one link did it shew with any known type of art belonging to civilisation's youth – or indeed to any other time. Totally separate and apart, its very material was a mystery; for the soapy, greenish-black stone with its golden or iridescent flecks and striations resembled nothing familiar to geology or mineralogy. The characters along the base were equally baffling.« (43f.)

figure found by Webb: »a very crude bas-relief of stone, comprising a hideous picture and some cryptic writing. And so far as he [scil. Webb] could tell, it was a rough parallel in all essential features of the bestial thing now lying before the meeting [scil. Legrasse's figure].« (44)

From the swamp cult prisoners, Legrasse learns of the Cthulhu Mythos:

»They worshipped, so they said, the Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died. This was that cult, and the prisoners said it had always existed and always would exist, hidden in distant wastes and ark places all over the world until the time when the great priest Cthulhu, from his dark house in the mighty city of R'lyeh under the waters, should rise and bring the earth again beneath his sway. Some day he would call, when the stars were ready, and the secret cult would always be waiting to liberate him. [...] Mankind was not absolutely alone among the conscious things of earth, for shapes came out of the dark to visit the faithful few. But these were not the Great Old Ones. no man had ever seen the Old Ones. The carven idol was great Cthulhu, but none might say whether or not the others were precisely like him.« (47f.)

Old Castro explains the mythos in more detail: »There had been aeons when other Things ruled on the earth, and They had had great cities. Remains of Them, he [scil. Castro] said the deathless Chinamen had told him, were still to be found as Cyclopean stones on islands in the Pacific. They all died vast epochs of time before men came, but there were arts which could revive Them when the stars had come round again to the right positions in the cycle of eternity. They had, indeed, come themselves from the stars, and brought Their images with Them. These Great Old Ones, Castro continued, were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape – for did not this star-fashioned image prove it? – but that shape was not made of matter. When the stars were right, They could plunge from world to world through the sky; but when the stars were wrong, They could not live. But altogether They no longer lived, They would never really die. The all lay in stone houses in Their great city of R'lyeh, preserved by the spells of mighty Cthulhu for a glorious resurrection when the stars and the earth might once more be ready for Them. But at that time some force from outside must serve to liberate Their bodies. The spells that preserved Them intact likewise prevented Them from making an initial move, and They could only lie awake in the dark and think whilst uncounted millions of years rolled by. They knew all that was occurring in the universe, but Their mode of speech was transmitted thought. Even now They talked in Their tombs. When, after infinities of chaos, the first men came, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshly minds of mammals. Then, whispered Castro, those first men formed the cult around small idols which the Great Ones shewed them; idols brought in dim aeras from dark stars. That cult would never die till the stars came right again, and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom. Meanwhile the cult, by appropriate rites, must keep alive the memory of those ancient ways and shadow forth the prophecy of their return. In the elder time chosen men had talked with the entombed Old Ones in dreams, but then something had happened. The great stone city R'lyeh, with its monoliths and sepulchres, had sunk beneath the waves; and the deep waters, full of the one primal mystery through which not even thought can pass, had cut off the spectral intercourse. But memory never died, and high-priests said that the city would rise again when the stars were right. Then came out of the earth the black spirits of earth, mouldy and shadowy, and full of dim rumours picked up in caverns beneath forgotten sea-bottoms. [...] Of the cult, he said that he thought the centre lay amid the pathless deserts of Arabia, where Irem, the City of Pillars, dreams hidden and untouched. It was not allied to the European witch-cult, and was virtually unknown beyond its members. No book had ever really hinted of it, though the deathless Chinamen said that there were double meanings in the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred which the initiated might read as they chose, especially the much-discussed couplet:

*>That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.« (48f.)*

3. Timelines

Overview

- 1860Webb’s tour to Greenland and Iceland
- 01.11.1907Legrasse and the swamp cult
- 1908Legrasse at the archaeological conference
- 1925Angell/Wilcox and the sea incident (see overview below)
(spring 1925: »outr , mental illnesses and outbreaks of group folly or mania« (38))
- 1926–27 (winter)death of Angell
- 1927ff. (?)manuscript of Thurston

Legend

freighter *Vigilant* (Valparaiso)

heavily armed steam yacht *Alert* (Dunedin)

two-masted schooner *Emma* (Auckland)

23.02.–22.03.
with aesthetes:
dreams of »very
bizarre things« (41)

28.02.–01.03. earthquake; Wilcox dreams and
creates the bas-relief in the night;
01.03. Wilcox visits Angell

01.–22.03.
daily visits/reports of Wilcox to Angell

22.–23.03. Wilcox gets sick in the night (»obscure sort of fever« (40))

23.03.–02.04.
with average people:
»scattered cases of
uneasy but formless
nocturnal
impressions« (41)

23.03.–02.04.
with aesthetes:
»intensity of the dreams
being immeasurably
the stronger« (41)

23.03.–02.04.
Wilcox fails to appear at Angell’s on March 23rd
and »had manifested since then only alternations
of unconsciousness and delirium.« (40) Angell
»from that time forward kept close watch of the
case« (40).

