



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Myth and mythology: How Stories Shape the World

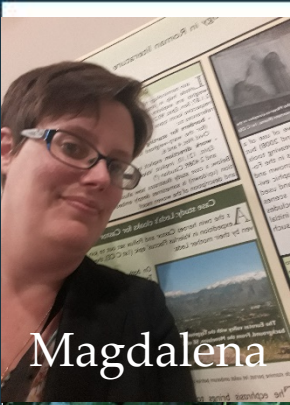
Dr Magdalena Öhrman

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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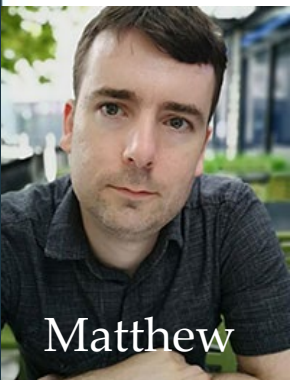
An interdisciplinary module



Magdalena



Jane



Matthew

- This module spans several millennia and several cultures – it is team taught to make sure you're always talking to an expert
- Over the course of the module, you will meet all of us – and have a guest lecture or two by others, as well
- Our contact details are in the module syllabus on Moodle



Katharina



Jessica



Sarah

Module content (the dry version)

AIM(S)

- To make students aware of a range of myths from ancient and modern cultures, as well as sources available for the study of and response to myth and mythology in various cultural contexts.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Upon the successful completion of this module, the student should be able to:
- Demonstrate a good knowledge of mythological traditions studied;
- Demonstrate a good knowledge of comparative approaches to myth and mythology;
- Respond analytically or creatively to discourses of myth and mythology.

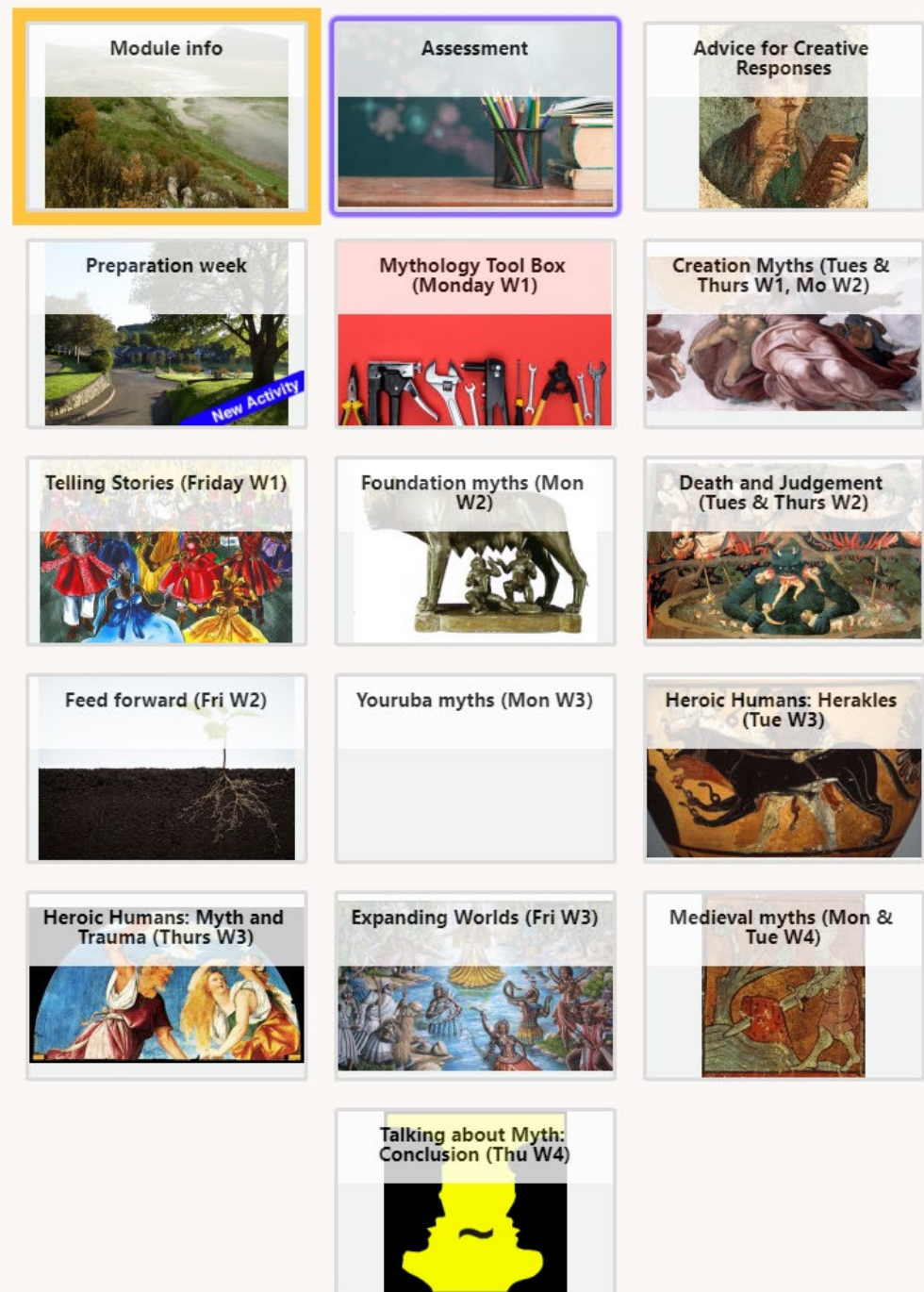
Schedule

- Mondays:
classroom, 2-5
- Tuesdays:
classroom, 2-5
- **Thursdays:**
online – and
12-3!
- Fridays:
classroom, 2-5

