

SEARCHING FOR THE BOEOTIC LANDSCAPE WITHIN A MYTHOLOGICAL FRAME

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Abstract

It's common knowledge that the landscape, as a representation of the overall and collective perception, constitutes the unconditional background for projecting all the manifestations of the Myth, the Reason and the human senses.

By de constructing the landscape we are able to researching all its ingredients and witness the strong connection between the natural and the cultural environment. The vast nature functions as the receptor of the human-cultural-activity which are related as interconnected and interdependent elements. These two elements are so closely connected that removing one of the two renders this relationship unsustainable.

Boeotia, as a research field, functions as receptor of all the concepts which co-function in order for this area to be considered as a timeless crossroad for nations and groups of people. This area can also be considered as a cultural bridge, a workshop of traditions, myths and prophecies, a meeting point for gods and heroes, a central point of interest for the greek mythology and history and finally a starting point for the greatest events which marked the whole world. All the above are elements which are based exclusively on the specific natural environment, a co-modulator of the Boeotia cultural identity.

Where do the specific natural and cultural environments meet? How do the cultural/man made elements shape a landscape within its defined natural environment? The Boeotia mythology research field actively contributes to the investigation of the aforementioned questions since it consists an area of outstanding natural beauty and cultural wealth.

Keywords: *landscape, mythology, Boeotia, Oedipus, Sphinx*

Introduction

Boeotia is located at the centre of Greece in the region of Central Greece. This area has been inhabited for thousands of years since the Prehistoric Era due to its geographic location on North-South and East-West routes. The Pantheon of Gods and Heroes has also been active throughout this period. It is also widely accepted that Boeotia is a melting pot of myths and legends which preserves the memories of a long forgotten past.

Searching for the golden era of the Boeotic land mythology, one comes across the long list of myths which have been underlying for thousands of years. The original myths along with the history of each specific place are not necessarily tales or inactive fossils of the past. On the contrary, they are allegories, references to a historic core and in general vital elements of a landscape's life and culture. Besides, as ancient spiritual and cultural scripts they bear marks of their history where all the multiple levels of usage during past generations have been emblased.

By looking more deeply into the past, into the beginning of the cosmogony and theogony, one will come across the basic ideas, the ideal, which have marked the world.

These ideals are the so-called “sfragidolithoi” (virtual signets) such as religion, self awareness, knowledge of the truth etc.

With that in mind, we can see that behind most -if not all- of the myths which have marked the land of Boeotia there are hidden ideas, perceptions and ideologies. All these elements are deeply powerful, theocentric, archetypical and characterised the western -maybe even the eastern- philosophy. The ideas-archetypes which mark the Boeotic land are powerful and potentially unique since they are not recorded in any other place, not even in the mythologically rich Greece. Is it maybe the specific Boeotic natural and geological characteristics that defined how the consciousness of the inhabitants of Boeotia, Aegean and Periaegean area was developed?

The Myth

Searching for the connection between the landscape and the myth can help draw out details from allegories which have marked this landscape. This is also the case for Boeotia. One of these myths describes the popular story of the tragic protagonist Oedipus, the infamous Sphinx, the house of Labdacids and their curse. The group of individual myths is part of the troubled Thebes cycle which marked the Boeotia land with heroes for each individual story, such as Oedipus.

A brief summary of the myth follows; Laius, son of Labdacus and great great grandson of Cadmus abducted Chrysippus son of Pelops while staying at the latter’s palace. This act constituted hubris against the Nomoi (Laws) while having a homosexual relationship led Chrysippus to committing suicide. When Pelops became king of Thebes he cursed Laius and his family and for this reason Laius and Iocaste (also known as Epicaste) could not have any children.

Driven by this, Laius went to the Delphi Sanctuary to seek advice from the Oracle. The chrismos (prophecy) he received was clear and showed the dramatic events that would unfold. The royal couple though - Laius and Iocaste- decided to have a child, ignoring the consequences and misfortunes mentioned in the Oracle's chrismos. After the birth Laius abandoned the newborn at the foot of Mount Cithaeron trying to escape his fate. Before abandoning the baby, Laius pierced and tied together the baby's feet to ensure the baby would not be able-bodied.

