

THE WITCHES OF THESSALY

by Brian Clark

Thessaly was always well known for its witches¹

INTRODUCTION

Book 6 of *Pharsalia*, Lucan's epic account of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar, is set in Thessaly on the eve of the battle of Pharsalus in 48BCE. Pharsalus is a major Thessalian city, possibly associated with Phthia in the Homeric catalogue² and home to the Thessalian hero, Achilles. In Lucan's epic Erictho is a Thessalian witch, whom Pompey's son consults for prophecy and she is therefore a pivotal character dominating the events of Book 6. Erictho is foul and repugnant and the descriptions of her magical rituals are gruesome and monstrous. From the text it is clear that by the 1st Century CE the depiction of the Thessalian sorceress had crystallised into an abhorrent image. Another Roman text, which prominently features Thessalian witches is Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. In the novel the hero Lucius travels to Thessaly 'on particular business'.³ This business proves to be his obsession with witchcraft. And Thessaly is the perfect place to appease his curiosity since it is 'renowned the whole world over as the cradle of magic arts and spells'⁴. Apuleius was one of many Roman writers fascinated by the witches of Thessaly. While the depiction of the witch altered dramatically throughout antiquity, the setting of Thessaly remained constant. The classical Greeks and later Roman writers favoured Thessaly as the location of sorcery, magical ritual and witchcraft.

Thessaly's reputation as a renowned centre of witchcraft has continued to survive since antiquity. The recent publication of *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilisation* states: 'Thessaly boasted an old tradition of witchcraft, the Thessalian witches being notorious for their specialty of "drawing down the moon"'.⁵ However this is the only reference made to Thessalian witches in the book and no further explanation or amplification of the alleged practice of witchcraft is made. Similarly, a recent

¹ Julio Caro Baroja, "Magic and Religion in the Classical World" from *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, edited by Max Marwick, Penguin (Harmondsworth: 1982), p. 77.

² H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, Bouma's Boekhuis N.V. Publishers (Groningen: 1969), p. 12.

³ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*, translated by E. J. Kenney, Penguin (London: 1998), Book 1. 2.

⁴ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*, 2:1.

⁵ Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilisation*, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 1998), p. 440. H.S. Versnel, author of the entry **Magic**, makes a bold statement about the witches of Thessaly, however does not amplify or support his statement. Under the entry **Thessaly** the author Bruno Helly does not mention witches or the presence of witchcraft in Thessaly. This tradition is consistently referred to in texts on the history of magic. For instance Montague Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft*, Kegan Paul (London: 1927) on p. 9 states 'the Greeks considered that the Thessalian dames were above all other folk skilled in sorcery and enchantments'.

publication on witchcraft and magic in ancient Greece and Rome examines the history of magical beliefs in the Mediterranean world. From centuries of magic in Babylonia, Assyria and Persia the authors conclude that ‘various practices reached Greece and Italy in the pre-historical period, perhaps via Thessaly, a region traditionally associated with witchcraft’.⁶ Again the authors attest to Thessaly’s reputation, yet present no evidence as to why this region has become associated with a tradition of magic. Since the classical period Thessaly’s trademark for witchcraft and magic has been assumed, yet never amplified or questioned. References to Thessalian witchcraft occur on a regular basis without any examination. Hence the association of witches and Thessaly has become so commonplace that Thessaly is synonymous with witchcraft.⁷

Why Thessaly earned this reputation as a centre for magical practice and witchcraft is the basis of inquiry for this paper. No archaeological or textual evidence explains the association of Thessaly with witches. Historical accounts of magic have also failed to provide evidential records as to why Thessaly became known as a region for witchcraft.⁸ However folklore about the region has persisted with tales of witches, drugs, poisons and magical spells ever since the Roman period. Lacking any evidence, the assumption is that Thessaly was influenced by the westward transmission of magical beliefs, a diffusive argument that is both unconvincing and simplistic. The geographical isolation and cultural stagnation of Thessaly contributed to both its cultural disenfranchisement from southern Greece and its reputation as a ‘backwater’. As a setting on the edge of the civilised world it was an ideal location for writers to locate witchcraft. Thessalian mythology (i.e. myths about Thessaly) seems to have a consistently ‘otherworldly’ character and behind our earliest sources there are traces of archaic practices of healing and shamanism. Through the myths of Chiron, Achilles, Asclepius, Jason and Medea, Thessaly’s tradition of healing and magic is subtly evident.

My findings suggest that the legend of the Thessalian witch was invented during the 5th Century BCE when the Greek ethos was dominated by the Athenian tendency to polarise everything non-Greek into barbarianism. Thessaly was the region best situated to attract this polarity. The image of the witch

⁶ Georg Luck, “Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature” from Valerie Flint et al (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 2: Ancient Greece and Rome*, The Athlone Press (London: 1999), p. 94.

