IMAGES OF MYTHS IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

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Myths and Images

Greek myths are seldom light-hearted, cheerful stories; more often they are bleak, heartless and cruel. The myth of the Trojan War is framed by two such grim episodes, both dealing with the sacrifice of an innocent young girl.

When the combined Greek forces had assembled under the leadership of the powerful king Agamemnon and were ready to sail across the Aegean Sea to attack the city of Troy, they found they were thwarted by the lack of a suitable wind. The remedy, they discovered to their horror, lay in the sacrifice of Agamemnon's virgin daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis, whom Agamemnon had offended. Once the girl was dispatched, the expedition was able to set off and in time successfully sacked the city.

After Troy had fallen and its king had been slain, one last terrible act was demanded of the victorious Greeks before they could return home: the ghost of Achilles, who had been killed in action, demanded as his prize Polyxena, a harmless maiden, daughter of Priam, the defeated Trojan king. Achilles had been a warrior of such distinction that his posthumous wishes could not easily be ignored. The girl was sacrificed and the Greeks sailed away.

Clues to Matching Myths and Images

A Roman painting (Fig. 1), preserved on a wall in Pompeii, shows a half-naked young woman held by two men. She raises her arms pathetically and lifts her eyes to heaven. A priest, standing to the right, anxiously raises one hand to his chin. In his other hand, he holds a sword. He is wreathed and prepared to perform a religious rite. The sword indicates that a sacrifice is imminent. The girl is to be the victim.

A Greek vase (Fig. 2) provides a more explicit and brutal image: a girl is actually being sacrificed. Her tightly swathed body is held by three warriors, while a fourth cuts her throat, from which blood spurts out.

How do we know who these unfortunate victims are?

The one on the vase (Fig. 2) is easy to identify: her name is written above her head. She is Polyxena; her slayer is Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles. His name is also inscribed, as are those of all the participants.

1. Iphigeneia being carried to be sacrificed. Fresco, Roman wall painting from Pompeii, AD 63–79. Museo Nazionale, Naples.

2. Polyxena being sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles. Attic black-figure amphora, c. 570–560 BC, by one of the painters of the Tyrrhenian Group. British Museum, London.

Inscriptions are a very clear and (usually) unambiguous way of specifying a story.

What about the girl in the Roman painting (Fig. 1)?

Here there are no inscriptions, but there are other clues that help to identify the story. Up in the sky to the right floats the upper part of the goddess Artemis, identifiable from the bow she carries. She summons a nymph, to the left, who emerges from the clouds holding on to a deer.

According to one version of the myth, Artemis at the last minute substituted a deer for Iphigeneia and miraculously whisked the girl away to be a temple servant in the land of the Taurians. The presence in the sky of a deer, soon to replace the maiden carried to the altar, identifies the victim. This must be Iphigeneia, for no such last-minute rescue was vouchsafed to the unfortunate Polyxena.

The deer alone is enough to identify Iphigeneia on a vase (Fig. 3) made by a Greek in South Italy. In the centre is an altar, behind which stands the man about to make the sacrifice. He holds a knife out towards the girl who slowly, solemnly approaches. Shadowing her, with its head, legs and rump just visible behind her, is a deer. Other figures surround the central scene: Artemis above and to the right, about to engineer the exchange of deer for girl. Opposite Artemis, on the left, is her brother Apollo, not a participant in this myth, but a twin often paired in images with his sister. Below and to the left, there is a young man assisting at the sacrifice and, at the far left, a woman.

3. Iphigeneia going willingly to her death. Apulian red-figure volute krater, 360–350 BC, by a painter related to the Iliupersis Painter. British Museum, London.

Iphigeneia in the Roman painting (Fig. 1) was carried protesting to the sacrifice, but on this vase (Fig. 3) she advances unprotestingly. There were, in fact, two different traditions as to how Iphigeneia met her end. According to one, she was taken by force to be sacrificed. This is most memorably recalled in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon* when the chorus recall how in order to gain a fair wind to take the troops to Troy, the girl was brutally slaughtered like an animal over the altar:

> Her prayers, her cries, her virgin youth,
> Counted for nothing.
> The warriors would have their war.
> The ritual began.
> Father, priest and king, he prayed the prayers,
> Commanded attendants to swing her up,
> Like a goat, over the altar,
> Face down . . .
> She cast piteous looks, arrows of grief,
> At the ministers of sacrifice . . .
>
> *Agamemnon*, lines 227–243 (trans. Raphael and McLeish)

According to the other tradition, Iphigeneia, at first horrified to learn the fate that awaited her, upon consideration decided to welcome it. This unexpected reversal is touchingly portrayed in Euripides' tragedy *Iphigeneia in Aulis*.