Finally, the baby - Oedipus - was saved by a shepherd-servant of the King who gave the baby to another shepherd. The latter brought the baby to Corinth where it was raised by the childless Queen Merope or Periboea, wife of Polybus King of Corinth. Oedipus grew up in the city of Tenea also known as Chiliomodi of Corinth and he was the legitimate heir to the throne. After many years, wishing to learn his true background he visited Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi. The Oracle provided him with a clear chrismos about the dramatic events that would follow. She told him that he and his children would be the cause of many bad deeds and that Oedipus himself would kill his father and marry his mother.

According to the Ancient Greek Writers, Oedipus decided not to return to his hometown -or maybe the hometown he assumed was his- Tenea, trying to escape from his fate as detailed by the chrismos. Finally, he travelled to Thebes and while on a crossroad of the Schiste Road he came across a chariot. He had a quarrel with the chariot driver -probably on the grounds of who goes first- and Oedipus ended up killing all passengers. The chariot owner was Laius, Oedipus's father, who was travelling to the Delphi Sanctuary to get information for his son's status.

The route

Let's try to place the myth within the landscape. Pausanias, in his diary about Boeotia, mentions the famous "Schiste Road" (or "Tristrato" or "Triplais amaksitis" which can be translated as triple crossroad) (Figure 1). This road is one of few named roads of ancient Greece and Europe and is probably the most famous of all. There are many reasons why this road is so significant.

"Steni Road" (Narrow Road) -as Apollodorus called it- was a strategic route connecting the main routes of Central Greece. These routes are from the North and South Greece towards Boeotia and Attica along with routes from East and West Greece towards the Gulf of Corinth. "Steni Road" ensured the communication between the three of the greatest cultural centres, Athens-Delphi-Thebes. It also consisted the only passage for pedestrians and chariots between the endings of mountain Parnassus to the north and mountain Kirfi (modern Xirovouni) to the south traversing valleys along the way. This passage was used as the main trail for pilgrims going from Athens and Thebes to Delphi to give offerings. Moreover, Steni Road controlled the valley of Kifisos river since it connected Chaeronea with the Kifisos valley and Thebes. Satyrs with goat-shaped legs and the Parnassus nymphs were also using this road on their way to the "sacred lands" of Delphi. Another group of people using this road was the Dionysian troupe "Thiades" or "Theeai" from Attica and Boeotia travelling to Parnassus to the town of Ilida to join the "Theea" festival dedicated to Dionysus. According to Pausanias during the mystic night in the mountain, the tranced "Thiades" and the ones initiated in the dionysian mysteries were parading and stopping at worship significant places - as in the ancient Panopeas- dancing and singing with musical instruments. The "Phocis Vouleutirio" or "Koinon ton Phoceon" which comprised representatives from all towns of Phocis was also located at Steni Road. In essence the "Phocis Vouleutirio" constituted the beginning of modern parliaments and of the representative democratic representation. A specific point along this road was "tristrato", a triple crossroad which is very significant for the Oidipus myth. According to Pausanias, near this point -"en mesaitato tis triodou"- lied the Laius tomb.

The etymology of the road's name indicates that it was a narrow road with many forks. Indisputably, Steni was a chariot road which originated at Delphi and forked at "tristrato" in three separate roads which connected the Kifisos valley and Thebes with Delphi. The first road was leading to Dauleia, ancient Panopeas (modern St. Blasius) and Chaeronea, the second one to Livadia and the third one to the ancient Amvrossos (modern Distomo) and ancient Steirida (modern Steiri). In more detail, as "Schiste Road" was crossing Diauleia and the ancient Panopeas, it was passing through Phociko or Vouleutirio (Kefalovriso) following a direction parallel to the modern Platania creek and terminated at Delphi. According to Io.Picoulas (Picoulas, 1992), the Road was following a route through the following toponyms: Tseres, Steni Rematia, Mpardani, Ntabelleika-Mnima tou Mega, Harokopou Rema, Zemeno. From the point where the three roads converged, Steni Road was going uphill through the gorge formed by the steep slopes of Elikonas, Kirfi and Parnassus and after crossing valleys it terminated at Delphi. It has to be noted that in the vicinity of the modern Zenemo village, old track traces have been found which show the required gauge for the ancient chariots. These traces strengthen the view that "Schiste Road" was a paved chariot road.