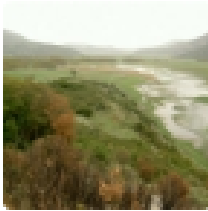
Monday 22.11		Module intro (MO) + Theory with examples (MO)	MO
Tuesday 23.11		Egyptian creation myths (KZ)	KZ
Thursday 25.11		Judeo-Christian creation myths (JK)	JK
Friday 26.11		Telling stories (theory) + Telling stories (practical)	SR
Monday 29.11		Greek and Roman creation and foundation myths	MO
Tuesday 30.11		Death and judgement, Egypt	KZ
Thursday 02.12		Death and Judgement, Judeo-Christian	JK
Friday 03.12		Practicalities and feed forward	MO, SR
Monday 06.12		Guest session: Yoruba mythology	BS
Tuesday 07.12		Heroic humans: Herakles	MC
Thursday 09.12		Heroic humans: Myths about trauma	JK/SR
Friday 10.12		Myth, margins and identity	MC
Monday 13.12		Heroic humans	JC
Tuesday 14.12		Myths made modern	JC
Thursday 16.12		What is myth and how do we talk about it?	KZ, JK
Friday 17.12		QUIZ	

Moodle

- [Our Moodle page](#) is divided by topic
- Most tiles contain material for more than one session
- Prep reading, class recordings, slides, follow-up reading will be available under each tile
 - Please look out for content warnings (CW): they are intended to make sure that we approach difficult topics with care
- Immediately after a class, you can also find the recording in the Teams chat



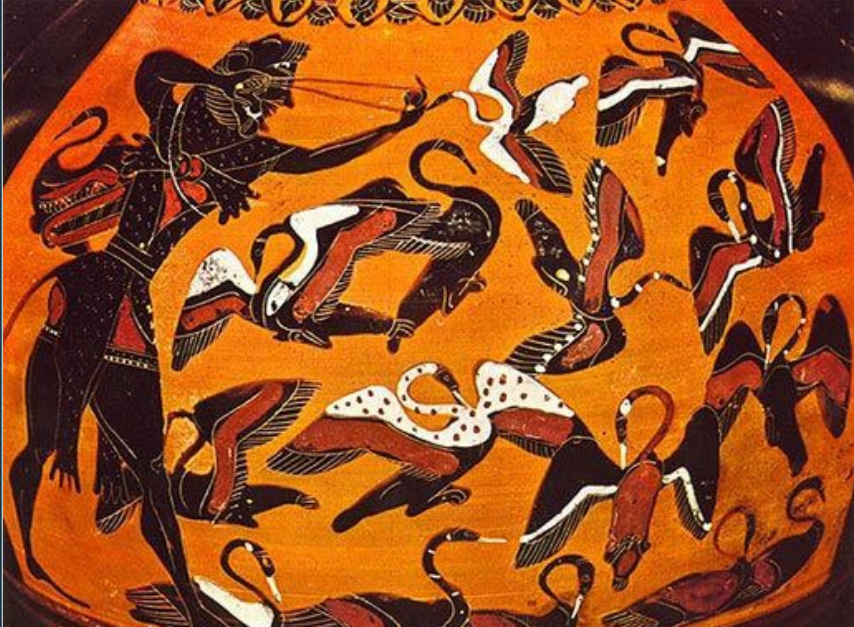
Teams



Myths & Mythology: How
Stories Shape the...

Our Teams icon is a view of Lake
Stymphalos in Greece: the setting of
one of Herakles' labours

- Teams will be used for quick announcements and online sessions
- You can always find the links to online meetings in the Teams calendar
- At the top of our Teams page, you have a link to the module Stream called Class recordings
- All class recordings will appear in that Stream
- If you are on campus and have issues connecting to Teams, remember that you can use the Blue Computer Room to follow classes (bring headphones!)



