

PERSEUS: SIGNIFICANCES OF A BIG GREEK HERO OR AN EARLY SUN-GOD

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Abstract. The purpose of the paper is to describe the fascinating myth of Perseus, son of Zeus and Danae, who became well known for his two great achievements: a) the beheading of gorgon Medusa and b) the killing of the Cetus sent to tear Princess Andromeda to pieces. The myth was so impressive that its personages were made constellations. The different scenarios proposed so far for Perseus but especially the various interpretations of the myth together with its symbolism and historical and technological significances are referred and discussed.

Actually, our interest for the myth of Perseus started from the presence of its hero in the star catalogue of Ptolemy. The myth as such is a multi-level transposition of historical facts, human desires and imagined outcomes. It is the first coherent form of human knowledge, preceding philosophy and science. But the multiple symbolisms of the myth – and, concerning the myth of Perseus, it is only suggested here – deserves to be remembered, even if only for our belief in progress and development. More concretely, the technological objects that people dreamed of remind us that the first step of creation/innovation was – and is – imagination.

Keywords: Greek mythology, myth of Perseus, ancient Greek and Roman coins.

Rezumat. Scopul lucrării este de a descrie fascinantul mit al lui Perseu, fiul lui Zeus și al lui Danae, care a devenit cunoscut din cele două mari realizări ale sale: a) decapitarea gorgonei Medusa și b) uciderea lui Cetus ce fusese trimis în bucăți prințesei Andromeda. Mitul a fost atât de impresionant încât personajele sale au fost făcute constelații. Sunt menționate și discutate diferitele scenarii propuse până acum pentru Perseu, dar mai ales diversele accepțiuni ale mitului împreună cu simbolismul său și semnificațiile istorice și tehnologice.

De fapt, interesul nostru pentru mitul lui Perseu a început de la prezența eroului său în catalogul stelelor din Ptolemeu. Mitul ca atare este o transpunere pe mai multe niveluri a faptelor istorice, a dorințelor umane și a rezultatelor imaginate. Este prima formă coerentă a cunoașterii umane, care precede filosofia și știința. Dar multiplul simbolism a mitului - și, în ceea ce privește mitul lui Perseu, el este doar sugerat aici - merită să fie reamintit, chiar și numai pentru credința noastră în progres și dezvoltare. Mai concret, obiectele tehnice la care visau oamenii ne amintesc că primul pas al creației/ inovației a fost - și este - imaginația.

Cuvinte - cheie: mitologia greacă, mitul lui Perseu, monede antice grecești și romane.

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1. Prologue

Perseus, Περσεύς, according to mythology, was the son of god Zeus and the princess of Argos Danae, Δανάη. His life, from the way of his birth till his two great achievements, i.e. the beheading of gorgon Medusa who transformed to stones those who looked at her and the killing of the Cetus sent to tear to pieces the princess of Ethiopia, Andromeda, is extremely fascinating and interesting. These made him well known not only in the narrow space of his nationhood, but all over the known at his times world, as he and all others related to his myth “became” constellations, namely, the famous astronomer Ptolemy gave their names to constellations.

Indeed, not only Perseus, but also the flying horse *Pegasus* that came out from Medusa’s head became a constellation and similarly, *Andromeda*, her parents *Cepheus* and *Cassiopeia*, as well as the *Cetus* in Ptolemy’s *Almagest*. Thus, all of them turned into immortals, as those who learned the various constellations also wanted to know the history or myth related to their names.

Here the most important parts of Perseus’ myth will be mentioned, along with its various interpretations. Moreover, the explanations and the symbolisms of the myth proposed up to now, either by new investigators as well as by ancient authors, will be given.

Thus, Chapter 2 deals with the myth itself and what the ancient authors referred to. Chapter 3 gives the up to now proposed interpretations and their symbolism. Finally, in the chapter Discussion the opinions of the various investigators about Perseus, his myth, and all others related to it are given.

Part I

2. Mythology

2.1. Overview

According to the Greek mythology, Perseus was the son of Zeus, *Jupiter*, and princess Danae, daughter of the king of Argos, Acrissios, Ἀκρίσιος. He was an important king³, whose name is related to Ἀμφικτυονίης⁴, while Argos was a great *city-country* in ancient Greece⁵, the acropolis of which is described by Pausanias⁶.

Due to an oracle according to which Acrissios’ grandson would kill him, the king locked his only child, i.e. his daughter Danae, in a prison⁷, which still existed in Pausanias epoch and was

³ Apollodoros, *Library* 2.1.4 | 5

⁴ Strabo, *Geographic*, 9.3.7

⁵ Idem, H 6.18

⁶ Pausanias, *Tour of Greece*, 2.24.1

⁷ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.1

described by him⁸. While Danae was kept in this underneath copper room, Zeus, who was in love with her, managed to penetrate into the prison, by being transformed into *golden rain* and had a sexual intercourse with her; thus, she became pregnant and finally gave birth to a son, Perseus. When Acrissios learned about it, he put Danae and her son into a wooden box and threw them into the sea⁹.

To the so far referred there are various interpretations. For instance: a) regarding Danae's pregnancy, some said that Proitos, Προϊτος, Acrissios' brother, was responsible and not Zeus; b) concerning when Acrissios learned that Danae had a son, others said soon after his birth, while according to others much later. In any case, all agree that Acrissios put Danae and her son into a wooden box throwing them in the sea, (Fig. 1).

The waves brought the box with Danae and Perseus to the island of Serifos, where they were saved by the fisherman Dyctes, Δίκτυς, brother of the king of Serifos, Polydectes, Πολυδέκτης,¹⁰. From Hesiod¹¹, and Apollodoros¹², one learns that Δίκτυς and Πολυδέκτης were sons of Μάγνης, *Magnes*, who was the head of the race of *Magnetes* in Thessaly. According to the most acceptable scenario of the myth, Danae and his son stayed at the island of Serifos supported and protected by Dyctes, but bothered by Polydectes who wanted to make Danae either his wife or mistress, but she had repeatedly denied it.

