

A new ancient Greek Myth

Eleftheria

Kratos

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Prolegomena

After an unforgettable journey to Greece—my fifth visit to Greek-speaking territories—I found myself at Athens Airport for the return flight, inspired by the numerous references to the ancient myths of Greek gods and heroes such as Theseus, Orpheus, Pandora, Herakles and others more. I purchased a book that retold some of these myths and eagerly devoured it with my eyes. Certain elements seemed recurrent, such as the explanation of natural phenomena: Winter occurs when Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, takes her place as Queen of the Underworld beside Hades. There were also brief, tragic decisions or tests of endurance, like the one that ultimately seals Orpheus's fate—elements that I recognized more than once. Additionally, parallels to other stories from the ancient world stood out, such as the striking similarity between the story of Pandora and the biblical expulsion from Paradise. Just as storytellers—I deliberately avoid the term "author," which only emerged with the advent of writing—shared many elements, I too wanted to process my experiences, thoughts, modest knowledge, and ideas in a story like this, and make them my own through a new blend of old and recurring elements. And so, after returning to Italy, where I am spending the rest of the holidays with my Italian wife and German-Italian daughter, I decided to create a myth of my own. Here is the result, and I hope it will please the discerning reader.

PART I - humans and half-gods - Eleftheria



O Muse, sing of Eleftheria, daughter of Zeus, whose cunning and courage defied the Lycian horde, and of Kratos, born of divine blood, whose fate was woven by the hands of the Fates themselves.

It came to pass in the ancient kingdom of Fitria that Kratos, son of King Etinos, was brought forth into the world on the sacred day of Demeter's harvest feast, a child blessed by the gods. The blood of Kratos's mother, Artisia, was of divine origin. It was said that her grandmother Kinesia, Kratos's great-grandmother, was among the many loves of Zeus himself. While washing in the river Thimes, near the foot of Mount Olympus, the father of the gods encountered her as he strolled, pondering how best to persuade his brother Poseidon not to let the island of Delos sink beneath the waves near Crete.

The island of Delos pleased Zeus greatly, not least because Hera paid it little heed and because there lived upon it some of the most beautiful muses, who had withdrawn from the world. One of these muses, Ginania, could dance so nimbly along the shores that the father of the gods watched her movements in fascination. When Zeus saw Kinesia on his walk—perhaps he had just been thinking of Ginania—he transformed himself into a strong young man. He offered Kinesia his aid and courted her persistently, following her home until she finally gave herself to him. From this union was born Kratos's grandmother, Eleftheria, who became known throughout the land for her steadfastness when the Lycians besieged their city.

After ten days and ten nights, almost all the supplies in the city of Akinos, where they lived, were nearly exhausted. Only a small spring and the evening shadows kept the inhabitants alive. King Arkos, who ruled at that time, was prepared to open the city gates to the Lycians, but Eleftheria convinced him and the people to stand firm. "Hold steadfast, and let not the gates be opened to the Lycian horde, no matter the honeyed words they may offer, for their oaths are as fleeting as the morning dew. So it was in Iolkos and in Istimos. Hold fast, and tonight, I shall drive the Lycians away."

Though Arkos knew of Eleftheria's great strength and the stories of her father, he doubted that even a woman as strong as Eleftheria could drive away an entire army alone. Only after his sons, whom Eleftheria had taught many things when they were children, also pleaded with him, did the king reluctantly agree.

A short time later, a messenger from the Lycians appeared at the city gate and cried, "People of Fitria, surrender and open your gates, for you can no longer withstand our army. Our king will be merciful and spare your possessions and temples if you only give him your treasures and host his army."

King Arkos, uncertain if it was wise to refuse this offer, nonetheless ordered one of his guards to shoot an arrow just past the Lycian's ear. The messenger understood the warning and quickly returned to his camp. That same evening, Eleftheria called her maidservants to her and had them smear fine gray mud into her hair and onto her face, letting it dry. She donned tattered garments so that she appeared as an old woman who had seen her best days fade. Finally, she asked for a bottle of herbal tincture brewed at the Temple of Asclepius, used by the townspeople to treat illness. This medicine tasted foul but relieved many ailments.

"Dilute the tincture just enough so that its green color remains and its bitter taste lingers," she instructed her servants. "Then pour it into a drinking flask and add some of the poisonous waste from the blacksmith's forge."

The servants did as they were told, and Eleftheria tucked the flask into her belt. "If I do not return by dawn," she told the maidservants, "you must flee with the king through the hidden cave at the north gate before the Lycians overrun the city." The maidservants nodded anxiously and watched as Eleftheria slowly slipped toward the western gate.

