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Tools for working with Greek and Roman mythology

Myth and mythology: How Stories Shape the World

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



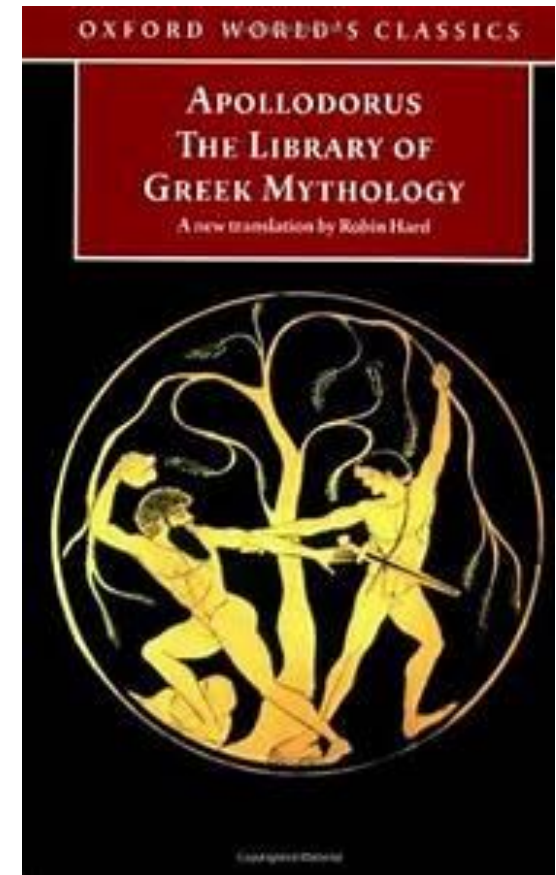
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Textual sources

- Written sources are of two types:
 - Ancient texts that **use** myths: literary and documentary texts, epic, drama, philosophy, travel writing...
 - Ancient texts that **collects and explains** myths: “textbooks” and compilations of myths
- ...and remember, only a fraction of the ancient material survives to us today

Ancient compilations of myth

- Like we do, the ancients also sought to systematise mythological material
- This gives us some of the best overview sources:
 - Apollodorus *Library of Greek Mythology* (Greek: 1/2nd C CE)
 - Hyginus *Stories* (Latin: 1st C CE)
- Both compile and compress earlier sources



Aethra bore to Aegeus a son Theseus, and when he was grown up, he pushed away the rock and took up the sandals and the sword, and hastened on foot to Athens. And he cleared the road, which had been beset by evildoers. (Apollodorus *Library* 3.16)

And as special awards Agamemnon got Cassandra, Neoptolemus got Andromache, and Ulysses got Hecuba. **But some say** that Helenus got her, and crossed over with her to the Chersonese; and that there she turned into a bitch, and he buried her at the place now called the Bitch's Tomb (Apollodorus *Library Epitome* 5.23)

- Be careful: quick reading of ancient compilations can give the impression that there is a “true” version of each myth
- But these compilations, too, give only a snapshot view, one version to be put alongside many others

Ancient texts *using* myth

- Far more sources either tell mythological stories in their own right
- Key examples are:
 - Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (C BCE)
 - Hesiod's *Theogony* (Greek, C BCE)
 - Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Latin, 1st C CE)
 - Plutarch *Lives* (Greek, 1/2 C CE)
- ...or include them in passing, in philosophical discussion, in descriptions of travel or historical events, etc:
 - Pausanias *Descriptions of Greece* (Greek, 2nd C CE)

So how do you find the texts?

- Online: there are several reliable sites hosting translations of Greek and Latin sources
 - Perseus at Tufts: [Greek and Roman material](#)
 - [The Internet Classics Archive](#)
- Online via UWTSD: [Loeb Classical Library](#)
- The site [theoi.com](#) combines text and encyclopaedia articles – but use with caution!

But what if I don't know the text?

- If you are looking for a mythological character (Herakles, Andromeda, Medea, *e.g.*), the most reliable option is *Brill's New Pauly*
- This is an academic encyclopaedia of the ancient world – it covers far more than mythology
- Access via [UWTSD online library databases](#) and logging on to the database called Brill Reference Works, and selecting *New Pauly Online* to search the English version only

Theseus

(1,832 words)

(Θησεύς/*Thēseús*). Mythical king and national hero of the Athenians (*Athens*). T. belongs to the generation before the Trojan War. He is the son of *Aethra*, daughter of *Pittheus*. His divine father is *Poseidon*, his human father the Athenian king *Aegeus*.