⁷ In the footnotes of the translations of ancient texts, the translator generally equates Thessaly with witches and witchcraft. David Mulroy translator of Horace’s *Odes* and *Epodes*, University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI: 1997) on p. 66 states that Thessaly is ‘a region where witchcraft flourished’. W.H.S. Jones, translator of Pliny’s *Natural History, Volume VIII*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA: 1963) on p. 283 says ‘Thessalian’ is the ‘word [that] suggested witchcraft’. William Arrowsmith, translator of Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI: 1966) on p. 132 states that Thessaly was a region ‘renowned throughout antiquity for its abundant supply of witches.’ On page 122 he suggests Thessaly was famous for its ‘red-headed witches’.

evoked all that was contrary to the Athenian: uncivilised, wild, woman, outsider, heretic. Witches live on the periphery, outside the values, customs and traditions of the *polis*. To the Athenian mind Thessaly was also foreign. Having colluded with the Persians during their second invasion of mainland Greece, the Thessalians were likewise referred to as barbarians. Thessaly's mythology, history as well as its reputation during the classical period promoted a mystique, which attracted the projection of the witch. I will suggest that the myth of the Thessalian witch developed due to Thessaly's isolation and marginalisation as well as the supernatural remnants of its mythic tradition.

Firstly, I will focus my attention on the culture and geography of Thessaly which contributed to its isolation from the rest of the Greek peninsula. In contrast to the rise of the *polis* and civilisation in the other areas of Greece, Thessaly's progress was regressive. The shadow of the rising cultural sophistication in the south fell over Thessaly. I will argue that Thessaly, geographically and culturally disenfranchised from southern Greece during the archaic and early classical period, is the natural landscape where marginalised and mythical 'beasts' like witches are located in the Athenian psyche and later demonised by the Romans. Thessaly's lack of cultural progress kept the region backward and isolated. Without the sort of cultural development experienced in the south the peasant lifestyle sustained its oral and primitive culture longer than its southern neighbours did. As a result its mystique and its myths retained a more primitive quality. Consequently the underdevelopment of this area also contributed to its primitive reputation.⁹

Thessaly was central to many of the Greek myths. Since many of the region's myths shaped its reputation as a centre for supernatural and mystical practices, Thessalian myths promote this notion. Thessaly's wilderness, abundant forests and mountain ranges were the setting for many of Artemis' hunts. Like Artemis, the region was known for being untamed; a wilderness. In the southern part of the region the myths of the Centaurs supported the classical view that this region was remote, uncivilised and home to the primitive. The Centaurs were barbaric, foreign and on the margins of society: 'creatures at the boundaries of difference'.¹⁰ For the classical Greeks they were barbarians, symbols of the savage. Their myths were centred in the same region that later became known for witches, other disenfranchised 'creatures'¹¹. A common characterisation of witches is that they are

⁸ Fritz Graf, author of *Magic in the Ancient World*, also laments this lack of historical perspective: 'Why does the orthodox history of magic include no account of how Thessalians became so famous for the art?'

⁹ Hence the majority of literary sources on Thessaly are from the vantage point of southern Greece.

¹⁰ Page duBois, *Centaurs and Amazons, Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being*, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI: 1991), p. 27.

¹¹ Latin writers (especially Horace, Lucan and Apuleius) were more inclined than the Greek to portray the hideousness of witches.

marginalised, live in exile and practice on the periphery of civilisation. Like centaurs, witches are barbaric, and therefore it was appropriate that the maligned Thessaly became their mythic homeland.

Pelion, the major southern mountain in Thessaly, was the mythic home to Chiron, the semi-divine Centaur, who was mentor and foster-father to many of the heroes, including Achilles, Jason and Asclepius, all sons of Thessaly. Chiron's tutelage included magical arts, especially skills at healing. Thessalian heroes were known for both their warrior and healing skills, which were passed down from their mentor Chiron.¹² From the Thessalian heroes in Homer's *Iliad* we first learn of Chiron's magical herbs and the nexus of heroism and healing. Many of the myths, which contained elements of magic, healing and heroism, were already centred in Thessaly. The mythic convergence of Chiron, Asclepius, Medea and others endowed Thessaly with a mystical legacy, therefore Thessalian myths, which contribute to understanding Thessaly's mystical reputation, need to be examined.

It was probably during the 5th Century when the Thessalian witch first entered literature. Therefore I will examine the atmosphere of this period, which contributed to the amalgamation of Thessaly and the witch. During the 5th century BCE the concept of the barbarian and the 'other' came to the forefront of Athenian consciousness. This mode of thinking in polarity, of the 'other', placed Thessaly, a backward and unsophisticated territory, in direct opposition to Athens. The Athenian opinion of the Thessalian also plummeted during the 5th century for a myriad of reasons. Throughout this period magic and magical practitioners were also polarised to civic religion and its authorised representatives. Both the Thessalian and magical practitioners were disenfranchised throughout the course of the 5th century and therefore in Chapter 3, I will concentrate on the events of 5th century Athens that created the atmosphere, which promoted Thessaly as a land of witchcraft.

Roman literature revived the Thessalian witch. Lucan's Erictho and Apuleius' Pamphile were reshaped and reinvented from the remnants of the Thessalian legend born in the classical period. The Thessalian witch is featured throughout the works of Ovid, Statius, Martial, Polyaeus and other Roman writers. In Chapter 4 I will address the Roman writers who animated the Thessalian witch so successfully that she became myth herself; a legend left undisputed.