It was late evening, and as the Lycians focused their attention on the main gate to the south, Eleftheria, taking advantage of a moment when the young and inexperienced Lycian guards were distracted, slipped out unnoticed along a rocky shepherd's path. This path, known to her since childhood and once walked by Zeus before he met her mother Kinesia, guided Eleftheria as she prayed to the father of the gods for aid.

Zeus, hearing her prayer and wishing not to draw Hera's ire, answered Eleftheria and appeared above the path as a mighty eagle. Eleftheria halted in her steps. The eagle sharpened its talons on a stone until one broke off, and Zeus let out a piercing cry, as sharp as the wind that slices through the mountain peaks. Eleftheria knew she stood in the presence of her divine father.

Still in the guise of the mighty eagle, Zeus seized the broken talon in his golden beak and descended towards Eleftheria, as a stormcloud descends upon the earth, dark and full of portent. Instinctively, she extended her arm, and the eagle landed upon it, dropping the talon into her hand. She gently stroked the eagle's head before it took to the skies once more and vanished into the night. "Thank you, Father," she whispered, hiding the eagle's talon deep within her garment.

With renewed courage, Eleftheria continued until she reached the source of the Thimes, the only place in the region where one could draw enough water outside the city. As she had expected, Lycian guards stood watch on a nearby hill, their eyes fixed on the spring. Eleftheria pretended to sneak toward the spring, feigning the act of filling her flask with water.

The Lycian guards had long since spotted her and now approached, one with a drawn bow aimed at her, the other with a sword. "Halt!" commanded the young man in a firm voice. "You're coming with us." They bound her arms behind her back, took her flask, and led her directly to the Lycian camp.

When the Lycian king, who had been sleeping, was roused, he was not pleased. His own supplies were dwindling, and he had intended to be much deeper into the land, near his true goal—the treasure houses of Argos. "What is it?" he asked harshly.

"We caught this old woman at the spring, filling her flask."

The king laughed loudly. "Old woman, why do you bother filling this pathetic flask? Do you believe a single drop could save your people from parched lips and dry tongues? Did you think you could buy another day for your city? You should have more wisdom at your age."

But Eleftheria replied cunningly, "O king of the hated Lycians, you who have unjustly and without cause invaded our land, you are mistaken. Look upon me—I am at the end of my days, and I do not wish to see my beautiful city destroyed in my final hours. So I went to the cursed spring to fetch the poisoned waters of the Thimes for myself and those who seek to escape your swords before it is purified by the waterfalls and river meadows below. Let me drink it, I beg you. I cannot bear to witness the ruin of my beloved city."

"What nonsense is this?" replied the king, whose own water supplies were running low. "Kurtos, drink a sip of this water."

A gaunt, war-weary servant was shoved forward by the guards and began to drink from the flask. After the first sip, he gagged and choked, the taste unbearably bitter. "Drink, I said," commanded the king, and two guards forced a large draught of the water down the poor man's throat, holding his mouth shut. Soon, his stomach began to churn, and red blotches appeared on his skin as he convulsed.

Eleftheria knew these blotches were a harmless side effect of the tincture and would soon disappear, but the nausea came from the toxic waste of the blacksmith's forge. Within moments, Kurtos began to vomit violently and collapsed in a heap. The Lycian king, however, stood with mouth agape and

ordered, "Tend to Kurtos at once! As for this old woman, bind her to a post in the middle of a tent and leave her there."

Then he turned to her directly. "I shall grant you the death you desire, old woman, and more. You will not have to witness the fall of your city with your own eyes, but only hear with your ears as my army marches in to take it. Reflect on the mercy of the Lycians in your final hours."

The king then whispered to his captains as she was led away, "Break camp, we march for Argos. Leave only the tent where the old woman is bound. By dawn, we shall be ready. We will follow the river down to the meadows and waterfalls, refill our supplies there, and continue our march."

Eleftheria was brought to a dark tent where a wooden post stood in the center. One could still feel the heat of the sun which had shone onto this tent the whole day. Surely, shortly after dawn, the temperature would soon become unbearable and who would withstand such conditions for long. The guards bound her tightly with strong ropes—no ordinary ropes, but those from the treasure of Iolkos, woven with the tail hairs of Pegasus and nearly impossible to sever. No mortal could hope to escape them.

After the guards had gone, Eleftheria waited a few moments, then reached into her robe with one hand and drew forth the eagle's talon. She sliced through the ropes that bound her, for she was the daughter of Zeus, and this was no ordinary blade but the talon of the king of the gods himself. She then slipped from the tent under the cover of night, moving silently between rocks and bushes toward her city.

As she was about to leave the camp which was in steady movement, she noticed a nearly lifeless body lying among the refuse heaps of the Lycian army. It was Kurtos. Eleftheria checked if his heart still beat, if he still breathed. Sensing life within him, she lifted him and, still moving quietly and cautiously, carried him back to her city. For she was the daughter of Zeus.