With the passing of time, Perseus became a strong young person able to protect his mother from Polydectes, who continuously tried to find a way to get rid of her. The opportunity came when Polydectes announced his marriage with Hippodamia, Ἴπποδάμεια, daughter of the king of Pisa in Peloponnesus Oenomaus, Οἰνόμαος, and on such an occasion everyone had to offer him gifts, mainly *horses* but Perseus, with his young enthusiasm and thinking that Polydectes will not continue to annoy his mother, promised that he could offer him even *gorgon Medusa's head*. So, Polydectes demanded from him Medusa's head hoping that he will not come back and, thus, he could finally get to Danae.

On the other hand, according to Hyginus¹³, Polydectes married Danae and rose up her son taking care of him. He continues mentioning that when Acrissios has learned that his daughter and Perseus were at Serifos, he went there having in mind to kill his grandson; but Polydectes mediated between them and Perseus promised that he will never kill his grandfather. It is also said that Polydectes died while Acrissios was still on the island, and Perseus organized *Funeral Games* in his honour, which were the seventh ones¹⁴.

2.2. About Gorgons – Gorgon Medusa

The most predominant aspect for gorgons is that they were daughters of Forkus, son of Pontus and Gaia, from his sister *Ceto*^{15,16}, although others think they were daughters of Gorgon, son of Typhoon, and Ceto, from whom their name comes¹⁷.

Gorgons were humanlike monsters, who turned to stone those who looked at them, and Apollodoros described them in detail¹⁸. Gorgons lived either at the western end of the ocean¹⁹, or

⁸ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 2.23.7

⁹ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.1

¹⁰ Strabo, see *supra* note 4/, 10.10

¹¹ Hesiod, *Women's Catalogue*, 3

¹² Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 1.9.6

¹³ Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 63

¹⁴ Idem, 273

¹⁵ Hesiod *Theogony*, 270-336

¹⁶ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 1.2.6

¹⁷ Hyginus, *Preface*

toward the Ethiopian ocean, or even at Hades. Besides, their number is not accurately known, (e.g., Homer refers to one²⁰; Apollodoros says they were three, while others say they were many more).

At the beginning, gorgons were beautiful, had pride for their beauty, and especially for their nice and rich hair; and Medusa not only dared to compare it with that of goddess Athena, but to find hers better. Thus, Athena transformed them into monsters with snakes in the place of their hair, while deprived of immortality from Medusa²¹. Moreover, for Medusa it is said that she made love with Poseidon, with or without her will, at one of Athena's temple, a fact that made the goddess mad with her. Thus, when Perseus promised to kill Medusa and bring her head to Polydectes, Athena ran to help him.

On the other hand, there are other representations of Medusa and/or generally of Gorgons^{22,23}. According to the first, Medusa was queen and leader of some Libyans and fought Perseus who, with an army from Peloponnesus, came against them. According to the second, Gorgons belonged to one of the female nations of Libya; they were very brave fighters against whom Perseus marched. Besides, Diodoros informs us about the fights between the nations of Amazons and Atlantes as well as between Amazons and Gorgons²⁴.

2.3. Preparation of Perseus for his first achievement

After his promise to Polydectes, Perseus had to find out the exact place where the gorgons lived, because various and different things were said about them, as already mentioned.

At this appropriate moment, god Hermes and goddess Athena appeared telling him that first of all he had to find Graies, who would tell him where Nymphs lived. Besides, they advised him to ask them to provide the necessary equipment for his trip, which were:

- a) Κυνέα, i.e. the magic cap of Hades that made invisible those who were wearing it,
- b) Κίβισις, i.e. a special and very strong bag to put Medusa's head after beheading her,
- c) The flight sandals to be able to reach the living place of Medusa.

Before continuing, it is worthwhile to give some information about Graies and Nymphs. It was supposed Graies to be three, although their particular names differ from author to author. According to Apollodoros²⁵, Graies were gorgons' sisters, *born old* that explains their name origin, because γράιες in Greek means *old women*. Besides, it is said that Graies share a common tooth and eye. Hesiod gives some information about them too²⁶; he informs us that they lived towards the western end of the earth, where Hesperides also stayed. Besides, Hyginus mentions that Aeschylus, in his work *Forkides*, calls Graies guardians of gorgons²⁷. Indeed, some said Graies were the vanguard of gorgons, although others do not agree; while Palaifatos considers Graies and gorgons identical²⁸.

Regarding Nymphs, they were good and pretty women, daughters of Zeus, lived in trees, fountains, caves etc. protecting them and living in harmony with humans.

¹⁸ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.2

¹⁹ Hesiod, see *supra* note 15/, 274-275

²⁰ Homer *Odyssey* λ' 633 | 635

²¹ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.2

²² Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 2.21.5 | 6

²³ Diodoros of Sicily, *Library of History*, 3.52

²⁴ Idem, 3.54.4 | 7; 3.55.3

²⁵ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.2

²⁶ Hesiod, see *supra* note 15/, 270 | 279

²⁷ Hyginus, *Poetica Astronomica* 1, II.12

²⁸ Palaifatos, *About Unbeliever Stories*, 31.15–

After building a boat, Perseus started his trip towards the West to meet Graies. Finding them, he took their only teeth and eye and forced them to tell where the Nymphs lived. So, he learned that the Nymph Στυξ kept in Hades cave his magic cap, and that Medusa lived at the upper north place^{29,30}. Getting this valuable information, Perseus continued his trip. He found Στυξ, and the others keeping the equipment he wanted, and obtained them.

For those mentioned above there are various interpretations: So, others said that Hermes gave him his flying sandals; others that Hermes provided him with a diamond harp to cut Medusa's head, while others that Vulcan gave it to him. Besides, Athena offered him a *shield*, of either copper or crystal, to use it as a mirror, and thus avoiding to looking directly at Medusa's face.