My central argument will be that the Thessalian witch who first appears in the classical period is born out of the Athenian tendency of that time to perceive everything non-Athenian as 'other'. However

there is a complex of influences which contribute to shaping the myth of the Thessalian witch. The archaic atmosphere of Thessaly, its history, topography and myths, which include the fragments of a pre-existing magical tradition, along with the denigration of magical practitioners during the classical period are all influential in the creation of her myth. The mythic traditions of Chiron and Medea were the touchstones in developing the figure of the Thessalian witch. My primary sources will cover a wide period ranging from Homer to Apuleius with only Greek or Roman sources included. While there are numerous literary sources providing mythic accounts of the rituals of the Thessalian witch and the magic of Chiron's herbs and Asclepius' healing abilities, there is no archaeological or textual evidence upon which to make concrete conclusions. I have endeavoured to cite the references that are available to illustrate the entry of the Thessalian witch into literature and to clarify the legend which has been taken for granted since the Roman period.



Late 5th Century red-figure vase painting depicting Medea and her cauldron

¹² Achilles is the foremost example of this however Asclepius' sons, Machaon and Podaleirios, are also warrior/healers. See the Iliad 2:732.

CHAPTER 1 THESSALY: On the Edge of the Civilised World

*Thessaly followed a course of development strangely remote from the main channel of Greek civilization.*¹³

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate that the socio-political development of Thessaly, coupled with its topography, gave the region a reputation of being marginal to its southern neighbours. Thessaly, being on the periphery of the civilised world, gained a reputation as a land of witches, as both were marginal to the civilized world. Thessaly is in North Eastern Greece. While Thessaly is well known as a region of ancient Greece it did not become a unified territory until the 6th Century BCE. The region's name is derived from the Thessali, a race who migrated from the northwest and is said to have conquered the country two generations after the Trojan War.¹⁴ Homer lists 280 ships in his Catalogue of Ships from this region but never mentions the name Thessaly presumably because it had not yet coalesced into a specific region.

During the prehistoric period Thessaly was 'largely independent of external influences'¹⁵ and was more akin to its northern neighbours than its southern. Mycenaean civilisation had little influence, with the exception of Phthia and Iolcus in the southeast, as the Homeric catalogue attests¹⁶. Throughout the prehistoric period Thessaly's culture differed greatly from the south. Without the Mycenaean and civilising influences Thessaly 'always continued in a backward and barbarous state of civilisation'¹⁷.

In many ways Thessaly's natural role during the prehistoric period was as a geographical buffer. It was a natural boundary, which segregated the more civilised southern communities from the aggressive tribes of the northern Balkans.¹⁸ Its densely wooded and mountainous terrain also naturally contributed to its isolation and lagging development. While its northern and southern neighbours both developed trade and commerce throughout this period, Thessaly remained a backwater:

¹³ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p. 22.

¹⁴ The influx of the northern tribes, often referred to as the Dorians, also moved into Thessaly during this period, however did not remain and continued southwest towards the Peloponnese. For an early history of Thessaly see Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, Chapter 2. Homer ignores the political realignments, which took place after the invasion of the Thessali. See G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume 1*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1987), p. 187.

¹⁵ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p. 21.

¹⁶ In the Homeric Catalogue of ships Phthia supplies the largest contingent of ships (50) from Thessaly, led by Achilles. See Homer, *Iliad 2:685* and Appendix 1. For archaeological evidence see Wace, A.J.B. and Thompson, M.S., *Prehistoric Thessaly*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1912). On page 255 the authors state that 'Mycenaean influence never succeeded in permeating Thessaly' which contributed to its stagnant development.

¹⁷ A.J.B. Wace and M.S. Thompson, *Prehistoric Thessaly* (Cambridge: 1912), p. 255.

¹⁸ A.J.B. Wace and M.S. Thompson, *Prehistoric Thessaly*, p. 249. The authors suggest that Thessaly was a buffer state which 'helped to protect the civilised regions of Southern Greece from the more vigorous tribes of the Northern Balkans'. When trade punctured this buffer the 'destructive invasions from the North' began, engulfing the Greek peninsula.

Thessaly was backward in civilisation because it lay just outside the two metal-using areas of the Eastern Mediterranean district, being too far north or rather just off the lines of Mycenaean trade, and too far south of the line of metal-using peoples that runs east and west through Servia and Troy.¹⁹

From the Dark Ages Thessaly's fertile plains were cultivated and the region was agriculturally able to support its population. Land hunger, which precipitated an economic crisis initiating colonial expansion for many other areas of Greece, did not affect Thessaly. Lacking the economic impetus to colonise contributed to Thessaly's insularity and lack of intercourse with the rest of the Greek peninsula.²⁰

During the Archaic period Thessaly was too broad to be unified politically and was divided into four districts which 'seemed to have existed as separate and independent states'.²¹ These main districts were known as *tetrads* while lesser marginal districts, known as *perioikis*, were also defined as regions of Thessaly.²² As Westlake points out by the end of the 7th Century the whole country was unified into a single state for defence purposes only. During the first half of the 6th century Thessaly was unified through its strong military presence. However feuding amongst the aristocratic families continuously fractured the national unity, and social conflict continued well into the fifth century: 'Social unrest caused the prestige of the Thessalians to sink to a very low ebb throughout the Greek world, and the part which they played in Greek history at this time was almost a negligible one.'²³ The borders within Thessaly were now continuously affected with shifts in alliances and unstable leadership. While civic reform and social change occurred throughout southern Greece, Thessaly remained stagnant. Westlake suggests that in the case of Thessaly, 'the Dark Ages may scarcely be considered at an end until the close of the fifth century'²⁴. Until the 4th century, when Jason of Phaere emerged as the tyrant who unified Thessaly, the country's cultural development was minimal.