At the city of Stymphalos in Arcadia there was a lake called Stymphalis, in the depths of a thick forest and innumerable birds had sought refuge there [...]. So when Herakles was at a loss as to how he could drive the birds from the wood, Athena gave him some bronze castanets which she had received from Hephaistos. By rattling these from a certain mountain [...] beside the lake, he frightened the birds. Unable to endure the noise, they flew up in alarm, and in that way Herakles was able to shoot them down with his arrows. (Apollodorus *Library* 2.5)

Classroom sessions

- All classroom sessions will be recorded
- If you are unwell or required to self-isolate, catch up on the session online
- Please spread out in the room as much as possible, unless you are already in a bubble
- Please use a face covering when you cannot keep 2m distance, e.g. when entering and exiting the room, and avoid crowding

Online sessions

- Thursday sessions are wholly online
- You will need to work both with
 - Prepared content on our Moodle page
 - Live meetings via Microsoft Teams
- Times for each live Teams meeting will be up on Moodle (look under each topic tile and Activity)
- ...and you will also see it in your Hwb and Teams calendar – twice!
- All Teams meetings will be recorded so that they appear in the Microsoft Streams channel for the module: do follow it for easy access

Assessment

- This module is assessed by a two-part portfolio $\approx$ 4,000 words
 1. A 2,000 word written assignment due Friday 10 December (75% of portfolio) – Week 3
 2. A 30 minute online Moodle quiz due Friday 17 December (25% of portfolio) – Week 4
- The written assignment is about depth and focus on your chosen area (Egypt, Greece, writing...)
- The online quiz is about breadth of knowledge

From title idea to submission

- **For your long assignment, you can do either**
 1. a primary source analysis of an object, text, etc, on myth in a culture/period of your interest in an essay of 2,000 words, **or**
 2. a creative response to the module material (equivalent of 2,000 words)
- The options are available in the Module syllabus on Moodle
- In the Friday session in Week 2, you will have the opportunity to work through a draft with us
- Draft submission, and final submission will all be via the assessment tile on Moodle

Module workload

- This is a 20 credit module: it **entails 200 hours of work**
- It has **48 hours** of contact time (either in the classroom or via online activities)...
- ...so the majority of your work (**152 hours – a 38 hour work week!**) is independent study:
 - ...preparation reading, follow-up after class, preparing assignments...

Myths and Mythology: How Stories Shape the World

WHAT IS MYTH & MYTHOLOGY?

The word 'mythology'

- *Mythos* – originally simply: 'something delivered by word of mouth',
 - Soon after Homer: also 'tale, legend'.
 - In the last sense, a degree of untruthfulness may be implied
- Juxtaposition between *mythos* and *logos*
 - *Logos* ('word') in a wider sense also means 'tale' and 'story'
 - Implied: a story with historical truth

Modern usage – several definitions!

- The **narrow, content-based** definition: myths are stories about the relations between humans and gods (Morford & Lenardon, 2003, 3f)
- The narrow, **target-based** definition: myths are stories that explain the origins of places, objects and customs
- The **broad** definition: “We have chosen to define a Greek myth as a tale rooted in Greek culture that recounts a sequence of events chosen by the maker of the tale to accommodate his own medium and purpose and to achieve particular effects in his audience.”
(Tyrell B. & Brown F. 1991 *Athenian Myths and Institutions: Words in Action*, 6)

Silk-moths are also reported to be born in the island of Cos [...] First however, it is said, small butterflies are produced that are bare of down, and then as they cannot endure the cold they grow shaggy tufts of hair and equip themselves with thick jackets against winter, scraping together the down of leaves with the roughness of their feet; this is compressed by them into **fleeces** and worked over by **combing** with their claws, and then drawn out into warp-threads, and thinned out as if with a **weaving comb**, and afterwards taken hold of and wrapped round their body in a coiled nest.

Then (they say) they are taken away by a man, put in earthenware vessels and reared with warmth and a diet of bran, and so a peculiar kind of feathers sprout out, clad with which they are sent out to other tasks; but tufts of **wool** plucked off are softened with moisture and then thinned out into threads...

Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 11.27



Myth, saga, and legend

- Sometimes we also distinguish between myths, legends, and sagas
- Sagas and legends also contain features found in folktale and legends without mention of gods or the supernatural
- Sagas and legends are felt to have some basis in fact, some relation (however vague) to history
 - Most local legends and most tales of heroes worshipped in a particular region fall in this category: Theseus for Attica, Herakles for Argos, etc.



Did people believe in myths?



- The truthfulness of myth questioned throughout history
- The Greek geographer Hecataeus explains that Kerberos was in fact a serpent with poisonous fangs, not a three-headed hell hound
- There is an ongoing scholarly discussion of to what extent the ancients believed in myths, and whether we can assess this – cf. Buxton, 1994, 145-165
- Saying that a myth is not factual does not necessarily equal saying that it does not convey any truth

Truth in myth?

- Myths fulfil important functions even for the most hardened sceptic
- Myths depend on make-believe, but are also an important means to convey truths about life and society
- The oppositions and problems reflected in the myths a society uses are the same ones that readers/viewers would find in their daily lives
 - Choices between right and wrong, problems of power etc

Instantiations of myths

- What we can access is instantiations ('versions') of myths
 - Cf. Homer's *Iliad* and the film *Troy* as two instantiations of the myth of the Trojan war
 - Each instantiation has a specific purpose, and is bound by specific conditions:
 - Homer – oral tradition, political conditions both at the time of recital and in 6th century Athens
 - *Troy* - limitations of the film format (time, genre demands, viewer knowledge)
- Our task: To analyse adaptations, versions, re-writes of myths from previous instantiation

