

Interpretation of the Ancient Greek Myth of the Minotaur

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Abstract. This article is about the literary interpretation of the ancient Greek myth of the Minotaur. Ancient myths have been a source of artistic creation for centuries. Even the ancient Greeks Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were inspired by the Trojan War, exciting plots of legends and myths about great heroes - Achilles, Hercules, Perseus, Theseus, and Jason.

Key words: *literature, trend, mythology, legend*

Introduction

The myth of Theseus and Minotaur, along with other heroic myths, such as the myth of Perseus and Heracles, belongs to the myths of gods and heroes and forms the heroic cycle of myths. This cycle of myths was embodied in many works of ancient literature. Thus Greek mythology positions its heroes precisely and in a certain chronological order. The activity of Theseus, representing the Attic version of the cultural hero, is associated with Athens, while the figure of Heracles, whose dual character cleanses the earth of Doric monsters, is associated with Argos. The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur is quite common in works of ancient literature. Theseus is first mentioned in Homer's poems "Iliad" and "Odyssey". In "Iliad" "immortal like" (I, 262-272) the king of Athens is one of the heroes next to whom the king of Pylos Nestorius fought against the centaurs. In "The Odyssey" the king of Ithaca, having descended into the underworld kingdom of Hades, wants to see "the glorious, gods-born, Theseus the king, Pirithoi" (XI, 631), but never met Theseus. Ancient writers tried to interpret the image of Theseus, to search for the historical basis of the myth and to "discover" a real person who was the prototype of the mythological hero. According to the chronology of the Roman historian Eusebius, Theseus was the tenth king of Athens. The hero is believed to have ruled between 1234 and 1205 BC, after his father Aegeus. The ancient Greek writer Plutarch proves that the mythical Theseus was real and ruled Athens. Theseus is the protagonist of the anonymous epic poem "Theseis", which has not survived and served as a source of the plot for writers of antiquity. Nevertheless, the feats performed by the hero in his youth, did not attract the attention of ancient authors (to them can be attributed the feats of Theseus on the road from Tiresias to Athens, because most of them resemble the feats of Heracles). The myth of Theseus' journey to Crete and his rejection of Ariadne in favor of Dionysus on the island of Naxos were especially popular. The image of Theseus is widely represented in ancient lyrics, especially choral melikas. Of particular interest are two poems by the ancient Greek poet Bacchylides about the exploits of the legendary Athenian king Theseus: the mythological past of Athens serves here as an explanation for its increased importance in the Greek world after the victories won at Marathon and Salamina. Thus, I.M. Tronsky notes that in the

work of Bacchylides "Athenian legends occupy a prominent place - the result of the growing political importance of Athens after the Greco-Persian wars. One of these dithyrambs, which tells of the Athenian hero Theseus (Theseus) jumping into the sea, into the chambers of his father Poseidon, in order to find a ring thrown there, creates a mythological justification for Athens' maritime hegemony. Another dithyramb on the theme of the same Theseus is interesting for its dialogical form: it is built in the form of a conversation between the Athenian king Aegeus and the chorus and in this respect represents an intermediate link between choral lyrics and drama" [1, p. 95]. Thus, in these dithyrambs of Bacchylides there is a direct connection between the mythological and historical past. In addition, the Greek playwrights Sophocles and Euripides, who turned to the Theban cycle of myths in their work, also addressed to the image of Theseus.

Thus, the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides "Aegeus" describe the same event and the victory of the prince over the Marathon bull. Thus, the tragedy "Theseus" tells about the hero's victory over the Minotaur. In Aeschylus' tragedy "Eleusiniana" and Euripides' "The Begging" Theseus negotiates the release of the dead bodies of Polynices' supporters in Thebes. The latter tragedy centers on the political dispute between the legendary Attic king Theseus and the Theban ambassador. The Theban defends the advantage of individual power, while Theseus develops a complete plan for an Athenian state based on the equal rights of all citizens. In the Greek playwright Sophocles' works based on the Theban cycle of myths, the Athenian prince Theseus gives shelter to the eye-gouging Oedipus. In the works of Greek playwrights such as Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, Theseus was identified with the Athenian polis. Moreover, his victory over the Minotaur was perceived as a victory of Athens over Crete, and of civilization over archaism. Thus, in Euripides' tragedy "Heraclides" "the legendary Attic king Demophontes, son of Theseus, takes under his protection the old mother and children of Heracles, persecuted after the death of the hero by his original enemy, the Mycenaean king Euryspeus" [2, c. 363]. In addition, the tragedy of Euripides "The Praying" has political overtones, in which an important place "is taken by the political dispute of the legendary Attic king Theseus with the Theban ambassador" [2, p. 363]. In this work the Theban defends the advantages of a single power, Theseus unfolds the full program of the Athenian state system based on equality of all citizens" [2, p. 363]. Thus, in the person of Theseus the Greek playwright glorifies Athenian democracy as an ideal system. In the Hellenistic period the myth of Theseus is addressed by Callimachus in the epilogue "Hecala", the theme of which is "one of the feats of Theseus, the taming of the Marathon bull; but this feat is performed somewhere in the distant background, outside the epilogue, the poet's attention is focused on the modest hut of the old woman Hecala, where Theseus took shelter from the rain the night before the capture of the bull and where he returned with the tamed bull, but no longer found the old woman alive and established an annual holiday in memory of her (again the etiological motif)" [2, c. 414]. Thus, in this work the myth serves only as a background for the development of events, because in the foreground in the epilogue is a description of everyday life (a detailed description of Hecala's hut, the preparation of dinner for Theseus) and features of psychologism (Hecala's anxiety for the fate of the hero). As for historical works, it should be noted that in "History" Thucydides appears as a wise ruler and founder of Athenian statehood. Approximately from the middle of V century BC Theseus began to be considered the founder of democracy, despite the fact that in literary sources he was mentioned as a king. Plutarch made an important contribution to the perception of Theseus' image, dedicating a whole chapter to him in "Comparative Biographies" and considering his biography along with the biography of the founder of Rome - Romulus: "...it seemed to me that with the father of invincible and glorious Rome should be compared and compared to the founder of the beautiful, all praised Athens. One founded Rome, the other Athens - the two most famous cities in the world" [3, p. 5-6]. In addition, Plutarch calls both