At the western gate, she knocked, and when the guards heard her voice, they recognized it at once and opened the gate. She entered and delivered Kurtos to the healers of the Temple of Asclepius before being brought before the king.

Meanwhile, at dawn, as the Lycian army began to move, the Lycian king saw one of his soldiers drink from the Thimes, where it was still but a trickle. At first, he considered stopping him, but then thought he had enough soldiers—what was one more or less? His cruel heart watched eagerly for the soldier's reaction. But nothing happened; the young man remained in good health. Seeing this, the king realized he had been deceived.

He rode back to the nearby camp and the tent where Eleftheria was supposed to be bound. When he opened it, he saw the truth of his deception. Eleftheria and the king of Fitria looked down from the city walls at that moment and saw the departing Lycian troops. The gazes of the kings and then of the Lycian and Eleftherias met, and Eleftheria's eyes shone with triumph, for it was too late for the Lycians to turn back. Furious, the Lycian king turned away and rode back to his army, setting his sights on Argos where he and his army should be defeated fiercely not long after.

Back in the hall of the king of Fitria, the king said, "We are forever in your debt, Eleftheria. The Lycians are breaking camp and leaving us. You are indeed the daughter of Zeus. What do you wish for, that I may grant it?"

"Let me nurse the Lycian prisoner back to health. Give him a home and make him one of us if he wishes it. This shall be my reward," replied the proud Eleftheria, for she had felt pity for the prisoner when he was forced to drink her poisoned water. She also found his features pleasing, and it was not long before the man regained his strength and health. He was none other than the brother of the king of Iolkos. And he too came to love Eleftheria, and soon they were wed. From this union was born Kratos's mother, Artisia.

PART II - the gods interventions - Kratos



On the day Kratos was born, the weather was splendid. All were busy with preparations for the annual festival in honor of Demeter. A bustling energy filled the air as people arrived from the hills and mountains of the surrounding region, and even from the wide coastal plain nearby.

It was on this very plain that Demeter had once met Poseidon, imploring him to regularly wash the coastal lands with water, so that the harvests would be more bountiful and the fruits would grow even larger. Poseidon agreed and began to flood a stretch of the coastline, turning it into fertile marshland where the Thimos River meets the sea. In return, Demeter had to promise that Poseidon could claim parts of the land as his own, to be consumed by the ocean. Demeter agreed and promised him the island of Delos.

The people celebrated and offered Demeter all manner of food and gifts. Thanks to the fertile coastal lands, the harvests were greater than ever before, and the goddess was greatly pleased. Yet,

as she observed the festivities from afar, she noticed an even grander celebration taking place in the king's household. She drew near and soon learned that this was not a harvest festival but a feast in honor of a newborn child. This enraged her, for no celebration on this day should surpass her own. In her wrath, she led all the cats in the region away the following day, allowing the mice to overrun the land and devour the grain stored for winter. The young Kratos, she cursed, decreeing that one day he would be entangled and consumed by the vines of a fruit-bearing swamp plant.

Years passed, the harvests returned to normal, and the boy grew into a man—one of the strongest and most agile in the kingdom. One day, while wandering the slopes of Olympus, Zeus, his great-grandfather, appeared to him. Zeus had long wished to visit the muses on the island of Delos but had never found the time. Now, as Poseidon claimed more of the coastline each year, making good on his agreement with Demeter, the muses were on the verge of leaving the island before it sank completely into the sea. This displeased the father of the gods greatly.

"Do you know who I am?" asked the god, and Kratos recognized him at once.

"Is it true that you are my great-grandfather?" he asked directly.

"Yes, child," replied Zeus. "You must do something for me, and I will reward you richly. You must travel to the island of Delos near Crete and seek out the muse Ginania. She dances upon the crested waves along the edge of the land. Tell her that she must speak with Poseidon and ask him to spare the island of Delos, lest he swallow her and her sisters into the sea. But do not tell her that I have sent you. And you must take up residence in the hut at the heart of the island and set up a shrine to the god of the sea. Sleep there for three nights and offer this flask filled with sand and earth. Tell the muse to speak of a man who has made his home on the island."

Kratos nodded, and Zeus gave him the flask along with a golden dagger.

"With this dagger, you can defend yourself. It once belonged to the Titan Atilus and can shatter the strongest materials. Do not fear; I will watch over you."

Kratos returned to the city and, without speaking to his friends or family, set out the next day. After a voyage by ship, he finally reached the island of Delos. It was not long before he found Ginania, dancing gracefully on the white foam of the crashing waves and along the rocky coastline. At a bend in the shore, he waited and spread his arms to stop her, but she slipped past him and stood before the young man.

