



Meeting Medea or not

Apollonius Rhodius' notion of Theseus' position in time

Search the GML
advanced

"May I therefore succeed in purifying Fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of History. But where she obstinately disdains to make herself credible, and refuses to admit any element of probability, I shall pray for kindly readers, and such as receive with indulgence the tales of antiquity." (Plutarch, *Parallel Lives Theseus* 1.2).

Aeetes and Pasiphae, children of Helius, had their respective daughters kidnapped by foreigners. Medea (daughter of Aeetes) escaped with Jason, and Ariadne with Theseus.

But who was abducted first? Some think that Medea was, asserting that she came to Hellas with Jason, lived with him in Corinth for ten years, and later, having left him, married Aegeus₁ (Apd.1.9.28). Now Aegeus₁ ignored that years before he had fathered a son in Troezen, and in Euripides' *Medea*, he tells the Colchian witch:

"I am childless: it is the act of some god." (671)

It is told that later Aegeus₁'s son Theseus came from Troezen to Athens, where Medea attempted to poison him (Apollodorus, *Epitome* 1.5ff.; Plutarch, *Theseus* 12.2; Diodorus Siculus 4.55.4-6; Pausanias 2.3.8; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.406-424, and others). But Aegeus₁, having recognized his son, expelled Medea from the city. After that incident, Theseus sailed to Crete, a voyage which resulted in the abduction of Ariadne.

Several authors agree in that order of events. Yet, Apollonius Rhodius thought that the first to be abducted was Ariadne since he represented Jason telling Medea:

"In days past the maiden Ariadne, daughter of Minos, with kindly intent rescued Theseus from grim contests—the maiden whom Pasiphae, daughter of Helius, bare." (*Argonautica* 3.997).



Theseus. 5627: Mosaïques de pavement. Thésée, IVe-Ve siècle après J.-C. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Genève.

In Apollonius' view then, Theseus belonged to "days past", which means that he could not have been the victim of a plot conceived by Medea (since when she attempted on Theseus' life no one knew who Theseus was, whereas Apollonius' Jason obviously knows him very well—and so does the girl he is seducing).

Also Apollodorus and Hyginus preclude the meeting between Theseus and Medea in Athens. But whereas they do it by counting Theseus among the ARGONAUTS, Apollonius Rhodius achieves the same result by placing Theseus in "days past" (i.e., previous to the expedition of the "Argo"). Yet Apollodorus also suggests (2.6.3) that the voyage of the ARGONAUTS and the hunt of the Calydonian boar took place while Theseus was traveling from Troezen to Athens, clearing the Isthmus of malefactors. Quite a few manuals tell the story of that fateful meeting between Theseus and Medea as happening before the participation of Theseus in the expedition of the ARGONAUTS! Yet one has to wonder: Was it not this same expedition that brought Medea to Hellas? And if Theseus, as member of the expedition, indeed brought Medea to Hellas, how could he, as an unknown newcomer, meet her in Athens some time afterwards?

Other difficulties arise when Theseus is thus placed in "days past":

The death of Meleager, soon after the Calydonian boar-hunt, clearly suggests that the expedition to Colchis took place before the boar-hunt since Meleager was among the ARGONAUTS (the same could be said of Ancaeus₁, an Argonaut who was later killed by the Calydonian boar; or of Eurytion₂, another Argonaut who was accidentally killed by Peleus during the hunt; or of Iphiclus₂, an Argonaut whom the same Meleager slew while disputing about the skin of the Calydonian boar). Similarly, if Jason had participated in the Calydonian boar-hunt before becoming an Argonaut, he would have been known, not only to Pelias₁ but to the whole of Hellas. Ovid (in *Metamorphoses* 8.302), when counting Jason among the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS, calls him "the first ship's builder" (a title which Apollodorus, 2.1.4, gives to the father of the DANAIIDS), thus acknowledging that the Argonaut became a hunter rather than the other way round.

Besides Ovid, also Pausanias, Hyginus, and Apollodorus count Theseus among the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS. The same authors (with the exception of Pausanias) assert that even Jason was among them. Pausanias' list of hunters (which includes Theseus but not Jason) is based on a Calydonian boar-hunt sculptured by Scopas of Paros (4C BC). When did Theseus go a-hunting? For here again, the hunters were famous, and so Theseus should hunt the boar after meeting Medea and not before (for before meeting her, he was an unknown newcomer). Although for Diodorus (*The Library of History* 4.50ff.) King Pelias₁ met his death on the very return of the ARGONAUTS to Iolcus, Apollodorus suggests (3.9.2), or more emphatically implies (3.13.1) that the Calydonian boar-hunt took place before the death of Pelias₁ (who was murdered at the instigation of Medea). Hyginus (*Fabulae* 25) asserts that Jason was burned to death, along with his new bride Glaucus₄ and her father Creon₃, as a result of Medea's machinations. Since it is after that deed that Medea is believed to have met the unknown newcomer Theseus in Athens, it becomes difficult to see how Theseus and Jason could have hunted the Calydonian boar together (as Ovid, the same Hyginus, and Apollodorus report).