Instantiations of the myth of Achilles



Above: Poster for the 2004 movie *Troy* with Brad Pitt as Achilles

Left: Vase painting by Exekias showing Achilles and Ajax playing a board game (late 6th C BCE)

Ancient instantiations

- Myths live on, but if we want to work with myths in the ancient world, our sources need to be contemporary:
 - Exekias vase tells us of early Classical Athenian perceptions of heroes of the Trojan war...
 - Brad Pitt's Achilles tells us of how ancient myth was approached in 2004 – as action, as eye candy, as a big screen adventure...
- Whether you are a medievalist or a Classicist, you need to use evidence from the period you are studying

Folktale and oral tradition

- Many of our mythological texts are rooted in orally transmitted tales
 - Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (especially the fantastic parts of Odysseus' travels) are prime examples
- To whom did these tales belong?
 - Orally transmitted epics like the *Iliad* had a partly political function – rooted in a part of society dominated by men
 - But: writers from Plato to Philostratus mention women telling children tales and myths – but we know very little of this context of performance
- This mode of transmission explains some of the fluidity (the many variants) of ancient myth as we have it: the tales were composed anew in each performance

Three layers to Greek & Roman myth

- **Classical myth in general** – a specific event or character will be part of a much larger nexus
 - Kerberos the guard dog of Hades features not only in Herakles' story, but in Aeneas', and Orpheus' stories, etc.
- **The collection of stories about our character/event** – 'the myth of X', a multifaceted and often contradictory network of stories from different periods and places
- **Specific instantiations** – individual re-tellings of mythological stories or parts of stories
 - That *particular* vase painting of Kerberos, that *particular* text section on Daphne, etc)

Why studying myths is useful

- “[myths] provide reality and a unity to what is transitory and fragmented in the world we experience” (Morford & Lenardon, 2003, 4)
- “[...] a verbal medium through which members of the community – those who share the same myths – use the past to talk about the present. They communicate with each other *through* but not *about* the past. (Tyrell & Brown, 1991, 8)
- Hence, careful analysis of myths may bring a better understanding of ancient society and how its people understood themselves

SOURCES FOR GREEK & ROMAN MYTH

Texts

Mythographical texts – like Apollodorus, collecting and systematising myths, often focussing on genealogy of mythological characters:

“Zeus married Hera and fathered Hebe, Eileithuia, and Ares; but he had intercourse with many other women, both mortal and immortal. By Themis, daughter of Ouranos, he had some daughters, the Seasons, namely, Eirene, Eunomia, and Dice”
(Apollod. Bibl. 1.3)

Myths in other texts – epic, tragedy, poetry etc



Bronze votive figurine of Zeus holding a lightning bolt:
Sanctuary of Olympia, 5th C BCE

Iconography

- Depictions of mythological characters and events in art are some of our most important sources
- Mythological motifs are popular as decorations on vase paintings or small art objects
- ...and used in large-scale art programmes (temple friezes, statues...)
- Also a key way in which Greeks and Romans engaged with myths



Cults

- Religious ceremonies and cults reflect myths
- Clearest in cults that involve re-enactment of myths:
 - The Bear Festival (Arkteia) at Brauron: a festival to Artemis celebrated by select girls before puberty
 - The Mysteries at Eleusis (Demeter, Kore, and the death and re-birth of Triptolemus)

*At the age of ten,
And clad in yellow
robes,
Soon after this,
I was Little Bear to
Brauronian Artemis;
(Aristophanes
Lysistrata 644-645)*



Religious practice: re-enactment

But a girl poked fun at it, with her lack of restraint upset it, and it scratched her face. This annoyed her brothers and they shot the bear, as a result of which a plague befell the Athenians. The Athenians consulted an oracle and it replied that their troubles would end if, to pay for killing the bear, they made their maidens perform the arkteia. And the Athenians voted that no girl should be married to a man without performing the arkteia for the goddess.

(*Suda* 'Arktos e Brauroniois' in Dowden, K (1992)
The Uses of Greek Mythology, London, 74)

Right: Votive plaque from the Artemis sanctuary in Brauron in Attica: Artemis running carrying a torch while a hunting dog runs alongside her



THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Different approaches to myth

Structuralist theory has been particularly influential in the field of myth interpretation:

