

## The plunge of Theseus: a Mediterranean myth across time

Bacchylides' Dithyramb 17 recounts a famous episode of the life of Theseus: challenged by King Minos, the Athenian hero jumps into the sea to retrieve a precious ring, a seemingly impossible task. The two main themes of this myth – the plunge in the sea and the recovery of the golden ring – have been re-told several times in the Ancient World, becoming a popular iconographic trope in vase-painting and glyptics (Maehler 2004.) Nevertheless, this myth's influence seems to extend beyond the Ancient World, and its echoes can be found in modern Mediterranean folktales.

Indeed, this myth showcases interesting analogies with the legend of Colapesce, a tale attested in several variants across many Mediterranean countries from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The main character, common to all the versions, is a young man who is challenged by a king to prove his fame as an extraordinary swimmer through the recovery of a precious object in the sea, according to a narrative scheme analogous to the story reported by Bacchylides. This legend is particularly diffused in Southern Italy, and specifically in Sicily and in Naples (Pitrè 1904 and Croce 1919,) where it is still part of the local folklore.

In this paper, I focus on the Southern Italian version of this myth, by comparing it to Dithyramb 17 through the cross-cultural comparative method formulated by Wendy Doniger (Doniger 1996.) Contrasting the stories of Theseus and Colapesce, it is evident that they share a common essential structure, which is what Doniger defines as a basic "minimyth." Through this approach, it is possible to enlighten the points that the two stories hold in common, but also the differences between them, that allow us to understand how this narrative has changed over centuries, and how the values connected to it have changed as well. Furthermore, I analyze two themes which I find particularly relevant in this kind of story, namely the theme of the "king's ring cast into the sea" and the one of the "belly of the fish," in order to understand what is the function that these two important motifs serve in the stories.

I argue that, through the contrast of these two stories, it is possible to affirm that the values and the morals vehiculated by the same narrative can completely change (and be almost overturned!) according to the narrator who reports the story, the context in which it is set and the audience to which it is destined. I propose, consequently, that a more fruitful understanding of a myth can come to us not through the analysis of its elements *per se*, but rather through the analysis of how those elements are understood by the public in a specific social and historical context.

### Bibliography

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