2.4. The beheading of Medusa

Perseus, putting the magic cap, κινέα, on his head to become invisible, taking the special bag and wearing the flying sandals, was now ready to fly to the place where Medusa and her sisters lived. It was said that κινέα was made by the skin of Kerberos, i.e. the *dog keeper of Hades*, whose name comes from the Greek word κύν/κυνός meaning *dog*. From a wonderful description of Perseus and these equipments³¹, one learns that the special bag, κίβισις, was made of silver.

He was lucky and her sisters were sleeping when he arrived, and thus he managed to behead her, (Figs. 2, 3, 4). Then, Medusa's two children from Poseidon – the flying horse Pegasus and Chrysaor – came out of her severed head. Perseus put Medusa's severed head in his bag and riding Pegasus fled away as soon as possible³².

Perseus went away while Medusa's sisters followed him, (Fig. 5); but it was impossible to find him, as the wearing of the κινέα made him invisible³³. So, they came back crying and howling in distress, while the countless heads of the snakes they had instead of hair made a harmonic sound. Some say that Athena has been inspired from this to create a flute variant called *many headed*³⁴. Others – that Athena herself discovered the *pipe*³⁵, but when she realized that it made her to look ugly she threw it away and Marsyas found it³⁶, and with it he competed with Apollo in music.

It is also said that Athena had followed Perseus and attended him during Medusa's beheading. It seems very possible that because of this, there is the interpretation according to which Athena herself beheaded Medusa³⁷. Besides, it is said that Athena collected Medusa's blood and actually collected it separately from the vein of her right and left sides. From it, she gave two bottles to Asclepius³⁸, or only one according to others. It is also said that she sprinkled with 2 drops, one from each bottle, her protected snake Erichonius, making it able to cure and also to kill.

Athena put Medusa's severed head in the middle of her shield (Fig. 6), irrespective of whether she herself had killed Medusa or Perseus had done it, offering her the head as recognition of her great help³⁹. Besides, Athena has always appeared wearing on her chest *aegis*, (Fig. 7), i.e. a piece of she-goat skin with a representation of Medusa's head, known as *gorgoneion*.

²⁹ Hesiod, see *supra* note 15/, 383-394; 775-

³⁰ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 8.17.6 | 8.18.6

³¹ Hysiod, *Hercules Shield*, 216-237

³² Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.2

³³ Idem, 2.4.3

³⁴ Pindar, *Phythionicos Hymns*, 12

³⁵ Diodoros of Sicily, see *supra* note 23/, 5.73.8

³⁶ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 1.4.2

³⁷ Hyginus, see *supra* note 27/, II.12

³⁸ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 3.10.3

³⁹ Idem, 2.4.3

2.5. Perseus and Atlas

After Medusa's beheading, Perseus was able to come back home and, riding Pegasus, started his trip back to Serifos. Then, while being at the west end of the world known in his epoch he met the titan Atlas, grandson of Uranus. Atlas had married his brother's daughter Hesperis and had got seven girls, known either as Atlantides or Hesperides from their father's or mothers' name, respectively⁴⁰.

Atlas was considered a great astronomer. This was confirmed by Diodoros of Sicily⁴¹, who gives his own explanation for why people thought Atlas hold the whole world on his shoulders, by observing⁴²:

"... It is said that he (Atlas) improved the science of Astronomy and he was the first who taught people everything about the sphere. For this reason, it was considered that the whole world is on his shoulders, i.e. the myth implies the discovery of the sphere, its design and use ..."

To Atlas and generally to Atlantes Herodotus refers⁴³ as well others, too. Besides, Pausanias is also referring to Atlas⁴⁴, as well as to Perseus' persecution by the sisters of Medusa, when describing the decoration of a coffin.

Perseus asked hospitality from Atlas, but he was denied, Atlas being afraid that Perseus will see his *golden apples*, also known as the *golden apples of Hesperides*. Then, Perseus showed him Medusa's head and transformed him into a huge rock, which according to some is the homonymous Mountain in West Africa.

Except Perseus, his grandson Hercules met Atlas, too, and as it is well known, he managed to steal the *golden apples*. This yield to the conclusion that more than one person named Atlas existed; but these are out of the scope of the present work.

2.6. Perseus and Andromeda

Perseus continued his trip back home, and while flying above Ethiopia, he saw a young woman tied with chains in a nearby sea rock. She was Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus, king of Ethiopia and was left there to be eaten by a sea monster, Cetus.

This happened because Andromeda's mother, queen Cassiopeia, found herself prettier in comparison to Nereids. So, they complained to their father who sent the Cetus; while according to an oracle, the country would be released only if the king offered his daughter to be cut into pieces by that monster⁴⁵.

On the other hand, Lucian refers that a dragon was sent to cut into pieces Danae, and not a Cetus⁴⁶. Because of this reason and since in the sky there is the Dragon constellation and that of Cetus, confusion occurred, and some think that the nearby constellation of Dragon is related to the myth and not the constellation of Cetus, which is a bit far away.

Andromeda being bound in chains is described by various ancient authors, although they do not agree for the place. For example, Hyginus simply refers that Andromeda was bound in chains at a coast of Ethiopia⁴⁷, while Strabo tells that this happened at the city Joppa in Israel⁴⁸. With the

⁴⁰ Diodoros of Sicily, see *supra* note 23/, 4.27.1

⁴¹ Idem, 4.27.5

⁴² Ibidem, 3.60

⁴³ Herodotus, *History*, 4.184

⁴⁴ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 5.18.4

⁴⁵ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.3

⁴⁶ Lucian, *Maritime Dialogues: Triton and Nereids*

⁴⁷ Hyginus, see *supra* note 27/, II 9-10

⁴⁸ Strabo, see *supra* note 4/, 1.2.35; 16.2.28

latter agrees Pausanias⁴⁹, adding that the water near Joppa is red, because Perseus washed his hands there after killing the Cetus.