> "I have pondered the thing," Iphigeneia reflects, "I am resolved to die. And I will do it gloriously. . . . The whole might of Hellas [Greece] depends on me. . . . Ten thousand men are armed with shields, ten thousand men have oars in their hands. . . . Shall my single life be a hindrance to all this? . . . If Artemis has willed to take my body, shall I, a mortal woman, thwart the goddess? It cannot be. I give my body to Hellas [Greece]. Sacrifice me, sack Troy. That will be my monument. . . ."
>
> *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, lines 1375–1399 (trans. Hadas and McLean)

Artists could choose which tradition they wished to illustrate. The painter of the vase in Figure 3, like Euripides, showed Iphigeneia approaching the altar with calm dignity; the Roman painter (Fig. 1) preferred the harsh tradition described by Aeschylus and so showed the terrified victim held in the firm grip of the two men carrying her.

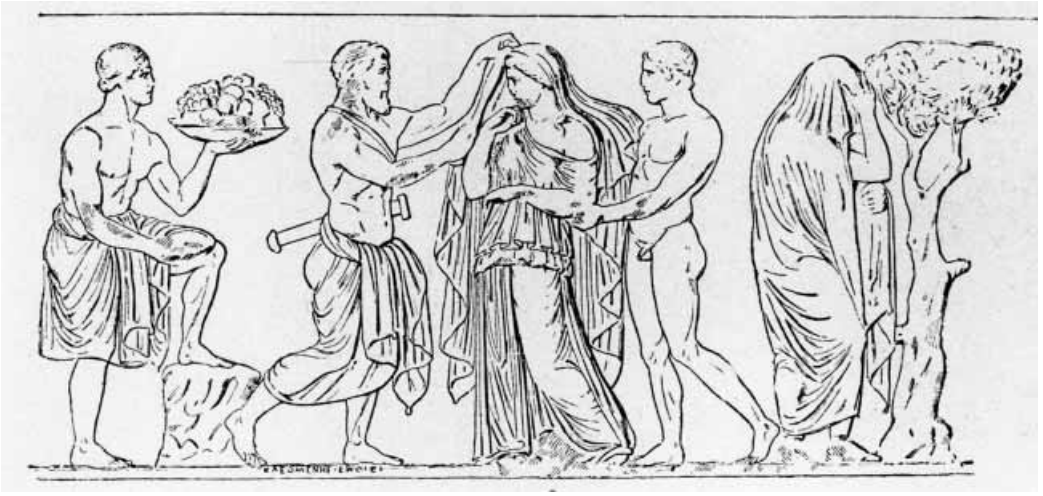
Despite his best efforts, the Roman artist has compromised the tragic content of the scene: the priest at the right is awkward and overlarge and the girl in the centre looks artificially posed and theatrical. As a result there is little to touch the heart in this mediocre painting – except for the grief-stricken man at the far left, his cloak over his head, his face buried in his hand. The Roman painter did not invent this strikingly poignant figure himself; he took the image from a celebrated painting (now lost) that had been created centuries before by a famous Greek painter named Timanthes.

Pliny, a Roman writer of the 1st century AD, described the painting in which it first appeared, as:

> that much-praised painting of *Iphigeneia* depicted by Timanthes with the girl standing by the altar ready for death. Timanthes had represented all the onlookers as plunged in sorrow so effectively that he exhausted every possible representation of grief, and when he came to portray Agamemnon [her distraught father], he had to conceal his face in his cloak, for he had reserved no adequate expression to show his suffering.
>
> Adapted from Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 35, 73

Timanthes knew what he was about better than Pliny realised. By concealing Agamemnon's face, he liberated us to imagine a grief more overwhelming than any that could be portrayed.

Timanthes depicted Iphigeneia quietly accepting her fate (as on the vase in Fig. 3 and in Euripides' tragedy); the fame of his painting rested primarily on the emotional impact produced by his expressive



4. Iphigeneia about to be sacrificed. Drawing of a Roman marble altar decorated with reliefs possibly derived from a lost painting by the 4th-century BC Greek painter Timanthes. 1st century BC. Uffizi, Florence.

characterisation of Agamemnon, heart-broken father of the innocent victim, turning away from the ghastly action that he himself had been obliged to instigate.

The Roman painter appreciated the power of this invention. In composing his picture (Fig. 1), he freely drew on two different traditions. He chose to show Iphigeneia being forcibly carried to a violent death (as presented by Aeschylus), but, perhaps aware of his own limited ability to convey subtle feelings, he cleverly added Timanthes' creation, the evocative image of the veiled Agamemnon.

A Roman cylindrical altar decorated with reliefs (drawn in Fig. 4) shows a girl solemnly facing a man who cuts off a lock of her hair. Before an animal was sacrificed, its forelock was cut off and placed on the altar. This ritual action performed on the girl, as it would be for an animal sacrifice, makes clear what is about to happen. There is no deer, no image of Artemis. Does the girl's apparently willing compliance identify her as Iphigeneia?

No, she could be Polyxena, for there were two traditions about her sacrifice, too. Whereas the Greek vase in Figure 2 shows Polyxena being carried forcibly to the altar, other images present her as fully compliant, as does Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba*.