Laius and Oidipus, father and son, travelled along the highly significant Steni Road to receive "chrismous" (prophecies) but also to meet each other and cause the tragic events as fate had it (Figure 3).



Figure 1: The Schiste Road, G.William_1805-1806

The Sphinx

The myth does not end here though. After the tragic event, Oedipus continued travelling towards Thebes without realising that he had killed his own father. During his journey he came across the Sphinx, guardian of the legendary riddle (Figure 2), the exact content of which is not known to us from ancient sources but from subsequent ones which provide various versions. The myth, however, goes like this; the defiant looking Sphinx was asking each passer by “What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?”. Anyone who did not know the answer was strangled and killed by the Sphinx. Oedipus faced the same question and solved the riddle by replying: The man, is the being which crawls on all fours at the beginning of his life, uses a walking stick towards the end of his life and walks steadily on two feet as an adult in the in-between period. Bested at last, the Sphinx then threw herself from the high rock she was standing on and died.

Finally, Oedipus bested the beast however he does not focus on this event. He is looking further than the lion shaped Sphinx, at the narrow path which will get him to Thebes and even further at the end of the route at Colonus. The hero succeeds in liberating the inhabitants of Thebes from the lethal appetites of the grotesque beast however he can not enjoy his feat. He is aware of this future, his tragic ending and the disastrous trap fate has set up for him.

Oedipus is worthily rewarded for his salutary intervention -the solution of the legendary Sphinx riddle-, is announced King of Thebes and marries -unbeknownst to him- his mother Iocaste. Following a tragic plague affecting every living being inside the city and in the nature, the tragic protagonist traveled to Delphi where he learnt that the prophecy given to him had turned out to be true. He then blinded himself, self exiled from his royal status, cursed his children while Iocaste committed suicide. Finally, the popular leader, Oedipus, ashamed and humiliated fled Thebes and traveled to Athens with his daughter Antigone. Theseus, King of Athens, welcomed him and facilitated the reconciliation of Theseus with the Gods which led to his redemptive death (Figure 4).



Figure 2: Oedipus and Sphinx

Continuing the route

Let's put once more the myth on the map. Oedipus, after murdering his father at tristrato, seems to be travelling towards Thebes where he meets the female looking beast, the lion shaped Sphinx who is responsible for asking the important and legendary enigma. The human looking beast sits at the Sfiggio (or Fikio) mountain or Fagas, at the outskirts of the city of Thebes, north of modern Vagia village, in order to control the passage and raid the passer-bys. Afterwards, the hero's destination is Thebes where he becomes King. Then, after receiving the Pythia's prophecy he will get to Colonus -at the Sanctuary of Eumenides- humiliated where he will get salvated from his wrongdoings and his life cycle will be completed (Figure 3).

Apart from placing the myth inside the natural landscape, one can search for elements of nature even in the mythological beings which are used in the myths. During the process of drawing out these elements -nature and landscape- from the myth's plot we have to point out the female looking, grotesque and enigmatic being, the Sphinx who is tightly connected to the Laudakides. It symbolises the black and rainy clouds which meet with the solar light while the top of the rock -as is common in the Eastern traditions- represents the mountain of clouds a symbol of the earth.

Although the Sphinx possesses wings, she plummets since Oedipus -every Oedipus who is a symbol of every man- stands up against her and answers the existential question. She is attached, transfixed without showing uplift. This goes against the fact of her possessing wings and by extending that, against her ability to fly.