Irrespective of *where* exactly Andromeda was tied, and *what was* the monster, Perseus' timely intervention saved her from it, (Figs. 8, 9), and then he married her. As regarding their marriage, there are various interpretations based mainly on Andromeda's previous engagement. Most acceptable is that she was engaged to her father's brother Fineus, with whom Perseus had to fight to be able to marry her, while according to others she was engaged to Agenor, son of Poseidon and Libya⁵⁰.

Regarding the fight of Perseus with Andromeda's fiancée, some say that her father Cepheus was on Perseus' side while others say the opposite. On the other hand, Ovidius describes the battle between Perseus and Fineus⁵¹. The result of this terrible fight was Perseus' victory, because when he realized that it was impossible to win the endless supporters of his adversary, he showed them Medusa's head and they were transformed into stones. So, finally Perseus married Andromeda and won the kingdom of Ethiopia.

It seems that Perseus and Andromeda stayed for a while in Ethiopia because it is said that they left behind their first son Πέρση, *Perses*, from whom the kings of Persians arose⁵², or from whom they got their name⁵³.

2.7. Perseus comes back home

When Perseus and Andromeda arrived at the island of Serifos after leaving Ethiopia, they found Danae and Dycetes supplicants in Athena's temple. Then, Perseus went to Polydectes' palace where he found him and his friends drinking and having fun. He showed them Medusa's head and all of them transformed into stones. Some relate this to the rocky ground of the island.

Perseus gave back the throne to Dycetes and with his mother and wife left for Argos to meet his grandfather. Unfortunately, Acrissios had left for Larissa of Thessaly to participate in the *Funeral Games* organized by the local king for his father's death⁵⁴.

Perseus, who wanted so much to meet Acrissios, went to Larissa and took part in the Games. Then, during the disk game the disk hit Acrissios and killed him, while Perseus when learned who the killed man was, buried him with great honours and returned to Argos⁵⁵.

To the death of Acrissios Pausanias⁵⁶ has also referred. As Perseus did not like to succeed his grandfather' throne in the city of Argos, and exchanged it with Tyrins. To the city of Tyrins as well as to the nearby Midea, which Perseus included later in his kingdom, Strabo has referred⁵⁷.

Later, Perseus extended his kingdom not only with Midea but also by founding another city, originally named *cyclopean*, because it is said that the Cyclops had built it. Later it was named *Mycenae* from the Greek word μύκης = *mushroom*, as Pausanias refers⁵⁸. The latter gives details and other interpretations concerning the origin of the city's name⁵⁹.

⁴⁹ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 4.35.9 | 10

⁵⁰ Hyginus, see *supra* note 13/, 64

⁵¹ Ovidius, «*Metamorphoses*», Books of Transformations, 5.1-

⁵² Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.5

⁵³ Herodotus, see *supra* note 43/, 7.61

⁵⁴ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.4.4

⁵⁵ Idem, 2.4.4

⁵⁶ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 2.16.2

⁵⁷ Strabo, see *supra* note 4/, 8.6.11

⁵⁸ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 2.16.3

⁵⁹ Idem, 2.16.3 | 4

On the other hand, Perseus fortified all the area with great and tall walls, (Figs. 10, 11) made by the Cyclops, who were called so because they had only one round eye⁶⁰, and in Greek the words *circle* and *eye* are called κύκλος and ὄψ, respectively, (Fig. 12). Besides, Stageirites refers that they got this name because they used tiny shields covering only their face and which had a small circle hole in their centre permitting them to see⁶¹. From the 3 main categories of Cyclops^{62,63,64}, these mentioned here belong to the third one. They were known as Χειρογαστορες or Γαστρόχειρες from the Greek words χέρι = *hand* and γαστέρα = *belly*, because they earned the necessary for living from their handwork, working either with stones or metals, in contrary to the other people who till then worked only with clay.

Perseus *using Cyclops* became a great king dominating almost all over Argolis. So, when god Dionysus came there, Perseus, who did not like somebody else to rule his kingdom, fought against him. Details for the fight between Dionysus and Perseus can be found in Pausanias⁶⁵. It seems that Perseus, with goddess Hera, Ἥρα, in his side, finally won Dionysus, although others do not agree with this.

Dionysus referred here, known as the god of vineyards, of fun and entertainment, is the son of Zeus and Semele. He was always followed by a team of faithful women Maenads, Μαινάδες, and a team of men Selenoi, Σειληνοί, who traced out people of the places they were passing through. Besides, Dionysus is characterized as *sungod*, staying at Delphi when Apollo visited the Hyperboreans.

Finally, it is worthwhile to refer that Perseus and Andromeda gave birth to many children, who were spread all over Peloponnesus, while their descendants all over the known world of their epoch.

Part II

3. Explanations – Symbolisms of the Myth

Most myths contain many exaggerations, teratology etc. as this under investigation. At the same time, it is clear that myths contain fragments of truth, and/or they are symbolic. Thus, people try to discover what is hidden behind myths, and/or give explanations for their symbolism. This happens for the myth of Perseus, too. So, the aim of this chapter is to refer to the symbolism and explanations proposed so far, restricted to the main persons, monsters and animals related to the myth.

3.1. Symbolism of Danae

Some consider that Danae was a goddess. These think that her enclosing in an underground prison and the transformation of Zeus into golden rain, symbolize the yearly circle of vegetation.

In this case, *prison* is identifying with the *roots* of plants needing *rain*; *Zeus*, the force (here, the rain) necessary for their development; and Danae symbolized the *Great Goddess*, the *Great Mother* worshiped in almost all places but under different names.

