

Theseus and the Serial Killers

Rather than traveling the easy way from Troezen to Athens—by boat across the Isthmus of Corinth—Theseus took the dangerous land route frequented by six criminals because he wanted to make a reputation for himself by facing them and making the road safer for travelers. These outlaws, usually identified as highway robbers, killed for pleasure rather than profit and actually fit the profile of what we now call serial killers. They exhibited sadism and a consistent pattern in their methods of killing as well as employing a level of brutality far beyond that of the typical highwayman of antiquity, usually involving mutilation of the bodies. Notably, the myths say little of what the six criminals did with their monetary spoils, focusing instead on how gruesomely they dispatched their victims.

Periphetes, for example, with his club of bronze (or wood, or iron), smashed the skulls of anyone passing by his territory. Periphetes was a cripple; psychologically, serial killing might have been his way of compensating for his deformity (MAYOR). Sciron forced his victims to wash his feet; in his need to humiliate his victims he strongly resembles the power ascendant/dominant serial killer type (VRONSKY). With his victims thus occupied, Sciron kicked them over a cliff, at the bottom of which a giant sea turtle waited to eat them. Procrustes invited exhausted travelers to spend the night at his home and then made sure they fit his guest bed exactly: if they were too tall he cut off the excessive extremities; if they were too short he stretched their limbs with weights. The bed itself is suggestive (MAYOR), and various versions of the story have him using a hammer, a saw, or an axe to make his victims fit the bed. Similar characteristics of serial killers can be attributed to Sinis, Cercyon, and the old woman who bred the bloodthirsty Crommyonian Sow.

Although Theseus killed all of these men (and by their own methods) he did it for the good of society and does not himself fit the serial killer profile. Also, since these men all attacked Theseus first, his actions would have been considered justifiable self-defense, which was lawful and incurred no penalty, as later in Classical Athens where "It was permitted to kill a highwayman who waylaid one on a road" (MACDOWELL). And as a pious Greek Theseus observed rites to purify himself of the killings—something none of the criminals he faced ever did.

The labors of Theseus were largely modeled after various labors and adventures of Heracles, several of whose opponents also fit the description of serial killer. For example, on his way to the Hesperides Heracles encountered Antaeüs, who forced travelers to wrestle with him and then killed them (cf. Theseus and Cercyon). Cycnus, a son of Ares, robbed passersby and then cut off their heads—until Heracles killed him (GANTZ).

Vronsky notes the difficulty of constructing a modern criminal dynamic for such killings: we are dealing with a period of history in which human life was valued differently than today. So when searching for evidence of serial killers in antiquity we have to look for a different pattern. We know that in antiquity people were aware that criminals could have long past histories that had gone unnoticed and/or unpunished. For example, the Greek rhetorician Libanius (4th c. A.D.), in his common topics exercise "Against a murderer," presents a defendant who, though described as a highwayman who killed for profit, in most other respects meets the criteria for a serial killer (*Progymnasmata* 7-8). This man not only killed and robbed his victims but mutilated their bodies. He had evaded detection for a long time before being arrested. Libanius adds that the murderer "arrived at this point by progressing from lesser crimes. He got

away with stealing many items . . . he committed violent acts [rape]. By not paying the penalty for each of these crimes, he was taught to shrink from nothing" (GIBSON).

In short, serial killing is not just a phenomenon afflicting modern society. Deviant behavior has always existed; it just hasn't always been stated in terms easily recognizable to the modern world. Evidence from the stories and laws of ancient Greece and Rome suggests that the existence of serial killers was recognized thousands of years ago. Not only monsters but human criminals described by ancient authors fit various serial killer profiles down to specific details. Yet because of the heinous nature of such crimes, and the lack of any media to disperse these stories, they have come down to us shrouded in myth and folktale.

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795 words