The clue in this instance comes from further round to the right, where the veiled, averted figure of Agamemnon stands. Timanthes' invention is enough to identify the scene. Agamemnon's grief can only be for his own daughter – the fate of a Trojan princess would hardly move him. Nor could the veiled figure be Polyxena's father, Priam, since he was already dead when Polyxena was sacrificed.

5. Warriors about to sacrifice a girl (Iphigeneia ? Polyxena ?). Etrusco-Campanian black-figure amphora, 470–450 BC. British Museum, London.

It looks as if once one knows the myths of Iphigeneia and Polyxena, images of girls about to be sacrificed can fairly easily be distinguished from one another. The presence of a deer or the goddess Artemis, the image of the veiled Agamemnon, the inscription of names, the surviving description of a lost image – such clues help to determine which unfortunate princess is intended.

But what about the painting on an Etruscan vase (Fig. 5) which just shows a girl being carried to an altar by a warrior where another warrior holding a sword awaits her? There are no clues to identify the girl. The fact is, we do not know. The scene may even represent a story that has not come down to us.

The Mutability of Myths

Decoding images and relating them to myths is often more complicated than it seems at first. The myths themselves were seldom fixed in any way; they always remained flexible and were often rethought.

Long before they were written down, Greek myths were told and retold to eager listeners – little children at home or groups of adults at public festivals or private parties. In the telling the myths were changed, modified, improved and elaborated. Small incidents were enlarged, new episodes introduced, local variants incorporated and different (even contradictory) interpretations offered. We have seen that by the end of the 5th century BC there already existed two versions of how Iphigeneia and Polyxena met their deaths.

Some myths eventually acquired a generally accepted form, but even those incorporated into the two revered Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, could still be treated freely by other storytellers, poets or playwrights.

This rich tradition was just as available to artists who worked with images as to those who worked with words. Though we may be tempted to think of portrayals of myths as illustrations of texts, it is actually more likely that artists drew inspiration independently from the same fund of stories that writers used. They probably thought of themselves as creating visual equivalents of those stories without reference to any particular literary works.

Myths in Images

From the 7th century BC on, the Greeks portrayed myths in a vast array of media. They depicted them in the decorations on their temples, in monumental wall paintings (now mostly lost), and even in gold jewellery, but most prolifically on painted pottery, a modest luxury produced in abundance until near the end of the 4th century BC.

The Romans, as they gradually conquered the Greek cities in South Italy and Sicily and finally Greece itself, became increasingly captivated by Greek culture and began to depict Greek myths painted on the walls of their homes and public buildings, carved on sarcophagi (elaborate marble coffins), laid in mosaics on floors, even ornamenting expensive glassware or composed into gigantic sculptural

groups. However, turning words into images is not a simple procedure. The chapters that follow explore various aspects of how artists in classical antiquity managed to evoke so many myths so successfully in visual form.

To begin with, artists had to find ways to make stories recognisable, so that people would know who was being represented and what was going on. Then they had to decide how to encapsulate a myth, which a storyteller might take hours to narrate, in a static image. They also had to choose whether to focus on the climax of the story, to hint at the outcome or to suggest the cause, to concentrate on a few pivotal figures or events, or to sketch in the broad context in which the story was set.

Once these crucial decisions had been made, work could begin and artists could start building images. They did not always have to invent a new scene from scratch; they could sometimes adapt an established image. If certain formulas had already been given visual form (aggressive pursuits, amorous encounters, murderous attacks), these types could be modified to depict different myths. Artists could express their personal interpretations by adding, changing or deleting certain elements. Even quite subtle innovations could be striking if placed against a conventional background.

Images evolved as myths evolved. Artists could be inspired by new poems or plays to create new images and by new interpretations of traditional tales to modify old ones. Sometimes they themselves invented images of considerable power and originality which provided unexpected insights into the meaning of a myth or the relationships between mythological characters.

An image of a myth could gain immediacy and emotional richness when it was shown as though taking place in settings familiar to the people of the time so that heroes could appear to behave like ordinary people and ordinary people like heroes. A mythological disguise might occasionally be used to make a political point: historical personages and real events could be made to carry propagandistic messages when artists set them in the realm of myth.

There were constant challenges. Images had to be so constructed that they could be fitted into awkward spaces (long thin ribbons, tall rectangles, or even triangles or circles); ways had to be found to reveal things that could not actually be seen (a series of transformations, a powerful emotion or a concealed threat); means had to be devised to avoid confusing one myth with another or confusing it with something that was not a myth at all.

Greek and Roman artists ingeniously solved many problems to create hundreds of images of myths that we can readily interpret or patiently decode. Sometimes, however, being human, they made mistakes, muddled names, confused motifs or conflated formulas. Aided by experience and scholarship we can often make sense of such images and occasionally even understand the causes of confusion. But some images continue to baffle all attempts at interpretation. Artists engaged on expensive projects could be expected to be careful and conscientious – yet some of the most celebrated works continue to defy agreement on what exactly they represent. Two such cases are discussed in Chapter 17. The puzzle we must solve is whether the artists have omitted essential clues or we have simply failed to find them.