⁶⁰ Hesiod, see *supra* note 15/, 139-146

⁶¹ Stageirites, *Ωγγυία ἢ Αρχαιολογία*, vol. 3, p. 9

⁶² Kommetas, *Pedagogical Lessons Mythology*, p. 130

⁶³ Stageirites, see *supra* note 61, vol. A', pp. 223 | 225

⁶⁴ Kakrides, *Introduction to the Myth*, vol. 2, pp. 341 | 343

⁶⁵ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 2.20.3 | 4; 2.22.1

Based on the foregoing referred for Danae, Graves thinks that people of this area were named Danae, Δαναοί, from her and not from her progenitor Danaos⁶⁶. Because Danae existed and was worshiped as a goddess at Argos much earlier, and certainly before the son of Belos, Danaos, came there from Egypt.

3.2. Symbolism of Perseus

Limited to the most important parts of the myth and avoiding details, one realizes that Perseus is connected with: a) at least one significant achievement, b) with Athena, the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, c) with Hermes, the god of the *alphabet*, gods' messenger, but also god of commerce and business, d) with the flying horse Pegasus that was going very fast, and e) with Chrysaor, who was considered identical with riches, as his name comes from the Greek words χρυσός = gold and ἄορ = sword.

From those mentioned above, it is supposed that Perseus had not only the *necessary knowledge*, but also a very good sense of how to use it. So, according to some, Perseus found the way to subdue the sea waves, and he became an excellent sailor, a seafarer who travelled to various new lands⁶⁷. This is related to the symbolism of gorgons, too (see below, 3.3).

On the other hand, some considered Perseus as *an old god who was later regarded as a great hero*. The fact that Perseus was considered as a god, actually an early *sun god*, is based on a couple of reasons referred by Kakrides⁶⁸. This conclusion also yields that Perseus fought with god Dionysus, as well as that Perseus had visited Hyperboreans⁶⁹, the same as god Apollo did.

Graves came to the same conclusion comparing the similarities of Perseus and god Dionysus with those of the Mexican god Tlalok⁷⁰.

To his conclusions, the following could be added that strengthen them much more: 1) a myth connects Perseus with *frogs*⁷¹, while a *frog* was shown on the very first coins of Serifos (Figs. 13, 14); 2) god Tlalok is connected with a *mushroom*, and Perseus built Mycenae because of a *mushroom*⁷².

3.3. Symbolism of Gorgons

Concerning gorgons, many symbolisms have been proposed so far. For example, it was said that they were related to the *earth*, as well as to the water, *sea*. Particularly, it was said that Stheno, Σθενώ, and Euryale, Ευρυάλη, represented the *strength* and the *endless* of the sea, respectively, as their names denote in Greek language. For this reason, they were considered immortal, in contrast to Medusa. The latter is supposed to have been mortal, because otherwise she could not have been defeated. Thus, Perseus who found the way to travel fast, without *fearing* the sea waves, won Medusa.

Furthermore, as the sea is represented by Poseidon, this may be the result of very old narrations of the myth according to which Medusa was one of Poseidon's brides⁷³.

⁶⁶ Graves R., *The White Goddess*, 1998

⁶⁷ Varlas G., «*Serifos: The Unknown Island of a Great Seafarer*», Αθήνα 1998

⁶⁸ Kakrides J.Th., «*Introduction to the Myth*», *Greek Mythology* Vol. 3, *Heroes* p. 188, 1986

⁶⁹ Pindar, see *supra* note 34/, 10

⁷⁰ Graves R., *Greek Myths*, 1979

⁷¹ Aelianus, *On the Nature of Animals*

⁷² Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 2.16.3

⁷³ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.3.2

As regarding the transformation into stones of those who looked at Medusa, it is said that people who listen to stories about Perseus' trip to far away and exotic places, remain speechless and ecstatic like rocks.

On the other hand, Palaephatus/Palaiphatos gives his own explanation for gorgons⁷⁴. He considers gorgons and Graies identical, being 3, having gorgons' names, and being daughters of Forkus. The latter lived in the island of Kerne, outside the *Herculean Columns*, and had a very good and faithful friend called Ὀφθαλμός that is *Eye*, whom he used in all of his works. Besides, Forkus ordered and made a huge, *4 meters high*, golden statue of Athena, whom the domestics call *Gorgo*, as goddess Ἄρτεμις, *Diana*, is called Βένδις by the Thracians, Δίκτυνα by the Cretans and Οὔπις by the Lacedemonians. Unfortunately, Forkus died before the statue was placed in its position in the goddess temple, and 3 daughters remained from him. Perseus, who learned about the existence of the golden statue, managed to catch the *Eye* and take the statue of *Gorgo-Athena* killing Medusa, i.e. one of the 3 gorgons. Then, he made a bigger ship, called it *Gorgo*, in which he put the statue's head, and sailing around he asked people to pay him taxes. He continues by referring that once Perseus approached the island of Serifos and asked from people money and the inhabitants promised to bring it the next day. In the meantime they collected big stones they put inside some bags and left the island. These bags full of stones were found the next day by Perseus when he went to collect the taxes. As he did not want that the people of the other islands to learn what had happened, he asked from them the taxes saying to them that otherwise they will turn into stones when they will look at Gorgon's head that was in the front part of his ship, as had happened with the inhabitants of Serifos.

There are some questions concerning Palaephatus' explanations, as he considers gorgons and Graies identical, as well as that the common eye and tooth Graies shared was their father's best friend *Eye* who took care of them, etc.

Explanations about what Medusa symbolized are still given even today. Thus, Bernan identifies her to death⁷⁵. On the other hand, some consider Medusa and the transformation of those who looked at her into stones, with a camera taking a picture that will last; so, that particular moment was petrified. Similarly, he considers her as a series of pictures being taboo or dangerous, and thus they cannot be seen directly.

3.4. Symbolism of Pegasus and Chrysaor

Although the existence of a flying horse is exciting, most think that there was not such a horse, but just a *very fast* one.

Others said that Pegasus was not a horse, but the name of the ship of Perseus. Similarly, and since Pegasus is also related to Bellerephontes, the great hero slayer of monsters, it was said that Pegasus was his ship's name⁷⁶.