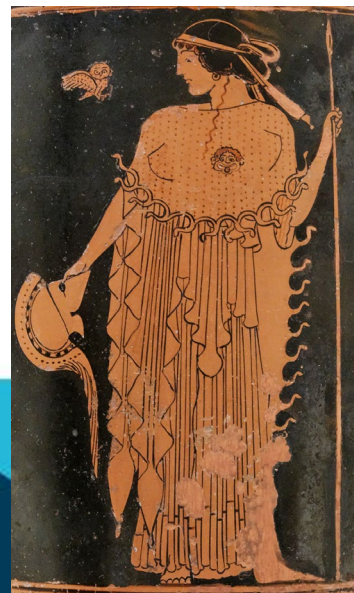
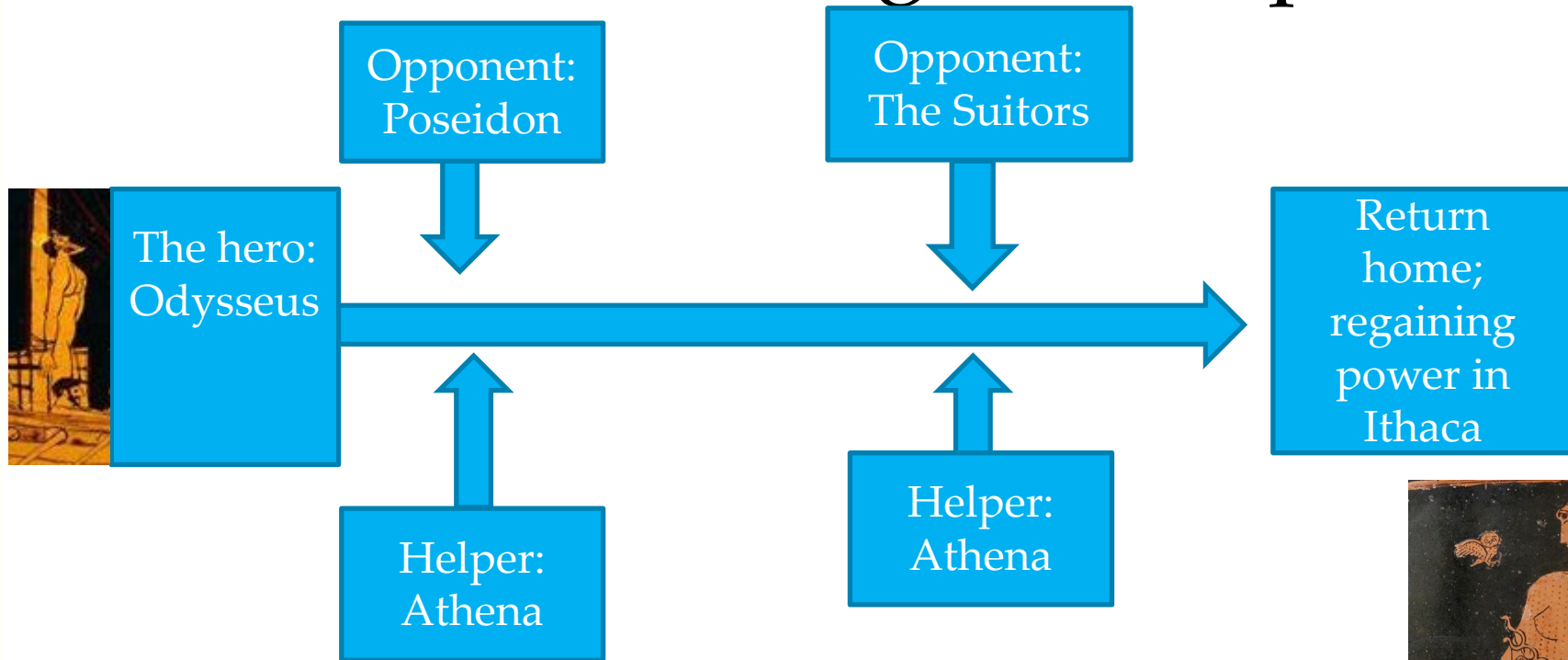
- Parts (of a language, a written text, a myth, a film etc) don't carry meaning on their own – it's all about the way they are put together
- Structuralist critics search for structures and carrying elements in their subject of study – opposites and pairs are often important.
 - Life and death, dark and light, male and female...

The building blocks of myth

- Structuralist readings of narrative and of myth took their impetus from the study of folktales conducted by the Russian formalist critic Vladimir Propp in the late 1920s
- Propp argued that folktales from all cultures can be stripped of detail to reveal an abstract scheme of events
 - Hero embarks on quest (for a girl, wealth, power...)
 - Hero is opposed and helped by other characters
 - Hero overcomes obstacles and achieves his goal

Folktale patterns in the *Odyssey*

return of the long-absent prince



The building blocks of myth

- Propp's theories were developed by **Claude Levi-Strauss**, arguing that folktales and myths are made up of a repeated and recurring elements, which are combined to create meaning
- These building blocks of myths are called **mythemes**
 - The mytheme: “parent kills child” recurs in many myths:
 - Medea killing her children to avenge herself on the faithless Jason
 - Herakles killing his children in madness, etc
- ...but these myths both contain many other mythemes, and the combination creates the specific meaning of the respective myths in that given instantiation.

Comparative mythology

- The impetus to deconstruct myths into their building blocks (mythemes) derives from post-enlightenment rationalisation and the conviction that an ur-myth could be identified
- Compilation and comparison of mythologies from around the world searches for the oldest and smallest common denominator – mirroring scholarly approaches to language development
- Many similarities and key mythemes identified (creation, sky god, descent into the underworld, e.g.)
- Post-modern critiques of the approach
- Revival for this type of work e.g. in Witzel's 2012 *The Origin of the World's Mythologies* – now seen in the context of 'big history' and big data

Psychoanalysis – mining myth

- And finally – don't forget Sigmund **Freud**!