¹⁹ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p.24.

²⁰ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p. 21ff.

²¹ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p. 24.

²² The four main *tetrads* were Hestiaiotis, Thessaliois, Pelasgiotis and Phthiotis. The lesser districts were Achaia Phthiotis, Perrhaibia, Magnesia, Dolopia, Malis, Ainis, and Oitaia. See H. Reinder Reinders, *New Halos A Hellenistic Town in Thessalia, Greece*, p. 21-2. Refer to map on page 8.

²³ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p. 37.

²⁴ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century BC*, p. 4.

From the prehistoric period to the 4th century BCE Thessaly's development was a complete contrast to the progress in southern Greece. Tyranny, which contributed to the growth of the *poleis* through building projects and cultural reforms, had occurred much earlier in major southern Greek cities like Athens and Corinth. Thessaly's role and reputation naturally became a polarity to the sophisticated culture in the south. For articulate poets, playwrights and philosophers of the classical period, Thessaly was a literary setting for what was 'other' to the Athenian culture. Cast upon Thessaly was the projections of what no longer conformed to the emerging Athenian ethos. Thessaly's social development ensured its reputation as a setting for what was marginal and barbaric to the Athenian mind. However the barbarian and the beast were already an aspect of Thessalian myth. Homer described the centaurs as the 'hairy beast men'²⁵ while Pindar wrote of their barbaric conception through Centaurus mating with the mares on Mount Pelion.²⁶ Without cultural reform Thessaly remained in the dark ages and the myths of Thessaly reflected this old and 'other' world. In these myths Thessaly was the locale where encounters with magic and the supernatural realm still occurred.

Thessaly's topography fascinated ancient writers: Herodotus, Strabo, Ovid and Lucan all described its mountains, rivers, plains and vales.²⁷ The earliest geographical account of Thessaly is Homer's Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad*, Book 2. Being a poet and myth maker his historical account is suspect, yet it was this account that inspired further amplification by Strabo and others. According to Homer, the Thessalian contingent included 280 ships, 24% of the total number of ships in the Greek fleet.²⁸ Not all of the sites which Homer mentions can be located with certainty and scholars suggest his locations may not accurately represent the populated regions of late Bronze Age Thessaly.²⁹ By Homer's period the Thessali had already invaded Thessaly which initiated political and social restructuring. Homer ignored these post-Trojan War events to reconstruct his mythic narrative.

Homer's account however is the first reference, which locates the healing tradition of Chiron in the Thessalian region of Pelion.³⁰ Two 'good healers' (2:732), Podaleirios and Machaon, sons of

²⁵ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press (Chicago: 1951). 2:744

²⁶ Pindar, *The Odes of Pindar*, translated by C.M. Bowra, Penguin (London: 1969), Pythian II: 43-48.

²⁷ See: Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 7: 128 – 9.

Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, translated by H.C. Hamilton, George Bell and Sons (London: 1903), Chapter V

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary Innes, Penguin (London: 1955), Book 1: 567-582 & Book 7: 220-235.

Lucan, *The Civil War*, translated by Nicholas Rowe, Everyman (London: 1998), Book 6: 558-720.

²⁸ See Appendix 1.

²⁹ See Denys L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad*, University of California (Berkeley, CA: 1972), pp. 125ff. and G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary Volume I, Books 1-4*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1985), pp. 185-6.

³⁰ Homer's account locates the greatest Greek hero, Achilles, from Phthia in Thessaly. Achilles was also a student of Chiron's. Surprisingly Phthia is not well known, nor is it easily accessible to the sea. Why Achilles' dominion does not reflect his heroic stature is a puzzle? Denys L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad*, p.126 states: 'the greatest hero of the

Asclepius are listed representing Tricca in the Thessalian contingent. Tricca promoted itself as the birthplace of the god of healing, Asclepius. Machaon has medicines, which Chiron had dispensed to his father (4: 218/9). Asclepius was also brought to Chiron on Mount Pelion where he was trained to become the 'Healer of every sickness'³¹ by the Centaur.³² Asclepius' medical treatments included incantations, amulets, drugs³³; magical and medicinal practices co-existed in Chiron's tradition.³⁴ Pliny suggests that the Thessalian people were content 'in the Trojan period with the medicines of Chiron'³⁵. Chiron and Asclepius planted the seeds of the Greek healing traditions in Thessaly.³⁶

At the end of the catalogue Homer also lists the horses of Eumelus as the best amongst the Greek army, an initial reference to the legendary horses of myth and folklore, which Thessaly become famous for.³⁷ One of Thessaly's epithets would become 'horse-breeding Thessaly' and in later military encounters the Thessalian cavalry had a reputation as 'the best in Greece'.³⁸ Horses roamed the fertile plains of Thessaly. In myth, the Thessalian horses on Mount Pelion had mated with Centaurus, the son of the Lapith king Ixion. He sired the race of the Centaurs, the mythical hybrid of the horse-men, which are a prominent feature of the myths of Thessaly.³⁹ In reality, horses inhabited the plains; in myth, the Centaurs roamed the mountains. Homer also acknowledged the mystical quality of the Thessalian horse. Achilles' horse, Xanthus, was able to communicate and prophesy. Homer describes the Thessalian hero Achilles' magical ability to communicate with the animal (*Iliad* 19: 400ff), a vestige of shamanistic tradition.⁴⁰ Like Thessaly its horses were imbued with both barbaric (the Centaurs) and supernatural (the horses of Achilles) qualities.