A deeper analysis of the grotesque Sphinx showcases the connections between this mysterious being with the four levels of spirituality along with the four basic elements of nature (i.e. the microcosm and the macrocosm). In more detail, the elements are: earth (humane -female- head - physical level), fire (body of a lion - spiritual level), water (snake tail - energetic level) and ether (eagle wings - astral level). All these levels express the enigmatic living being in other words the human being. Moreover, the four animals of the Ezekiel's vision and the four Evangelists are represented through the complex of the four animals above. The four elements together consist common archetypes in many cultures, such as the Greek, and this can be proved through the multiple similarities of the Greek and the Egyptian Sphinx. All the above make it clear that the entire Oedipus myth consists an archetype state.█

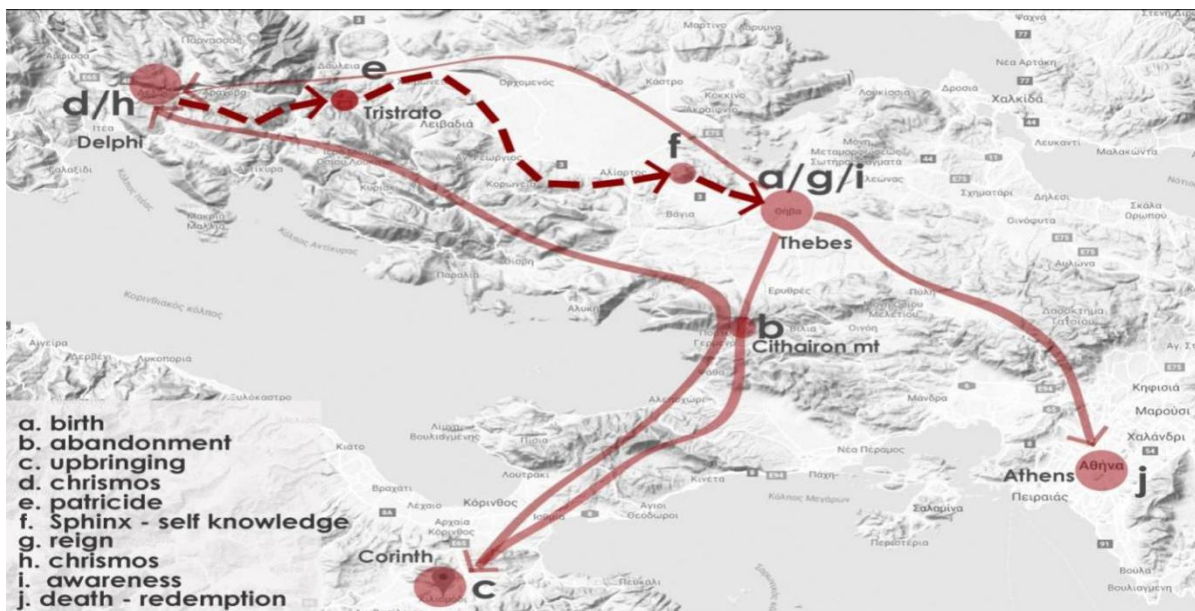


Figure 3: The Oedipus's route (personal file)

Conclusion

Concluding today's presentation the following points need to be mentioned: Two of the most significant events in the Greek mythology and in the western philosophy took place at Schiste Road. This fact stresses the Road's significance even more and further supports the belief that there is an interaction and interdependence between the landscape, the myth and the culture.

Oedipus and Laius travel through Schiste Road in order to receive a "chrismos" (prophecy) from the Oracle of Delphi. Oedipus is searching for his origins while Laius for his child. In other words, they move along the primary ancient arterial road -the attributes of which have been mentioned above- which connects three of the most significant cultural centres at that time, Delphi, Athens and Thebes.

The fight between father and son -Laius and Oedipus- takes place at "tristrato", not at any other random point along the Thebes-Delphi route.

The prominently featuring Sphinx, trying to submit the man, is also placed at the Schiste Road proudly standing on top of a Sfiggio mountain rock. As mentioned before, this location is very close to Thebes, one of the most culturally wealthiest cities and a significant cultural centre.

It has to be noted that the Freud psychoanalysis theory was based on the Sphinx since she was a key feature in this theory.

A shocking philosophical question which is closely connected with the human ideals underlies the Oedipus riddle. This fact brings out the significance of the myths as a concentrated version of reality.

The guilty King Oedipus constitutes the eternal symbol of how fate becomes reality for every human being. The hero uses his cleverness and sharpness to solve the unsolvable Sphinx riddle. In other words, he faces himself, his own demons, his own grotesque image, his Sphinx.

When the fallen hero Oedipus correctly replies to the enigmatic and mysterious beast, he moves from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge and from happiness to sorrow.