Plutarch (in his *Theseus*) does not insist on Theseus being among the ARGONAUTS and the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS:

"Of the many exploits performed in those days by the bravest men, Herodorus thinks that Theseus took part in none, except that he aided the Lapiths in their war with the Centaurs; but others say that he was not only with Jason at Colchis, but helped Meleager to slay the Calydonian boar ..." (Plutarch, *Parallel Lives Theseus* 29.3).

How did Herodorus (6C BC) think? ... When did the fight between the LAPITHS and the CENTAURS take place? Was it before the voyage of the ARGONAUTS or after it? If the answer is "before" and Theseus participated in it (as several assert), then Theseus was famous, and not the unknown newcomer whom Medea met in Athens. Thinking of the Lapith seer Mopsus₁, the answer would have to be "before" since he fought against the CENTAURS but perished during the expedition of the "Argo" (Arg. 4.1502ff.). Yet the circumstances of his death are reported only by Apollonius Rhodius, though Mopsus₁ appears in several lists of ARGONAUTS (*Argonautica Orphica*, Valerius Flaccus, and Hyginus).

Then again: Did the war between the LAPITHS and the CENTAURS take place before or after the Calydonian boar-hunt? Thinking of Caeneus₁, the answer would have to be "after"; for Caeneus₁ is the Calydonian hunter (following Ovid and Hyginus) that was later buried alive by the CENTAURS in the course of their famous fight with the LAPITHS (Apd.Ep.1.22).

Summing up, we notice that the story of Meleager and others establishes the sequence: 1) ARGONAUTS, 2) Calydonian boar-hunt. That the story of Mopsus₁ suggests another sequence: 1) LAPITHS/CENTAURS, 2) ARGONAUTS. And that the story of Caeneus₁ orders the events thus: 1) Calydonian boar-hunt, 2) LAPITHS/CENTAURS.

In the view of Apollonius Rhodius, Theseus' most celebrated adventure (the one resulting in the abduction of Ariadne) belonged to "days past" (i.e., previous to the voyage of ARGONAUTS), and being already famous, Theseus could not have met Medea in Athens in the shape of an unknown newcomer as other poets and mythographers assert. Had Apollonius included Theseus among the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS? It is not likely, since in Apollonius' view Theseus did not follow the ARGONAUTS because he was retained in the Underworld:

"But Theseus ... an unseen bond kept beneath the land of Taenarus, for he had followed that path with Pirithous; assuredly both would have lightened for all the fulfilment of their toil." (*Argonautica* 1.101).

Theseus' abduction of Helen and his subsequent detention in the Underworld is generally believed to have occurred near the end of his career (v.g. Apd.Ep.1.33; Pau.1.17.4). According to Plutarch (*Theseus* 31.1, quoting Hellanicus), Theseus was fifty years old when he abducted Helen, and having later returned from Hades (or some other place, as others say), he went into exile and died.

Did Apollonius believe that also the war of the SEVEN AGAINST THEBES occurred before the voyage of the ARGONAUTS? How is then the role attributed to Theseus by Euripides (*Suppliants*) or Sophocles (*Oedipus at Colonus*) in that war to be combined with such an order of events? Did Atalanta's son Parthenopaeus die at Thebes (Apd.3.6.8; Eur.*Phoe.*1157; Pau.9.18.6; Stat.*Theb.*9.885) before his mother killed the Calydonian boar? It appears that if someone wished to accommodate Apollonius Rhodius' view of Theseus' position in time, he would also have to drastically rearrange or eliminate several tales. But then he would meet a similar difficulty with the authors who count Theseus among the ARGONAUTS ... Indeed,

"The legends of Greece generally have different forms ... " (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8.53.5).

Carlos Parada
Lund, July 10, 2003

Related sections [Bibliography](#), [Medea](#), [Theseus](#), [ARGONAUTS](#), [CALYDONIAN HUNTERS](#)

Sources [See text above.](#)

[Abbreviations](#)