Iliad is being confined to a relatively obscure and insignificant territory; he is cut off from the plains, and from the gulf in the southeast of Thessaly by other kingdoms'. For this thesis it is important to note that both hero and healer are Thessalian and perhaps points to an archaic tradition where warrior heroes were also healers. Achilles is a great hero, not because of his kingdom, but because of his individual strength.

³¹ Pindar, *Pythian III*: 7.

³² Pindar, *Pythian III*: 44-6.

³³ Pindar, *Pythian III*: 51-3.

³⁴ For amplification on the use of magical plants, see John Scarborough, "The Pharmacology of Sacred Plants, Herbs, and Roots" from *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 1991).

³⁵ Pliny, *Natural History*, translated by W.H.S. Jones, William Heinemann Ltd. (London: 1963), XXX.II.6.

³⁶ Galen acknowledges Chiron and the heroes he taught as the traditional figures in the history of medicine. See Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe Their Myths*, translated by Paula Wissing, University of Chicago (Chicago, IL: 1988), p. 55.

³⁷ Sophocles (*Electra*, 703-6), Euripides, and Plato were amongst many that recounted the prized horses of Thessaly. In Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 7: 196 Xerxes mentions that he has heard that Thessalian horses 'were the best in Greece'.

³⁸ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the 4th Century BC*, p.4.

³⁹ Pindar, *Pythian II*: 25-48.

⁴⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Penguin (London: 1964), p.99 suggests that friendship and communication with animals represents the shaman's ability to regress to the period in mythical times when men lived in harmony with the animals. Through friendship with the animal and knowledge of their language 'the shaman has re-

Thessaly was also geographically isolated. Mountains, notably Olympus in the north, Othrys in the south and Pindus to the west are its natural boundaries. The Aegean is Thessaly's eastern border, however due to its steep coastline there are few harbours (refer to map on page 8). Ossa and Pelion are other important mountains, prominent in the myths of Thessaly and known since antiquity as regions abundant with both medicinal plants and drugs.⁴¹ The mountain ranges contain the fertile plains of Thessaly. Of the four plains of Thessaly two are large by Greek standards. These plains were accessible by mountain passes, which were the main route travellers and armies would use to cross through Thessaly. The Persian army traversed Thessaly in their assault on Greece early in the 5th Century. Herodotus describes Xerxes' passage through Thessaly and his account has led scholars to speculate that his familiarity with Thessalian geography suggests he may have travelled there himself.⁴² Unlike the later Roman writers, Pliny and Lucan, Herodotus does not mention the transmission of magic into Thessaly or Thessalian witches. The nexus between Thessaly and witches had not yet crystallized in the Greek mind.

Geographically Thessaly had been of interest to poets since Homer's Catalogue of Ships chartered the territory. Its wild and primitive setting provided a mythic setting for poets and writers.⁴³ Pindar, probably inspired by even earlier poets, located Coronis (the mother of Asclepius) on the shores of Lake Boeibos⁴⁴ and Cyrene (the lover of Apollo) in the vales of Pelion.⁴⁵ Roman writers Ovid, Lucan and Apuleius inherited a landscape for their magical myths of Medea, Erictho and Pamphile. Thessaly's topography was also a rich natural landscape, which inspired geographers like Strabo⁴⁶. Thessaly was both a literal place known for its mountains, vales, plains and abundant foliage as well as a mythic 'other world', where traces of the prehistoric period could still be located in myth.

Thessaly's mountains provided a natural enclosure. Its mountainous terrain kept the burgeoning Greek civilisation at bay, perpetuating Thessaly's mystique as a primitive and mysterious region. Due to its

established the "paradise" situation lost at the dawn of time'. Motifs in the myths of Thessaly are often subtle fragments from a pre-historic past.

⁴¹ See Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, translated by Sir Arthur Hort, William Heinemann (London: 1916). Theophrastus (372 - 287), a student of Plato and contemporary of Aristotle, is credited with the first record of botany. In this treatise he credits Pelion and Ossa with 'great abundance' of medicinal plants. Volume 1, p.324 ff.

⁴² Herodotus, *Histories*, translated by George Rawlinson, Wordsworth Editions (Ware: 1996). For Herodotus' descriptions of Xerxes' armies in Thessaly, see Book 7: Chapters 128-30 and 196.

⁴³ Peneus is the main river that flows through the renowned valley called *Tempe*, one of these main passages through Thessaly. Ovid describes the Tempe and some of the geography of Thessaly in the context of the myth of Apollo and Daphne, Peneus' daughter. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1: 567-82.