Another aspect for Pegasus is given by Lucian, who did not believe that Bellerephontes had a flying horse⁷⁷; but he had studied astrology, learned about stars and flew in the sky with his fantasy.

Similar, but more general, is Ann Searer's view⁷⁸, as she thinks that the release of Pegasus from Medusa means the spiritual elevation that was blocked and made prisoner inside the inactive Medusa.

⁷⁴ Palaiphatos, see *supra* note 28/, 31.15

⁷⁵ Bernan Z.P.: «*Pandora-Odysseus-Perseus*», 2008

⁷⁶ Plinius, *Hist. Nat.*, B 106

⁷⁷ Lucian, *About Astrology*, 13

⁷⁸ Searer Ann, «*Athena: Image and Energy*», Penguin Books, London, 1998

On the other hand, some think that Pegasus and Chrysaor, who came out from Medusa's head, have the meaning of *riches* (wealthiest) and *water* coming out from earth via the fountains. These connect the name of Pegasus with the Greek word πηγή = *spring*, fountain, and that of Chrysaor with χρυσός = *gold*, corresponding to riches.

Furthermore, they combine what is said about Perseus, Andromeda and Cetus considering the latter as the bad Dragon who watches all over, protects water, or detains it, and then dryness and death comes. Some fragments of the Dragon still remain even today in contemporary fairy tales.

3.5. Symbolism of Cyclops

A first reference to Cyclops is given by Hesiod, who mentions the 3 first of them born by Gaia: Βρόντης, *Vrontes*, Στερόπη, *Steroles* and Ἄργης, *Arges*⁷⁹. They were similar to the gods although they had only one cyclical eye in the middle of their face, while they had given Zeus his thunder and made his thunderbolt. These are the so-called Οὐρανίονες as sons of Οὐρανός, while their names mean Βροντή = thunder, Αστραπή = Lightning and Κεραυνός = Thunder, respectively. Besides, in order to have such physical phenomena, the water has to be heated producing clouds etc.

Later, some other Cyclops were born by other gods, as for instance by Poseidon, who were called Σικελιώτες, Sicilians, because it is supposed to live in Sicily. Besides, there were some others used as labourers by Vulcan in his laboratories which were in the islands of Lemnos, of Lipara, of Sicily etc., i.e. where there existed volcanoes. These people working with metals were supposed to be the *first metallurgists*. This is very possible, since, according to the local tradition, Cyclops also lived in the island of Serifos, (Fig. 15), as it is rich in metals, mainly iron.

The third kind of Cyclops, who were supposed to have built Mycenae and its Cyclopean Walls, were from Cilikia or Lykia, while either Proitos or Perseus had brought them to Argolis.

Irrespective of their kind, Cyclops had only one eye, and as was explained, their name comes from this fact. On the other hand, according to Graves⁸⁰, their name possibly comes from the fact that they made homocentric circles on their front in honour of the sun that brought flames in their labs. Besides, the homocentric circles except of sun's symbol are useful to the metallurgists; while he also thinks that they might cover their one eye to do their work better.

According to mythology, the first kind of Cyclops was killed by god Apollo, although it is said that Apollo killed his descendants. Because Cyclops had made Zeus' thunderbolt with which Zeus killed Apollo's son Asclepius; while Apollo was punished for this action by Zeus⁸¹.

It was, thus, thought that Cyclops' death symbolized the resolves of clouds by the sun. Similarly, one could suppose that the reference to Cyclops in the myth of Perseus, and mainly that he ordered them, is in favour of his identity as an early sun god.

4. Discussion

Everybody agrees that myths contain a lot of exaggerations, as they refer to extraordinary things, deformed animals, monsters etc. having peculiarities, excessive attributes and so on. This is true for the myth of Perseus, too, since it includes gorgons, a flying horse etc. As regards gorgons' representation, an interesting view has been proposed by Kaeres⁸², while Giouroucos & Kaeres⁸³,

⁷⁹ Hesiod, see *supra* note 15/, 139-146

⁸⁰ Graves R., see *supra* note 70/, vol. 1, p. 10

⁸¹ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 3.10.4

⁸² Kaeres M.: «*Mythology & Pathological Anatomy*», Αθήνα, 1993

referred to the connection between the myth of gorgons and medicine represented, as it is well-known, by a snake.

Perseus' myth begins with an oracle. The oracles in general, and mainly their following confirmation, made people believe them, and the Oracles to get much more power. Thus, the oracle of Perseus myth had to be confirmed. This happened as it was referred during a disk game, when the disk hit Acrissios and killed him. So, Acrissios was accidentally killed by Perseus during some Funeral Games, and the oracle turned to be true, independently to which games and where it happened: at Larissa, or at Serifos, although some think that the *confusion* concerning the place may be meant to show the connection between Serifos and Larissa.

It is worthwhile to add that Acrissios is not the only one who was killed by a disk, when it changed its direction due to the wind, since other cases are also referred; as that of Ὑάκινθος⁸⁴, for example, as well as others.

On the other hand, some think that myths were used to teach children, to pass messages and/or advice people, or that they were related to some religious ceremonies. So, they are divided in various categories. The myth of Perseus, for instance, is characterized as *historical*, and it seems that the Delphi Oracle recognized Persians as his "descendants"⁸⁵. Similarly, the Persians appeared in Perseus' myth as a historical fact of specific weight, since their king Xerxes had sent an envoy to Argos before his expedition against Greece⁸⁶.

Moreover, Perseus' myth contains much information regarding a lot of things, which could not be considered as typical references. These are for example the *magic hat* that made Perseus *invisible*, the *silver bag*, κίβισις, the *flying sandals*, the *flying horse*, the *collection of Medusa's blood from her two veins in different bottles*, the *flute's panarmonic lower octave*, the *taxes/tribute paid by the conquered cities/regions*, the *extensive economy of conquests*, Cetus and/or Dragon, Cyclops etc. Because of them, a lot of questions arise and rich material for thinking is provided.