Looking at ancient myths as metaphors of the human condition, Freud used ancient myths to illustrate inherently human phenomena and experiences

- Freud's follower Carl **Jung** claimed that myths (from the Classical world, or elsewhere, and again stripped of detail) contain images common to all humans, so-called archetypes. Myths are a way of making them visible, and aid us in dealing with our experiences
- Many critics still approach mythological material from a psychoanalytical standpoint

Other theoretical approaches to myth

- **Feminist** readings/readings focussing on construction of **gender** in myth
 - Gender (unlike the categories of biological sex) is a social construction: each society sets its own rules for what is male and what is female
- Myth – a medium for discussion of contemporary society – a place to try different gender identities out, and to reaffirm social norms
- What impact does it have on interpretation that the instantiations of ancient myth that we possess were mostly created by men?

Post-colonialist readings

Myth also makes visible a society's conception of itself in relation to its surroundings

- How do Greek and Roman myths describe the East?
- ...and, in contrast, their own societies?
- What makes a Greek a Greek rather than a barbarian?
- We will work with this in the W3 session on identity



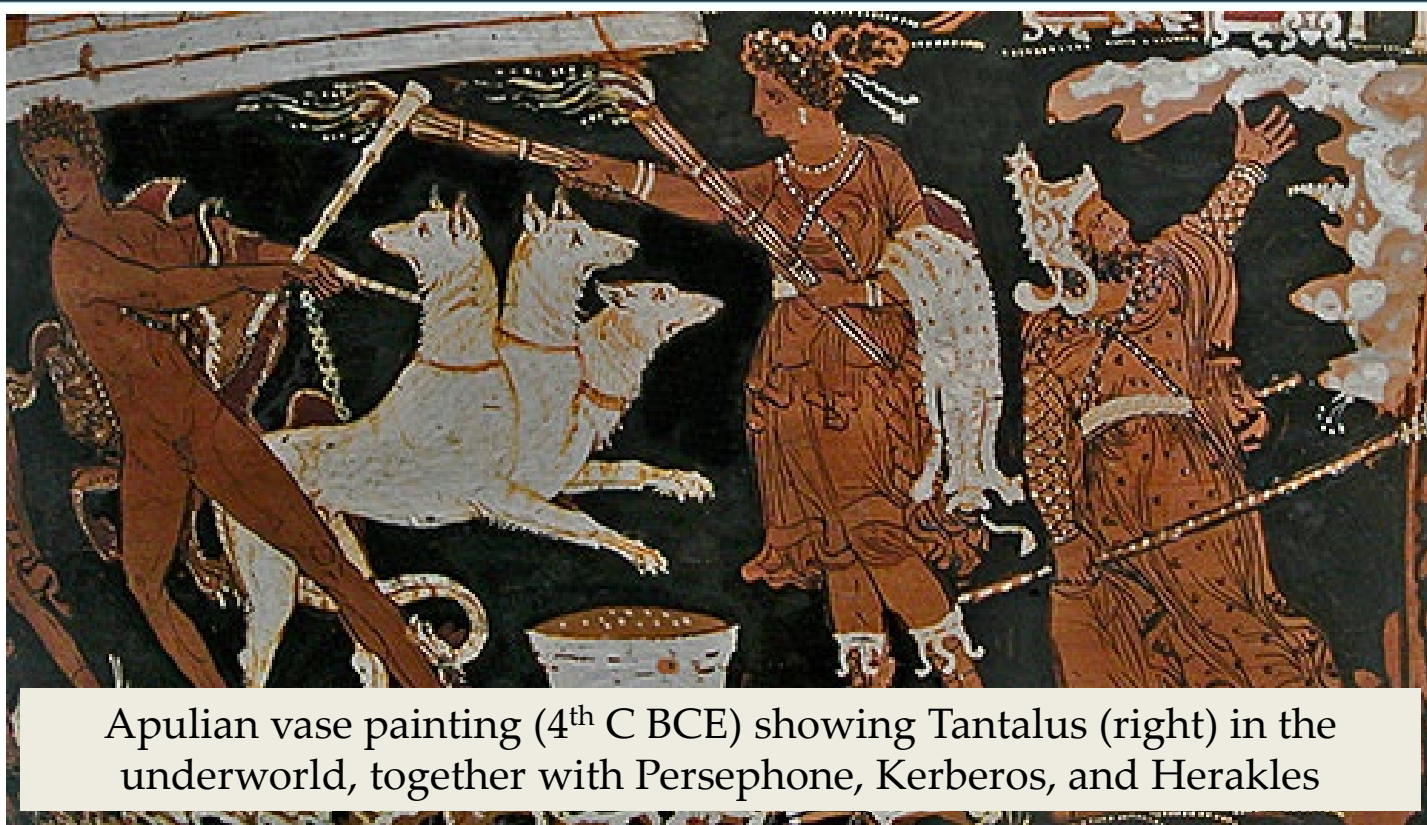
Take Away from this session

- Myths vary – as myths reflect society, they change or find new expressions when society changes
- A number of theoretical approaches have been used to interpret myths – historically most important is the influence from structuralism
- As myths vary, so do the scholarly definitions of what a myth is. Make sure to check what definition you use, and which ones are used in the secondary literature you use

The Argolid cycle

MYTHEMES & STRUCTURALIST READINGS

And I saw
Tantalus
enduring his
agony. He was
standing in a lake
which came up to
his chin. He was
thirsty and
always ready to
drink, but he
could not reach
the water.