02.04. 3pm »every trace of Wilcox’s malady suddenly ceased.« (40)
»All traces of strange dreaming had vanished with his recovery« (40)

02.–09.04. »my uncle kept no record of his night-thoughts after a week of
pointless and irrelevant accounts of thoroughly usual visions« (40)

1925

20. February

20.02. *Emma* sails from Auckland for Callao

28.

01. March

01.03. *Emma* driven south by storm.

01.03. *Alert* sets sail in great haste from
Dunedin right after earthquake.

R’yeh
↑

22.03. *Emma* encounters the *Alert*, is attacked by her and defeats her but sinks.
The *Emma*’s crew takes the *Alert*.

23.03. Crew of the *Emma* (on *Alert*) lands on R’yeh; 6 men die.

Cthulhu

25.03. *Vigilant* leaves Valparaiso.

01. April

02.04. *Vigilant* is driven south by heavy storms and huge waves.

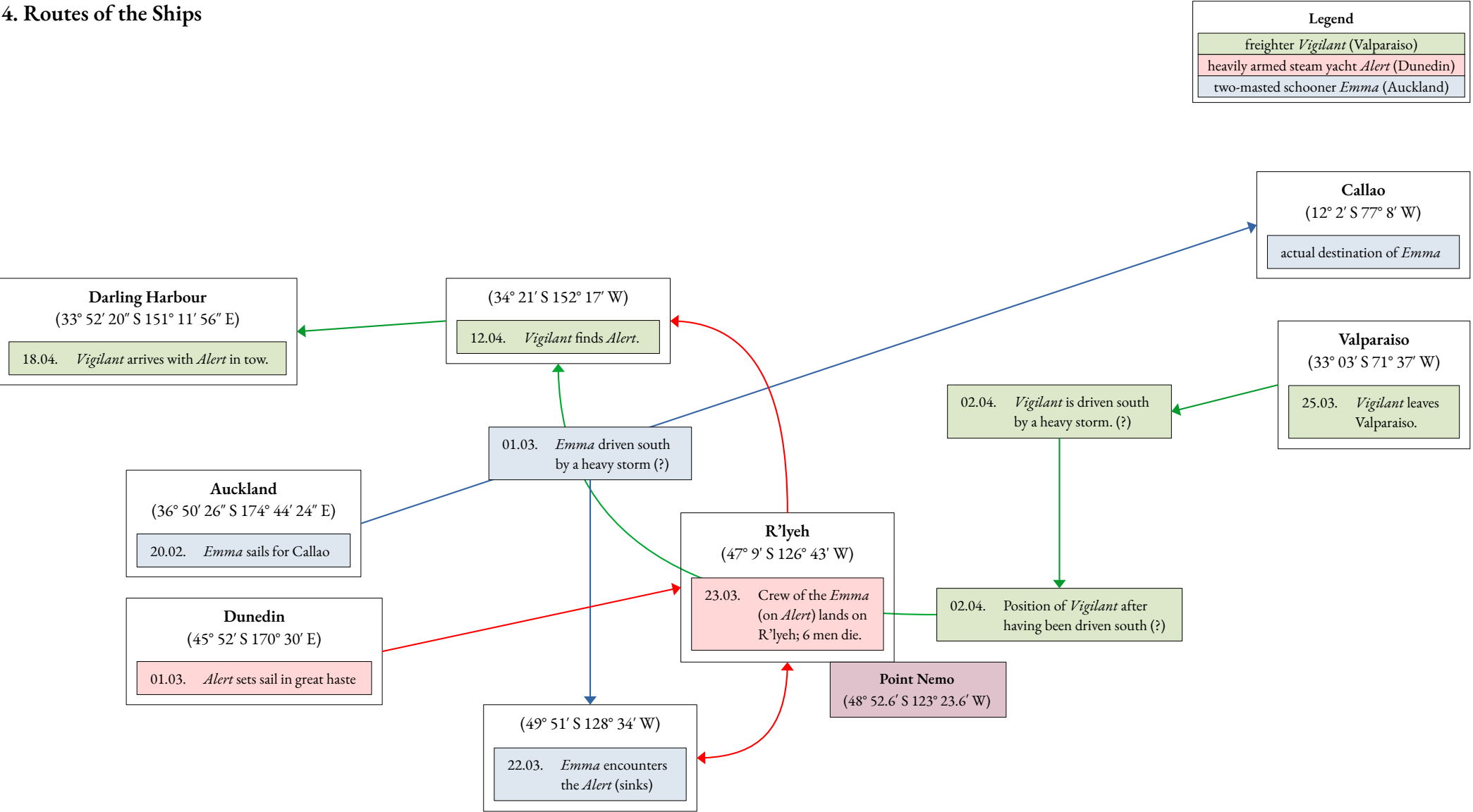
R’yeh
↓

??04. *Vigilant* sails over the spot under which R’yeh lies deep in the water.

12.04 The »battled and disabled« (53) *Alert*« (53) is sighted by the *Vigilant*
»with one living and one dead man aboard« (53).

18.04 *Vigilant* arrives in Darling Harbour with *Alert* in tow.

4. Routes of the Ships

Routes on Google Maps: https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=17UNxUJXzW_GArkRLGwD8FtaM8MgCsfwX&usp=sharing