⁴⁴ Pindar, Pythian III: 25ff

⁴⁵ Pindar, Pythian IX: 5-7.

isolation and mountainous terrain Thessaly was geographically ostracised from the Greek world in the pre-classical period:

Thessaly never became completely Hellenized and was regarded rather as a bulwark against the barbarian north than as a genuine and fully privileged member of the Hellenic world.⁴⁷

Thessaly was also densely wooded, which also prohibited access during prehistoric times, insulating its communities and rendering it relatively unknown. From the earliest records Pelion, southern Thessaly, was known as ‘woody Pelion’⁴⁸.

Imaginatively the mountain ranges and densely wooded areas of Thessaly contributed to its mystique of being ‘other’ to the *polis*. While the enclosure of the mountains echo Thessaly’s isolation, the context of a mountain in myth alludes to a space, which is external to the city. The mountains of Thessaly were a natural boundary to the southern culture. However Thessaly’s mountains were also mythic: Olympus was home to the Olympian gods; Orthys, home to the Titans and Pelion, home to the Centaurs. Mountains are mythic regions where poets locate and encounter the divine and the monstrous; a mythic symbol for a place ‘other’ to the *polis*: ‘An *oros* is a height outside inhabited and cultivated space—outside the *polis*, the *astu* (‘town’), and the *komai* (‘villages’)’.⁴⁹ Again the natural landscape of Thessaly conforms to an ideal setting for what is ‘other’ to the *polis*.

Richard Buxton suggests that there are three aspects to the mythical image of mountains:

1. ‘mountains were outside and wild’
2. ‘mountains are before. They were believed to be humanity’s place of first inhabitation.’
3. ‘a mountain is a place for reversals. Things normally separate are brought together, as the distinctions of the city are collapsed’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *The Geography of Strabo, Volume II*, translated by H.C. Hamilton, George Bell and Sons (London: 1903). Strabo dedicates a whole chapter to Thessaly which is mainly inspired by Homer’s descriptions of Thessaly in the Catalogue of Ships

⁴⁷ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the 4th Century, BC*, p.20.

⁴⁸ *Catalogues of Women and Eoiae*, 13 from Hesiod translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA: 1967), p. 163.

⁴⁹ Richard Buxton, *Imaginary Greece, The Context of Mythology*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1994), p. 82.

⁵⁰ Richard Buxton, *Imaginary Greece, The Context of Mythology*, pp. 88-92.

Thessaly's mountains endow the region with a primitive yet mystical quality. It is 'outside and wild', inhabited by beasts, relics of the dark past; first, by the Centaurs and later, the witches. It is a place 'before' our time; a sphere where the 'mystical' tradition of Chiron and his pupils is located. Finally it is a place where the encounter with the divine or with the barbaric can occur. Thessaly doubles as both a literal and a mythic setting. Its mythic geography invites the imagination to locate the supernatural on its landscape.

Thessaly's eastern coast borders the Aegean with the Bay of Pagasae at its southern extremity. Euboea also forms a buffer to the Aegean making it possible to reach Attica from the bay without ever entering the open sea. One of Pagasae's ports, Iolcus, was both the birthplace and the departure point for Jason, another of Thessaly's heroic sons, on his quest for the Golden Fleece. Its northern location and relative isolation, which contributed to the notion that Thessaly was on the margins or edge of the civilised world, made this a fitting departure point for the mythic hero. It is also the perfect entry point for Medea (the foreign sorceress and feminine counterpart of Jason) who became both a prototype of the early witch, and an intermediary figure between the heroic healers mentored by Chiron and the Thessalian witch. Another location in southern Thessaly is Lamia, a reminder that the ancient Greeks knew about 'gross and uncanny spectres'. *Lamia* is a generic name for female demons (witches, wise women, herbalists and female magical practitioners) and 'whereas the great gods are forgotten the *lamia* still lives on among the Greek people'⁵¹. Remnants of the supernatural remain in the topography of Thessaly.

While Thessaly in the prehistoric period was profusely wooded, Mount Olympus and the Mount Pelion regions were especially known for their prolific plant life: wildflowers, herbs and roots. Throughout the archaic period root digging, herb collecting and drug handling for healing purposes was an aspect of pastoral life. The use of herbs for medicinal and surgical purposes was an important aspect of Chiron's tradition. Homer is our first source who alludes to this. Machaon has inherited medical knowledge from his father Asclepius, a student of Chiron. It is the centaur who has taught Asclepius the power of 'healing medicines' (*Iliad*, 4:219). Achilles and other students of Chiron belong to a healing tradition passed down by their mentor. Pindar alludes to this tradition also existing in the previous generation. Chiron names his young charge *Iason*, a name meaning 'healer'⁵². This mythic tradition is continued through botany by the plants that are named for the Centaur Chiron. *Centaurea*

⁵¹ Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion*, University of Pennsylvania Press (Philadelphia, PA: 1972), p. 90-1.

has 70 species throughout Greece and Dioscorides suggests this was the plant with which Chiron tried to heal himself after being accidentally wounded by Heracles, commonly naming the plant ‘blood of Heracles’⁵³. Theophrastus in *Enquiry into Plants* (9.9.2) named *Inula helenium* the ‘all heal of Chiron’ as it grew throughout the valleys of Thessaly. The root, which contains inulin and helein, still remains an important medicinal herb today.⁵⁴ The seminal botanical treatise of Theophrastus suggested that on Pelion and Ossa plants, which had ‘medicinal properties in their roots and juices’,⁵⁵ were gathered for healing purposes. Pelion is also listed as one of the best places for the location of drugs: ‘of places in Hellas those most productive of drugs are Pelion in Thessaly’⁵⁶.