Apulian vase painting (4th C BCE) showing Tantalus (right) in the underworld, together with Persephone, Kerberos, and Herakles

Every time the old man bent down in his urge to drink, the water would be sucked away and vanish: a god would dry all up, and the dark earth would show at his feet. And high leafy trees had fruit hanging from their tops – pears and pomegranates, bright-fruited apple trees, sweet figs and flourishing olives. But whenever the old man reached up to take the fruit in his hands, the wind would toss it up towards the shadowing clouds. (Hom. *Od.* 11.582-592)

The Background

- Pindar, *Olympian Odes*, 1.46-58: *“But if the guardians of Olympus honoured a mortal man, that man was this Tantalus. Yet he could not digest great fortune, and in his fullness he brought on himself great madness.”*
- Apollod. *Epit.* 2.2: *“It is said by some that he suffers this punishment because he divulged the secrets of the gods to men and tried to share ambrosia with his friends.”*

Mythemes of the Tantalus story

- Human associating with gods
 - Other myths: Prometheus
- Eternal punishment of mortal by vengeful gods
 - Other myths: Prometheus, Sisyphus, Ixion
- Parent killing child
 - Other myths: Medea, Procne
- Unknowingly eating human flesh
 - Recurs later in the Argive cycle: Thyestes

The Next Generation

Tantalus' son **Pelops** restored to life by the gods

He courts Hippodamia, daughter of **Oinomaus** of Pisa

The chariot race: Pelops wins through the aid of Poseidon by cheating; Myrtilus

Mythemes

- Racing as a means of winning a girl, cf. Atalante
- Daughter deceiving father for sake of a lover, cf. Ariadne, Medea, Scylla of Megara
- Deception for love being thwarted: Myrtilus and cf. Scylla of Megara



Temple of Zeus at Olympia, c. 480 BCE:
The chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaus

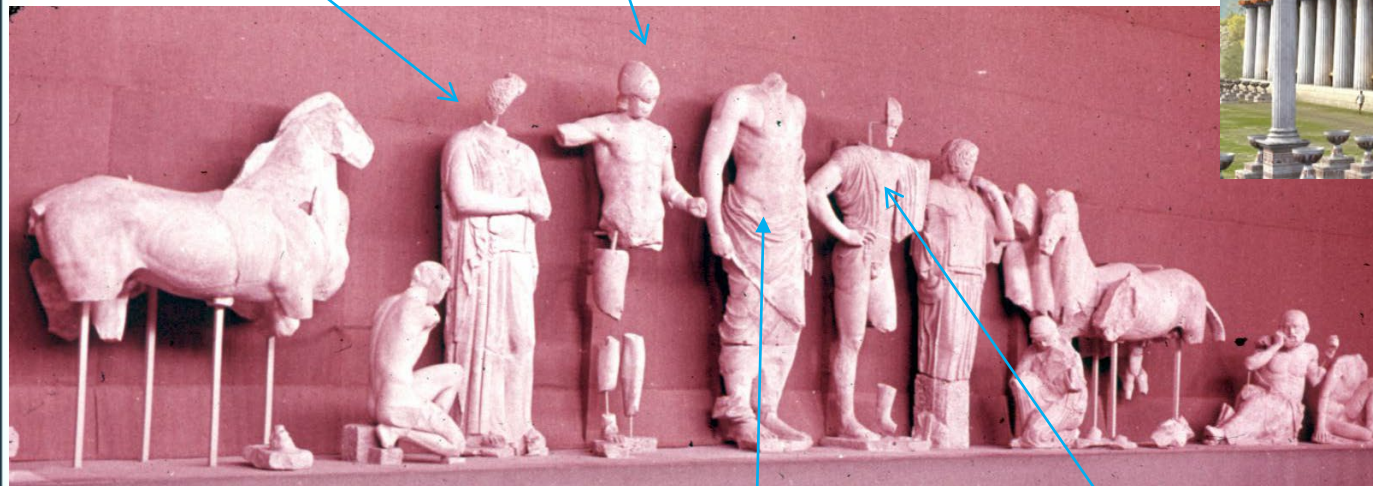
East Pediment: Zeus' Temple at Olympia

Hippodamia

Pelops

Zeus

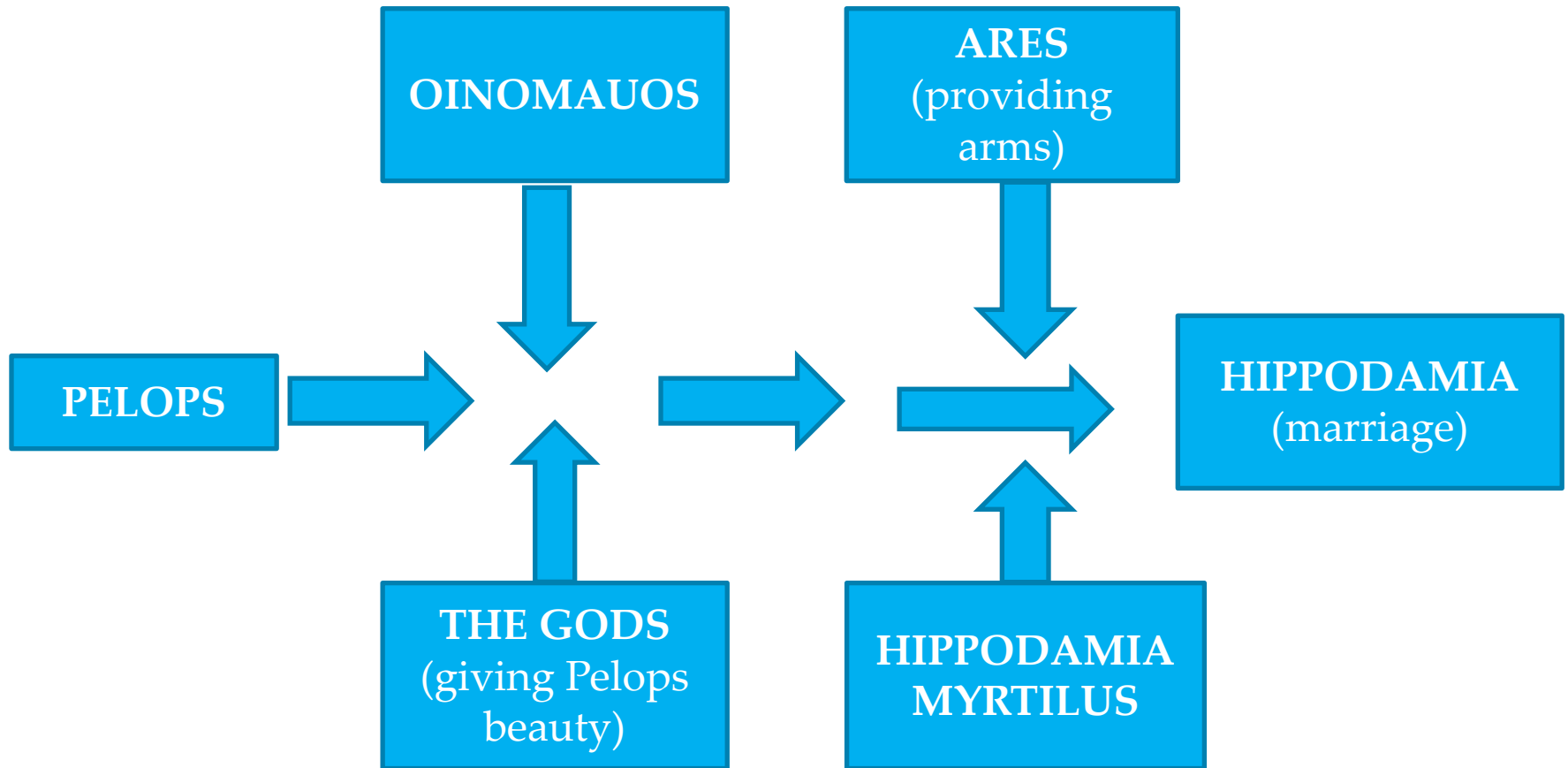
Oinomaus



The Chariot race

Now Oinomaos, the king of Pisa, had a daughter, Hippodamia, [...and] nobody was able to win her as his wife [...]. For Oinomaos possessed arms and horses given to him by Ares, and offered his daughter's hand to the suitors as a prize in a contest. Each suitor had to take Hippodamia on his own chariot and flee [...] and Oinomaos would immediately pursue him in full armour. If Oinomaos caught up with the suitor, he killed him, but if the suitor were not overtaken, he would win Hippodamia as his wife. In this way, he had killed numerous suitors. [...] Pelops too arrived [...] and when Hippodamia saw how beautiful he was, she fell in love with him, and persuaded Myrtilus, son of Hermes, to come to his aid. (This Myrtilus was Oinomaos' charioteer.) So Myrtilus, who loved her and wanted to please her, failed to insert the axle pins into the wheel hubs, causing Oinomaos to be defeated in the race and to lose his life. [...]

A Structuralist Reading



The Consequences

- The earlier helper, Myrtilus, curses Pelops and thus causes the troubles of the descendants of Pelops; esp. the house of Atreus
- Pelops: the sons Atreus and Thyestes
 - Thyestes is caught trying to deceive Atreus out of the kingship of Mycenae (Aerope)
 - Atreus' revenge: faking a banquet, tricking Thyestes into devouring the flesh of his own slain sons
 - Thyestes is exiled but curses Atreus' family
 - In exile, he becomes the father of Aegistheus

Pelops and Hero Cult

- Hero cults common all over the Greek world from the 10th/8th century BC
- Cult (including sacrifices) often centred around the presumed tomb of the hero
- Often characters from Homer and similar, sometimes real-life people
- Pelops worshipped at Olympia alongside Zeus and Hera