In Greek mythology, it is referred that god Hermes and goddess Iris used to fly, since both were god's messengers and it was important that the messages travel very fast; something like today's internet. So, it could be well regarding the flying sandals Perseus used. Thus, since he had already reached by flying the place where the gorgons lived, he could run away similarly and it was not necessary to leave the place on a flying horse, namely on *Pegasus*. Except those already referred for *Pegasus*, it is worthwhile to mention that according to the most acceptable scenario, *Pegasus* was named the very fast travel ship of Perseus, although Palaephatus called it *Gorgo*.

On the other hand, Medusa's beheading by Perseus and most of the various symbolisms given to it agree with the idea of *fear*; a general fear, that makes people's *blood to be cold* their mouth *speechless* and their body *motionless*. Thus, saying that Perseus managed to cut Medusa's head, is it possible to mean that he managed to win his fears? His fears for *long distance trips* to new, unknown, places? Trips: till Libya? Trips: outside Mediterranean Sea towards the Pontus? Or trips outside Hercules Columns? Or even: trips to the ocean.

Similarly, Perseus might manage to win the *fear of death*. So, he did great and significant things helping people, as great heroes do. It is mentioned that nobody refers to his death except Soudas.

In other words, Perseus managed to do something really great and important that nobody had done earlier. In this way, his myth was constructed in time, as people talking about his great achievements either changed and/or added something. Therefore, the myths, as that of Perseus, give

⁸³ Giouroukos S. & Kaeres M.: «Cyclopean with Triobody», *Medicine* 35, p. 349, 1979

⁸⁴ Lucian, *God's Dialogues: Hermes & Apollo*

⁸⁵ Herodotus, see *supra* note 43/, 7.220

⁸⁶ *Idem*, 7.150 | 152

historical information/suggestions, and they were created over a long period of time: thus, besides giving historical information, they are *historically* created.

Thus, for each myth except its *basic part*, various acceptations exist, too. So, a myth is continuously changing, because if things around changed, the myth has also to change in order to survive⁸⁷. In the myth of Perseus there are many interpretations most of which were referred here. From them, one could notice two big differences both referred by Hyginus⁸⁸. One is Polydectes' behaviour to Danae and Perseus was very good, and the other has to do with who really killed Medusa. Because, only Hyginus refers that not Perseus but Athena herself beheaded Medusa⁸⁹.

Independently of who killed Medusa, Athena put her severed head in the middle of her shield to frighten enemies. Besides, not only Medusa's head, but even a few of her *hair* were able to throw away the bad ones⁹⁰, while a *reproduction* of Medusa's head, known as *gorgoneion*, was later widely used on coins, as an amulet or was put in the middle of soldiers' shields, (Figs. 16, 17, 18).

Therefore, the basic symbolisms of most of those related to Perseus' myth were referred. Starting from the symbolism of Danae, and supposing that she denotes the yearly cycle of plants development, she is thus identified with the goddess of agriculture, i.e. Demeter. As the latter and Medusa are referred to be Poseidon's brides^{91,92}, it seems to be an indirect connection between Danae and Medusa that might have been included in the initial version of the myth and lost with the passing of time.

It is also very possible that an unknown relation connects Medusa and Andromeda that perhaps existed in the initial version of the myth, too. Both these names, as many others similar, mean the same thing, i.e. *royalty*, since all include the Greek verb μέδω = βασιλεύω = *to reign*.

On the other hand, it seems it was a custom to put a going astray woman into a box and throw it in the water, therefore to sacrifice her, as other examples are also referred by the ancient authors^{93,94}. From the referred cases, only this of Σεμέλη/Διόνυσος is almost identical to that of Δανάη/Περσεύς as described by Pausanias⁹⁵; but, it is mentioned that Lucian⁹⁶ gives another interpretation for the myth of *Dionysus* and his mother *Semele*, which is very much different.

Perseus, as son of Zeus, is supposed to be *semi-god*, but as mentioned, he was considered an early *sun god*, especially because of his visit to Hyperboreans, as Apollo did. Regarding them, it is not known from ancient authors' references if they have really existed, or if it was an absolutely fantastic group of people leaving peacefully in a beautiful land, like the Makaroi Island, and worshipping gods. Some place them in various places, while it is said that the wild olive tree was carried to Greece from their place⁹⁷. This erased the questions if their land was above the wind Boreas, while details about them have been collected and can be found in Kakrides⁹⁸.

Among the already referred agreements in favour of Perseus being an early *sun god*, are: his travels, his ability to fly and that wearing Hades cap made him invisible. Beside his similarities to god Dionysus, a fight between them has taken place, in order to find who of these two *sun gods* will

⁸⁷ Graf F.: «*Griechische Mythologie. Eine Einführung*», Γκραφ Φέιτζ «*Εισαγωγή στη Μελέτη της Ελληνικής Μυθολογίας*», Εκδ. Πανεπ. Κρήτης, Ηράκλειο 2018

⁸⁸ Hyginus, see *supra* note 13/, 63

⁸⁹ Hyginus, see *supra* note 27/, II.12

⁹⁰ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.7.3

⁹¹ Idem, 2.3.2

⁹² Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 8.25, 7

⁹³ Diodoros of Sicily, see *supra* note 23/, 5.62

⁹⁴ Apollodoros, see *supra* note 3/, 2.7.4

⁹⁵ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 3.24.3

⁹⁶ Lucian, *Gods' Dialogues: Poseidon & Hermes*

⁹⁷ Pausanias, see *supra* note 6/, 5.7.7

⁹⁸ Kakrides J.Th., *Greek Mythology* Vol. 3, *Heroes*, pp. 334 | 340, 1986

influence the wider area of Argolis. Furthermore, the following could be added to those mentioned above:

- 1) Perseus had a son named *Perses*, similarly to god *Helios*.
- 2) Perseus discovered the *disk game*, and the disk is a *sun symbol*.
- 3) Perseus' power upon Cyclopes who were connected to *circle, disk*.
- 4) In the fight between Perseus and Dionysus, Hera was in Perseus' team. This is normal as she wanted to protect the place where there was her temple and she was worshipped.

