

Section 8 – Greek Mythology

Perseus

Perseus' journey is one of the greatest epics in all literature. This famous myth has been the subject of many interpretations. In the following brief description we set out ours, but the reader should investigate the original texts.

Acrisius, king of Argos, had a daughter called Danae. The Oracle of Delphi prophesied that Danae's son would one day kill Acrisius. To prevent her from ever meeting a man and becoming pregnant, Acrisius walled Danae up in a dark, miserable tower with one tiny window. One day, a shower of gold came through the window impregnating Danae and turning the cell into a paradise almost as beautiful as the Elysian Fields, where the gods walked.

When Acrisius saw light coming from the cell, he ordered his men to break down the wall. He found Danae with a baby boy, the child Perseus, on her lap. Acrisius had both mother and child locked in a chest and cast adrift at sea. The chest drifted to the island of Seriphus, where a fisherman named Dictys caught it in his net and pulled it ashore. Dictys gave shelter to Danae and her baby and, having no children of his own, raised Perseus as his son.

The king of Seriphus, Polydectes, learned of Danae's great beauty and wanted to marry her, but she rejected him.¹ Polydectes would have taken her by force, but by this time Perseus was a strong young man who could defend her.²

Polydectes devised a scheme to claim Danae. He arranged a false marriage to the daughter of a friend and commanded that everyone must come to the ceremony, including Perseus, but not Danae. Because Perseus was very poor, he brought no present, as Polydectes had foreseen. The king castigated Perseus, who replied that he would procure any present in the world that the king desired. The sly Polydectes asked him to fetch the head of the Gorgon, Medusa, believing this a suicidal venture. The Gorgons were three female monsters with serpents for hair and bronze hands of incredible strength. One look at their faces would turn a living being to stone.

Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and his sister Athena visited Perseus. They told him that the god who had visited Danae in the tower was Zeus himself. Hermes gave the young man his winged sandals, which allowed him to fly, and the sickle Cronus had used to castrate Uranus.

¹ Marriage, in this context, once again means 'sexual possession': Danae is an object.

² In some versions, Dictys is Polydectes' brother.

Athena gave him her polished bronze shield and told him to look at the image reflected in it, rather than directly at the Gorgon.

Perseus was instructed to find the Graeae, and make them tell him how to find the Hesperides, the three daughters of Hesperus, who had two other weapons he required: the Helm of Darkness, which made the wearer invisible, and a supernatural bag which could contain the severed head. The Hesperides would also tell Perseus how to find the Gorgon's lair.

The Graeae were three old women who shared one eye, which they fought over constantly. They were sisters of the Gorgons. Perseus hid nearby and when one passed the eye to another, and all three were blind, he grabbed the eye from them. He threatened that he would keep it unless they told him how to find the Hesperides. When he had the information, he returned the eye and flew off.

The Hesperides, who were kindly, gave Perseus the Helm and the bag, and he set off for the Gorgon's lair. There he put on the Helm and became invisible. As instructed, he looked only at the reflection of Medusa in the shield and severed her head with Cronus' sickle. Then he put the head in his magic bag and set off for home.

On his way back to Seriphus, after many other adventures, he found a young woman, Andromeda, chained to a rock by the sea. She explained that she had been sentenced to death by Poseidon, as a sacrifice to the sea monster Cetus, because her mother had boasted of Andromeda's beauty. When Perseus showed the sea dragon the head of Medusa, it turned to stone and crumbled. Perseus freed Andromeda, and she became his wife.

The couple visited Larisa so that Perseus could compete in the games there. Perseus threw his discus badly, and it struck and killed an old man in the stands. The old man turned out to be Acrisius. The prophecy had come true despite all efforts to evade it. When they arrived at Seriphus, the couple met Dictys, who explained that Polydectes' wedding had been faked in order to get rid of Perseus. When Danae refused to marry Polydectes, he had forced her to be his concubine. Furious, Perseus left Andromeda with Dictys and went to the palace. He burst in, crying 'Let all who are my friends shield their eyes!' He held up Medusa's head, and Polydectes and his courtiers were turned to stone.