[German version]

I. Myth

T. grew up with *Pittheus* at *Troezen*, because *Aegeus* abandoned the pregnant *Aethra* in the light of an oracular prophecy. Having found the symbolic items (sword, shoes) left there by *Aegeus*, he made his way to *Athens*. During the journey, T. had to survive several battles with enemies and one monster (earliest surviving list, in geographical sequence, in *Bacchyl.* 18,19-30; complete *Diod. Sic.* 4,59,2-5; *Apollod.* 3,217 f.; *Plut. Theseus* = *Th.* 8-11; [10. 5-16]). Most of them he punished by *talion*. First, T. killed *Periphetes* [1]/*Corynetes* and took his club. Then, at the *Isthmus*, he vanquished *Sinis* (*Eur. Hipp.* 977 f.; *Ov. Met.* 7,440-442), by whose daughter *Perigune* he fathered *Melanippus* [3] (*Plut. Th.* 8). He then destroyed the *Crommyonian Sow*, which had killed many people. At *Megara* he met *Sciron*, who threw passers-by off a cliff: T. now in turn hurled him into the sea. At *Eleusis*, T. overpowered *Cercyon* [1], who defeated travellers by wrestling. In doing so, T. invented the sport of wrestling (*Paus.* 1.20.2). In *Attica*, he punished *Procrustes* for forcing wayfarers into an ill-fitting bed and mauling

Article Table of Contents

I. Myth

II. Democratic king and Athenian

III. Cult

IV. Iconography

- The in-text references to ancient texts in the article allows you to follow up...
- ...and the end-of-article bibliography gives information on key scholarly works on Theseus

Beyond text: iconography

- The New Pauly articles also have a section on depictions of myth in art (iconography)
- Like ancient texts using mythology (rather than just describing it), depictions of mythological characters and events in art are some of our most important sources
- ...not to mention a key way in which Greeks and Romans engaged with myths

Left: Amphora with vase painting showing Theseus killing the Minotaur. Athena and Zeus stand by. BM1843,1103.21

IV. Iconography

In the 8th and 7th cents. BC, only T.'s adventure with the Minotaur is recorded on vases [2; 4. 161-168]. From around 570 BC, he also begins to appear in battle with the Thessalian *Centaurs*, abducting Helen (*Helena* [1]) or on his adventure in *Hades*. Depictions of the deeds of his youth became popular as a cycle in Athenian art in the last quarter of the 6th cent. BC (black-figured and red-figured bowls: Athenian treasure-house at Delphi, c. 490 BC; in the pediment of the Temple of Apollo at Eretria [1], c. 510 BC: abduction of *Antiope* [2]; cf. [7]).

In the 1st half of the 5th cent., T. became a national hero in the fine arts too, in the propagandistic political processing of the *Persian Wars* at Athens (Amazon battle pictures, paintings in the Theseum and in the Stoa Basileus on the Agora, *metopes* in the Temple of Hephaestus and Athena Ergane). Linking portrayals specifically with particular events of the Graeco-Persian conflict (as [1] does), however, is probably problematic. In the 2nd quarter of the 5th cent., more peaceful scenes also became popular on vases [8]. From the 4th cent. on, depictions of T. rapidly dwindle. Attic and early South Italian vessels now almost only show the scenes with the Marathonian Bull and *Sciron*.

T. and the Minotaur are depicted in wall-paintings in the Vesuvian cities in the 1st cent. AD. In the Imperial period, labyrinth mosaic floors (with and without the killing of the Minotaur in the middle) were esp. popular, and from there they found their way into early Christian churches and mediaeval book illustrations [9. 175-194].

From the Renaissance until the 18th cent., the *Ariadne*/Dionysus (Bacchus) theme was almost the only one to be appropriated. T. experienced a kind of rebirth in the climate of incipient nationalism of the 19th cent., as the 'athletic champion' in the struggle of civilization against barbarism (sculptures of Canova) [9. 195-290].

Bäbler, B. 'Theseus IV Iconography'. *Brill's New Pauly*. Ed. Hubert Cancik et al. Brill Reference Online.

The Beazley Archive

- Housed with the Oxford Classical Art Research Centre (CARC), the Beazley Archive offers an online version of the largest reference work on vase painting ([*Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*](#))
- Using their [pottery database](#), you can search for data and images of mythological motifs in vase painting
- Normally, we would also use the hard copy *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*Iconographic Lexicon of Classical Mythology*) housed in the Tony Brothers library: it captures sculpture and other art too.

Summary

- Key primary sources for studying ancient mythology are:
 - Texts: ancient compilations + ancient use
 - Iconography: vase painting + sculpture
- Key ways of accessing these (and secondary sources) are:
 - The Perseus site
 - The Loeb Classical Library
 - The New Pauly online
 - The Beazley Archive