Theseus and Romulus kidnappers of women, points out that they were both haunted by family calamities and misfortunes in their personal lives, and experienced the hatred of citizens.

Plutarch in the biography of Theseus writes that the image of the Minotaur as a monster was copied from the chief of guards of King Minos Taurus, who took part in amusing fights with prisoners in the Labyrinth. According to V.G. Borukhovich his appearance "makes us remember the gods of Egypt depicted as people with animal heads" [4, p. 24]. For example, "Pausanias in his "Description of Hellas" spoke about the events, the heroes of which were Theseus, Ariadne, Orestes, etc., as absolutely real facts, accurately indicating where they took place. According to Pausanias, the Minotaur's real name was Asterius ("starry"), the son of Minos, defeated by Theseus. Therefore, on vases his body is dotted or mottled with eyes, on a coin from Knossos he is depicted in a bull mask " [2, c. 314]. Thus, the myth of Minotaur and Theseus' struggle with him is reflected in various kinds of art. As for the literature of ancient Rome, it should be noted that the myth of the legendary Theseus found here not such a vivid expression as in ancient Greek literature. Thus, the myth of Theseus and Ariadne can be found in the lyrics of Catullus. Thus, in the epilogue "The Wedding of Peleus and Fetida", in addition to the mythological content, the poet describes in detail the struggles of feelings, contrasting love and hatred, loyalty and betrayal. Catullus uses one of the fragments of the myth of Theseus, the story that links him with Ariadne, with the legendary hero playing a secondary role rather than the main one compared to his beloved. Thus, A.F. Losev notes that "Ariadne's love helped Theseus in his struggle with the Minotaur her thread led him out of the labyrinth. Trusting her love vows, Ariadne fled with Theseus from his native home. On a deserted sea island Theseus, obeying the god Dionysus, who desired marriage with Ariadne, left Ariadne asleep. Ariadne wakes up and sees the boundless surface of the sea and in the distance - the sail of Theseus's departing ship" [5, p. 361]. It should also be noted that treacherous Theseus "pays for Ariadne's grief with no less grief: forgetting to change the dark sail to a light one, a sign of safe return and victory, he becomes the unwitting cause of his father's death" [5, p. 361]. Thus, Catullus uses the mythological framework in order to transfer the heroine's feelings from one state of mind to another. The Roman poet Ovid also refers to this myth of Theseus and Ariadne in the mythological poem "Heroides", which is a collection of poetic messages of mythological heroines to their husbands or lovers who left them. Thus, the tenth letter is Ariadne's message to Theseus, who left her on Naxos. As in Catullus's epillium, Ovid's message conveys the feelings of the heroine, her requests for her lover to return to her. It should be noted that the myth of Theseus and Phaedra became the most significant for world literature in comparison with other mythological plots. It was used by Sophocles in "Phaedra", as well as by Euripides in the tragedies "Phaedra", "Hippolytus Cloaked" and "Hippolytus Carrying a Wreath". Thus, in Seneca's tragedy "Phaedra" the myth of Phaedra, sister of Ariadne and second wife of Theseus, is artistically embodied. The Roman playwright's work tells about Phaedra's love for her stepson Hippolytus: "rejected by the young man, Phaedra committed suicide from unrequited love" [6, p. 252]. The mythological story serves Seneca only as a framework for building pathetic monologues of the heroes, conveying the passionate story of Phaedra's love for Hippolytus and describing the horrors. It should be noted that Theseus is also given a secondary role in this work. Thus, Theseus is one of the most famous mythological characters, since the cycle of myths about the Athenian prince includes Ariadne, the Minotaur, Phaedra, Hippolytus and others. Despite this, Theseus very rarely became the main hero of artistic work, more often he is given an auxiliary role. To a greater extent, the image of Theseus was used by representatives of Ancient Greek literature (Homer, Bacchylides, Plutarch, Thucydides, Sophocles, Euripides and others), to a lesser extent by Roman authors - Catullus, Ovid, Seneca etc. It should also be noted that the image of Theseus is interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, he is an ideal political ruler (this image is characteristic

mainly of historical and philosophical works, in particular, Plutarch's "Comparative Histories" and Thucydides' "History"). On the other hand, Theseus is an adventurer, an unfaithful lover and an unfortunate husband and father, as he is portrayed in the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca and the poetic works of Bacchylides, Callimachus, Catullus and Ovid.

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