Perseus and Andromeda lived long and had many children, including Heracles, the strongest man in the world.³ Perseus was the legendary founder of Mycenae and was eventually killed by Dionysius.

³ Heracles was known as Hercules in Rome.

The story is replete with Goddess philosophy and symbolism. There are three Gorgons, three Graeae and three Hesperides. All are women, and their triple aspects tell us at once that they are the Goddess. The Graeae are the Crone, who represents both death and the route to rebirth. Perseus' encounter with them is symbolic of the deadly nature of his quest and suggests that by ingenuity, a man can outwit his death.

The Hesperides are the Maid. These were nymphs who tended the Garden of Hera, in the West, a place of beauty, calm, and happiness. It is a parallel to the Sumerian island of Dilmun, where Ki/Ninhursag resided, confirming the link between Hera and Ki/Ninhursag. The Gorgons were once the most beautiful women on Earth, but became hideously ugly, with serpents for hair. They represent the Great Mother. There is also a parallel with Tiamat, the Akkadian Great Goddess, who turned into the Serpent of Chaos and was killed by Marduk.

Later in Perseus' tale, he finds Andromeda, who had been condemned to death by Poseidon, the Greek sea god. In Sumer, the Sea is the Goddess Nammu, and this is an example of a male deity adopting a role of the Goddess. Cetus, the monster that is to devour Andromeda, is, like the Gorgon and Tiamat, the Serpent of Chaos, a manifestation of the Great Mother; Perseus kills it.

There is a parallel between Gilgamesh's delivery of Inanna from the bothersome monsters that haunt the Huluppu Tree and Perseus' rescue of Andromeda. Once again, the Goddess has to rely on a male hero, and subsequently marries him, which is to say, gives him her power and accepts his dominion over her.

Almost in passing, Perseus fulfils the prophecy that Acrisius had sought to deny, by killing him. Prophecies may not be thwarted, and within the mindset of the creators of this myth, there was no such thing as accident; humans merely played out their fate. The will of a deity is inviolable, and the priestly interpreters, the oracles and seers, are themselves infallible. This message is repeated time and again throughout the myths of Greece and the near east. Prophesying was a lucrative business, and its credibility had to be maintained.

Notice the weapons used to kill the two serpentine versions of the Great Goddess. The first is the sickle Cronus used to castrate Uranus. Since he did this at the behest of Gaia, the sickle is a metaphor for the Goddess' power to emasculate the gods. Then, when Perseus kills Cetus, he again uses the Goddess' power, this time directly, employing the head of Medusa to turn the monster to stone. These suggest that, in this stage of Greek mythology, the power of the Goddess may be wielded by a man. On his return to Seriphus, Perseus is given another set-piece to demonstrate his ability to deploy the Goddess' power, and he kills Polydectes and his court using

it. This is an injunction against rape. Once again it is the power of Goddess that provides redress, but it is wielded by a man. Danae is released into the care of her saviour.⁴

Perseus can use the power of the Goddess because he is not an ordinary mortal but the son of a god, Zeus. This is a powerful parallel to the later myth of Jesus, also the son of a union between a mortal woman and a god, who preaches Goddess theology and uses her power, through healing and resurrection.⁵ The warrior-hero's adventure is similar to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and is probably derived directly from it.⁶ The epic adventure-journey in search of the greatest prize on Earth, the power of the Goddess, is a format that will be repeated hundreds of times in the literature of cultures all over the world.

⁴ The tale of Perseus exists in many forms, of which only the simplest is discussed here.

⁵ Even the Christian apologist Justin Martyr recognised this parallel when he wrote that 'we propound nothing new or different from what you believe regarding those whom you call the sons of Jupiter (Greek Zeus.)' (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*.)

⁶ Burkert 1998.