"Speak, who dares to interrupt my dance between land and sea?" she asked.

"My name is Kratos of Fitria. This island sinks deeper into the sea each year."

When the muse heard this, her face grew sad. But she noticed something in the young man, something that seemed divine.

"I know this, but it is the fate of the gods. If you are not of divine heritage, what can you do to change it?"

Kratos, who had been instructed by Zeus not to mention that he had sent him, was young and overwhelmed by the muse's words. He thought recklessly, *If I tell her I am a great-grandson of Zeus, she might believe me more, and I won't have said that he sent me.* What he did not know was that Ginania had long ago noticed Zeus's gaze during their last encounter.

"You should speak with Poseidon. The gods sometimes alter the course of the world. Ask him to spare at least part of the island, and I will take up residence in the hut at the heart of the island and set up a shrine for him and pray to him. Tell him this. And you saw correctly—I am a great-grandson of Zeus," the young man said.

"You are a fool if you think the gods can be so easily swayed from their actions. Poseidon must honor his pact with Demeter; that is why our island is slowly sinking. But I will do as you ask, provided this is not a trick of your great-grandfather to pursue me."

Kratos was taken aback by her last words and did not know how to respond. Ginania gave him a scornful glance and continued to dance along the shoreline, toward the spot where the sea claimed more of the island each year. Even if she didn't believe she could alter the fate of Delos and therefore her own, she wanted to know if Poseidon had heard of Zeus interfering.

Kratos, however, moved into the hut and did as he had been instructed. This occurred at the same time that Ginania spoke with Poseidon. The sea god, also enchanted by the muse's graceful dances, replied that he would try to speak with Demeter as he was pityful and as there was now a man and a temple to his honor on the island. Poseidon then disappeared into the sea.

After three days, Kratos prepared to return home. In order to reach the dock of Delos, he had to swim through a small river that ran into the sea. As he waded into the water and began to swim, Poseidon, who had kept attention on Delos, in that moment realized he had been deceived. He aimed his trident at the swamp plants on the edge of the island, where Kratos was swimming across the river to reach the boat dock. The plants wrapped around his legs, and the more he struggled, the tighter their grip became. Zeus saw that Kratos was in danger, and Demeter realized that her curse was finally taking effect on the young man. Yet, she felt pity and was far from the place. Just before he drowned, Kratos remembered the golden dagger, drew it, and cut the vines, freeing himself and escaping to shore.

Poseidon and Demeter, whose work had both been thwarted, hurried to Delos, and so did Zeus, who knew that things could end badly for Kratos if he did not intervene. Demeter and Poseidon were not surprised to find their brother, the father of the gods, on Delos. Demeter had long ago learned from the muses of the island that Zeus had an interest in Ginania and had chosen this island in her pact with Poseidon so that she could hide it from his sight. Poseidon, meanwhile, had learned from Ginania that Kratos was the great-grandson of Zeus. The two gods had already devised a plan, after they had talked to Hera. Now they declared to Zeus.

"We will spare your great-grandson and allow part of the island of Delos to remain, but you must not approach again unless fate demands it," they said.

Zeus reluctantly agreed.

"One more thing," Demeter added. "Ginania must leave Delos. Poseidon and I have struck a new agreement. Each day he will claim part of the land, and each evening, he will return it. Here and there, however, he will let new land sink beneath the waves, and here and there, he will raise the seabed to create new land. Thus, the coasts will remain fertile, flooded, and the harvests will be plentiful. The shores will be forever in motion, and Ginania will always have new lines to dance along, so she can better develop her art. For Delos has long been too small for her, and her heart longs for new shores."

And so, the tides were born, and from that day, the coastlines have shifted—sometimes dramatically, sometimes imperceptibly. Ginania has long since left the island of Delos, returning only occasionally to visit her childhood home and her sisters. Then she dances in honor of Demeter and Poseidon. Afterward, she departs once more, dancing along the shores of the world with ever-new graceful movements and steps, never lingering long enough in one place for Zeus to find her. Sometimes, her elegant movements can be heard as faint variations in the otherwise uniform sounds of the waves and coastal winds when her dance cuts through them. And to this day, once every year, people travel to Delos when the tides are highest and celebrate her and Poseidon at the temple in the middle of the island.

Apolegomena

Many of the names may seem very un-Greek to experts, and other elements may reveal that I am anything but an expert in Greek mythology. However, if even for just a moment, the discerning reader has experienced the same feeling as when reading genuine works, then I have achieved my goal: Story canons are forever open, now more than ever in the digital age. The text itself has been translated and postedited by GPT4 and then again post-edited by myself. Images are DALL-E generated.

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