Throughout the pre-historical and archaic period Thessaly was well known for its medicinal plants and drugs. Theophrastus and Dioscorides confirmed this tradition. Using the existing tradition Roman writers continued to promote Thessaly as a natural source for medicinal herbs and poisonous plants. However now these herbs are directly linked to the rituals of the Thessalian witch. By the Roman period witches collected the Thessalian plants to mix for their spells. Lucan describes the mountainous location of these plants in his description of the Thessalian topography:

Thessaly’s soil, moreover, produces up in the highlands
Noxious herbs and magical stones that respond to the deadly
Configurations and spells of the wizards. Poisons are found there
Strong enough even to master the gods; Medea from Colchis
Brought no foreign drugs; and she found there all that she needed.⁵⁷

Medea is a sorceress with the knowledge of herbs and poisons and a priestess of the cult of Hecate, who also was associated with magic.⁵⁸ Her first magical act on Thessalian soil was to rejuvenate

⁵² See Emmett Robbins, “Jason and Cheiron: The Myth of Pindar’s Fourth Pythian”, *Phoenix*, Volume XXIX, 1975, p. 209. Also refer to C.J. Mackie, “The Earliest Jason. What’s in A Name?” *Greece & Rome*, Volume 48, No. 1, April 2001, pp. 1 - 14.

⁵³ See *The Greek Herbal of Dioscorides*, translated by Robert T. Gunther, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 1934). In Book III: 8 & 9 describe the plants bearing the Centaur’s name: *Kentaurion Makron* and *Kantaurion Mikron*.

⁵⁴ Hellmut Baumann, *Greek Wild Flowers and Plant Lore in Ancient Greece*, translated by W.T. & E.R. Stearn, The Herbert Press (London: 1993).

⁵⁵ Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, Book VI: 324ff.

⁵⁶ Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, Book IX:XV:2)

⁵⁷ *Lucan’s Civil War*, translated by P.F. Widdows, Indiana University Press (Bloomington, IN: 1988), Book 6: 438-42. The translation of Lucan’s *The Civil War* by Nicholas Rowe, Everyman (London: 1998) translates this as the Thessalian herbs are ‘Noxious, and fit for witchcraft’s deadly use’, line 712 and see footnote 63. In Rowe’s translation these are lines 711-17. Line numbers for the poem have changed with translation.

⁵⁸ See Apollonius of Rhodes, *The Voyage of the Argo (The Argonautica)*, translated by E.V. Rieu, Penguin (London: 1971), Book 3: 844-65.

Jason's aged father. The tradition of her ability to rejuvenate the aged with *pharmaka* was a long-standing one, recorded as early as the *Nostoi*.⁵⁹ In order to perform this ritual Medea must gather the appropriate herbs and magical plants which grew profusely in Thessaly. Ovid describes the elaborate preparation:

High in the air she soared, and saw Thessalian Tempe lying far below her. Then she directed her dragons towards certain definite regions. She examined the herbs which grew on Ossa, on lofty Pelion, and on Orthrys, on Pindus, and on Olympus, a greater mountain still, and gathered the ones she wanted, plucking some out by the roots, severing others.⁶⁰

The description of Medea's ritualistic collection of herbs, her sorcery and magical use of plants is strongly connected to Thessaly.

Horace also referred to the 'poisonous herbs from Iolcus'⁶¹ initiating the Roman notion that Thessaly cultivated these herbs for the purpose of magical ritual. Homer had already suggested the connection between Chiron and the healing herbs of Thessaly. To the Roman mind Thessaly's prolific plant life produced the raw material for the sorceress' spells. Lucan and Ovid portray Thessaly as abundant with herbs whose properties were sought for magical practices. Roman writers continued the legendary tradition first intimated by Homer of Thessaly being a source of drugs. However by this period these drugs are used for magical ritual:

The pregnant fields a horrid crop produce
Noxious, and fit for witchcraft's deadly use;
With baleful weeds each mountain's brow is hung.⁶²

⁵⁹ *The Returns*, 2, from Hesiod, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA: 1967), p. 527. See page 24 of this thesis.

⁶⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VII: 222-8. Sophocles' lost play *Rhizotomoi* (*Rootcutters*) also depicts Medea gathering herbs. While Ovid and Lucan suggests Medea found all the drugs she needed in Thessaly another variation suggests Medea was responsible for the proliferation of magical plants: 'Medea was said to have lost there her box of wonder-working plants, which sprang up again in the Thessalian soil'. See *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, edited by Paul Harvey, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1940), p. 257.

⁶¹ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, translated by David Mulroy, The University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI: 1994), Epode 5: 22, p. 86.

⁶² Lucan, *The Civil War*, translated by Nicholas Rowe, 6: 711-13

The earliest sources link the medicinal properties of Thessaly's herbs to the healing tradition of Chiron. However it was the Roman writers who would portray the Thessalian witch gathering and using these herbs for her magical spells.

The confluence of Thessaly's history, geography, topography and flora created a mystique for southern Greeks. Thessaly's geography was not just physical, but mythic. Its marginality from the centre of Greek civilisation endowed it with an 'otherworldly' reputation. Peripheral to southern Greece, Thessaly became the depository for archaic and supernatural remnants ostracised by the culture of the south.



