



Meeting Medea or not

Apollonius Rhodius' notion of Theseus' position in time

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"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 [Aegeus](#)₁ (Apd.1.9.28). Now [Aegeus](#)₁ 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 [Aegeus](#)₁'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 [Aegeus](#)₁, 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 [Ancaeus](#)₁, an Argonaut who was later killed by the Calydonian boar; or of [Eurytion](#)₂, another Argonaut who was accidentally killed by [Peleus](#) during the hunt; or of [Iphiclus](#)₂, 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 [Pelias](#)₁ 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 [Pelias](#)₁ 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 [Pelias](#)₁ (who was murdered at the instigation of [Medea](#)). Hyginus (*Fabulae* 25) asserts that [Jason](#) was burned to death, along with his new bride [Glaucé](#)₄ and her father [Creon](#)₃, 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 [Mopsus](#)₁, 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 [Mopsus](#)₁ 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 [Caeneus](#)₁, the answer would have to be "after"; for [Caeneus](#)₁ 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 [Mopsus](#)₁ suggests another sequence: 1) LAPITHS/CENTAURS, 2) ARGONAUTS. And that the story of [Caeneus](#)₁ 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
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Related sections [Bibliography](#), [Medea](#), [Theseus](#), ARGONAUTS, CALYDONIAN HUNTERS

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[Abbreviations](#)