Besides, it is mentioned that Perseus was worshiped in many places of Greece like Corinth, Athens, Serifos etc., as well as in others outside it (Fig. 19). He was also worshiped in Egypt, and especially in the city of Hemmis, where he appeared from time to time⁹⁹. Thus, Perseus could be considered an early *sun god*, who later remained in people's memory as a *great hero*. Either an early sun god, or a great hero, it can be said that Perseus was a significant personality, as a) there is a fish named Perseus¹⁰⁰, and b) the Egyptians had given his name to one cape at Nile's Delta¹⁰¹. The latter shows his relation to Egypt and especially to its city Hemmis, as already referred. Concerning Perseus' name, according to some it comes from the Sanskrit word *parasaha* that means *timely help* and it was given to him by his people, because of his great and quick help.

According to others, Perseus comes from the words *per* = son and *se* = son, characterizing the Egyptian god Oros, as son of goddess Isis (*se*); while others think his name should be Πτερσεύς i.e. *flying exterminator*^{102,103}. On the other hand, the name his mother Danae gave him was Ευρυμέδων that means *Great King*, as it comes from the Greek words *ευρύς/μεγάλος* meaning *great* and *μέδω* = *reign*. The son of Danae indeed became a great king, as he founded *Mycenae* that later became the most important *city-country* where a significant culture flourished, being the related ring between the Minoan culture and the later Greek one.

Regarding the question when Perseus lived and when his myth evolved the answer depends on what somebody thinks Perseus was: an early *sun god*, a *great hero*, or one of the Greek patriarchs. Because:

- a) If Perseus is considered *as an early sun god*, (a result of his similarities to gods Dionysus & Tlalok, his fight with god Dionysus, as well as his visit to Hyperboreans, and that nobody except Soudas is referred to his death) it is not possible to place him somewhere chronologically;
- b) If he is considered simply as a *hero* who built Mycenae we can say that he lived in the 14-13 century BC, based on the archaeological findings of the place;
- c) If he was one of the Greek patriarchs, then he must have lived 5-6 centuries earlier, i.e. around 2000 BC.

Finally it is worthwhile to add that Perseus' myth had a tremendous influence in all kinds of arts, from antiquity till our days. The influence in arts is too big to be referred in detail here; thus, its influence in Pindar's *Hymns*¹⁰⁴ as well as in Ovidius' *Transformations*¹⁰⁵ was only referred. Besides, one can take an idea from the given figures mainly from ancient pottery, as well as from ancient Greek and Roman coinage.

⁹⁹ Herodotus, see *supra* note 43/, 2.91

¹⁰⁰ Aelian, see *supra* note 71/, 3.28

¹⁰¹ Strabo, see *supra* note 4/, 17.1.18

¹⁰² Graves R., see *supra* note 70/

¹⁰³ Graves R., see *supra* note 66/

¹⁰⁴ Pindar, see *supra* note 34/

¹⁰⁵ Ovidius, see *supra* note 51/

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6. Figures and their Captions



Fig. 1: Danae and Perseus inside the urn.



Fig. 2: Medusa's beheading by Perseus (Acropolis of Selinous, Sicily).



Fig. 3: Coin from Amisoss, Pontus, (109-89) BC; Obverse: Head of goddess Athena with helmet; Reverse: Perseus holding his harpy and Medusa's cutting head, down her body, legend.



Fig. 4: Bronze coin from Sebaste, Phrygia; Obverse: Bust of Emperor Caracalla, legend; Reverse: Perseus cuts Medusa's head and goddess Athena watches him, legend.



Fig. 5: One of Medusa's sisters pursues Perseus.



Fig. 6: A Roman reproduction of Athena's shield with Medusa's cutting head in its centre, 3rd AD century (Fragment, British Museum).



Fig. 7: Goddess Athena with aegis at her chest, 490 BC. (From amphora of 490 BC; Scene from Iliad: The crisis of Achilles' weapons)



Figs. 8: Perseus frees Andromeda from Cetus
From ancient Corinth amphora, now at Altes
Museum, Berlin



Fig. 10: The entrance to
Mycenae, (Πύλη
Λεόντων = The Lion's
Entrance).



Fig. 11: A panoramic view of
Mycenae.

Figs. 9: Perseus frees Andromeda from Cetus
Drachma of 160/161 AD from Alexandria, Egypt;
Obverse: Head of Antoninos Pius, legend with his
name; Reverse: Perseus with Phrygian hat and holding
his harpy with one hand, gives the other to
Andromeda.



Fig. 12: An artist's
presentation of a Cyclop.



Fig. 13: The two sides
of the silver stater of
Serifos, 530-500 BC.



Fig. 14: Detail of the obverse
side of (fig.) 13.



Fig. 15: The so-called throne of the
Cyclops in the island of Serifos.



Fig. 16: Gorgoneion on one side of a coin from
Athens, 4th century BC.



Fig. 17: Bronze gorgoneion from
soldier's shield, 600-550 BC;
(Olympia Museum, Peloponnesus,
Greece).



Fig. 18: Coin from Macedonia, Head of Faustina II, daughter of Antoninus Pius & wife of Marcus Aurelius, legend with her name / Macedonian shield with Medusa in its centre

Fig. 19: Coin from Ake-Ptolemais, Phoenicia, 220-21 AD, Head of Elagabalus' wife, Aquilia Severa, legend / Complex of 4-style temple over a 6-style structure with statue of Tyche crowned by Nike; Statue of Perseus holding the head of Medusa & statue of Athena. Below is a 6-style portico with Zeus in its central arch and other statues to left & right, legend COL PTO