Solving the sacred enigma constitutes the proof of victory against the beast, a beast which lies within all of us. As mentioned in the myth, the Sphinx plummets, falls into the abyss as all the secret thoughts of the man also do. The man experiences the end of senselessness and dehumanisation.

At that moment -the moment of solving the riddle- the unveiling of the man takes place, a man who realises his differentiation and connection with nature. Through Oedipus, humankind realises the real reason of its very existence, understands that the man's life cycle is predefined while the man knows his limits, faces himself, his grotesque version, his most secret aspects. The enigma solution becomes a synonym with the myth's basic principle: "Gnothi safton" (know thyself).

Oedipus solves the legendary riddle and his victory apparently indicates that all difficulties will be removed, he will succeed in saving the country from the disasters, he will emerge as an "envoy" saviour since he believes that his sacred mission is to free his country, Thebes, a symbol of the whole world. The man, through the tragic hero Oedipus, blinds himself because he realises that he disregarded his ideals, killed the -positive- spirit represented by Laius, because he married the earth, through Iocaste, a symbol of the passions. He has now realised that his eyes had only seen material pleasures and with his cut out eyes he now chooses to withdraw himself from this mortal coil. He does this in order to save himself from the world's charm and to do a self-exploration through his reconciliation with this spirit which was dead until that moment. His life cycle is completed with himself going to Colonus, the Sanctuary of Eumenides, where he is salvated by Erinyes. The Sanctuary of Eumenides was characterised by a redemptive power similar to the Sanctuary of Apollon with the inscription: "Gnothi safton" (know thyself).

The entire story of the hero, the ascend and the fall, the greatness and the humiliation, the defeat, the searching for the enigmatic truth and his illusions symbolise the everlasting quest towards his self awareness and the awareness of an entire culture which consists of achievements, successes, doubts, obstacles, archetypes and supreme ideals. The battered King of Thebes Oedipus, the most tragic figure of ancient Greek mythology, is a symbol of the man, who pays a heavy price in search of the truth and knowledge. Hence, it is evident that since true knowledge -which includes self awareness- constitutes a supreme ideal, a man ought to pursue it in order to reach the supreme level of existence, the elite spiritual spheres.

It is clear that many myths, such as the Oedipus myth, were created in order to teach and guide the human who confronted their own selves with existential questions, passions and weaknesses. The myth comprised at least one hero who reached personal victory through all the difficulties he had to fight against throughout his life. Similarly, the mortal man -a potential hero- having as an example the hero of the myth was trying to determine himself to increase self awareness and self control and pay all required efforts to reach victory in his life exactly as it happens for the hero of the allegory. The myth carries over the archetypical principles to humans making use of a symbolic yet widely comprehensible language. It also preserves and applies the moral principles of culture and society, lifts morale and codifies the rules of life. However, the development of the plot of the myth requires a certain landscape with specific characteristics such as the Schiste Road or the Sfiggio mountain.

A sophisticated assessment of the aforementioned information leads to the conclusion that landscape; nature and culture interact and are interdependent concepts. The myth, as a part of culture, has been incorporated masterfully within the natural landscape. Myths, tales, personalities, heroes, divine and chthonic beings mingle gracefully and dance in the rhythm of nature without which everything would have been different. On one hand, nature creates a suitable environment for the myth's development while the personalities taking part in the myth incorporate characteristics of the natural landscape. On the other hand, the myth through its protagonists generously conveys the values, the supreme ideal of human life as cultural

ingredients. Therefore, the myth cannot exist without a specific natural landscape but also the natural landscape would not be the same without the powerful reflection of mythical archetypical ideas on nature. The myth becomes more meaningful as it takes place in a real, natural environment. In parallel, nature gains a new meaning, with its elements becoming prevalent since the myth develops only in a specific landscape with distinct morphological characteristics. Otherwise, completely different natural conditions couldn't support the necessary allegories and the projections of human values.

The following questions arise:

- Could we achieve a deeper interpretation of landscape by demystifying the allegories of antiquity?
- Is it a possibility that nature and culture function complementary in order for us to understand a landscape?

The myths of ancient Greece are numerous and quite rich. Let's imagine the multiple interpretations of the Greek landscape.



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