Medieval image of Erichtho, the Thessalian witch from Lucan's Pharsalia

CHAPTER 2 THE MYTHS OF THESSALY: Vestiges of the Other World

*If we are in search of cultural perceptions of magic, we may find that fictions and para-histories are more rewarding sources of insight than the explicit statements or 'hard' evidence so beloved of historians.*⁶³

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that traces of a healing and magical tradition in Thessaly lie behind our earliest sources and are transposed into the later myths of the Thessalian witch. When Medea enters the mythic history of Thessaly she becomes the transitional figure which bridges the heroic tradition of Chiron's healing and magic with the Thessalian sorceress who emerges in the 5th century.

From very early times Thessaly figures prominently in a number of Greek myths, especially as the homeland to the Greek heroes who were also skilled in the arts of medicines and herbs. These included two of the most renowned heroes of ancient Greece, Achilles and Jason. Chiron had fostered them, along with Asclepius and other heroes, in his cave on Mt. Pelion, where they also learned the arts of hunting and archery. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the region was well represented in Homer's Catalogue of Ships⁶⁴. The Thessalian delegation, which includes Achilles, also boasts other Achaean heroes of the *Iliad*: Euryelos, Philoctetes, Podalirius and Machaon (sons of Asclepius), all warriors familiar in various sources with the art of healing.

As I suggested, the mountains of Thessaly were part of a mythic geography whose myths focused around two of the most significant mountain-sites. Mount Olympus, Thessaly's northern boundary, is home to the Olympian gods while Mount Pelion in the south is home to the Centaurs. This dichotomy epitomises the 'split' between culture (the Olympians) and nature (the Centaurs) so often expressed in the myths of Thessaly. This 'split' is also visible in the myths of the important wedding festivities that take place in Thessaly. The most celebrated was the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, which erupted in chaos when uninvited Eris, the goddess of Discord, arrived. Another wedding feast in Thessaly which also ended in discord is when Ixion's son, Pirithous, married Hippodamia. The Centaurs were invited to the wedding since they were also grandsons of Ixion.⁶⁵ A melee erupted when the Centaurs got drunk and they attempted to abduct the bride and other Lapith women. The mythic battle between the Centaurs and the Lapiths expressed the struggle between the civilised and the savage, culture and

⁶³ Richard Gordon, "Aelian's peony: the location of magic in Graeco-Roman tradition", from *Comparative Criticism* 9, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1987), p.60.

⁶⁴ see Appendix 1.

nature. This scene, known as a Centauromachy, would become a favourite subject in 5th Century architectural sculpture to represent the battle against the barbarian, a conflict centred in Thessaly.⁶⁶

While Thessaly's myths were varied⁶⁷ they often tend to involve a magical theme. Melampus was a Thessalian seer whose special gift was to understand the language of animals. Herodotus suggests he introduced the worship of Dionysus into Greece, having learnt the ceremonies and rituals in Egypt.⁶⁸ Evidence of shamanistic motifs like Melampus' clairvoyance and his ability to understand the language of animals appears in other myths of Thessaly. A common thread throughout many of these myths wove together the theme of heroism with the theme of the healing and magical arts. These two themes play a major role in the myth of the centaur, Chiron. The contrast between the primitive, irrational behaviour of the Centaurs and the wisdom of Chiron was a recurrent aspect of this myth.

Chiron is a complex figure as he is a Centaur but not from the same familial line as the others whose ancestry can be traced back to the Lapith king, Ixion. Nor does he display the same barbaric nature as the other Centaurs. In myth he is portrayed as wise and just and a mentor to the heroes. He is a figure mentioned early in the ancient sources. Homer refers to Chiron as a teacher of medicine (*Iliad*, 11.831-2) and as having given special medicines to Asclepius (*Iliad*, 4.218-9). Chiron's cave is on Mt. Pelion, discussed in the previous chapter as a region known in antiquity for its herbs and drugs. Hesiod also refers to Chiron as the foster figure for Medeus (*Theogony* 1001), the son of Medea and Jason. An early poem *The Precepts of Chiron* was a didactic poem 'addressed by the Centaur Chiron to his pupil Achilles'⁶⁹ which included moral and practical precepts. From the earliest sources Chiron is portrayed as a healer using the prolific herbs of Pelion, a teacher of hunting and healing, a philosopher and a foster father, an antithesis to the other Centaurs. Homer refers to Chiron as the 'most righteous of the Centaurs' (*Iliad*, 11:831).

In contrast, the other Centaurs are marginalised: wild, unpredictable and barbaric, brandishing tree trunks, boulders and firebrands as their weapons. They inhabited a threshold between the primitive

⁶⁵ Pindar, Pythian II: 21-48.

⁶⁶ Refer to Chapter 3, page 27. The Centauromachy becomes popular in 5th century architectural relief sculpture to depict the struggle with the barbarian.

⁶⁷ For myths about Thessaly, refer to Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon, *Classical Mythology, Fifth Edition*, Longman Publishers (White Plains, NY: 1971), pp. 490-5.

⁶⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 2: 49. The transmission of magical practices from Egypt to Thessaly is often suggested, as is the connection between these two environs as centres of magic. See Hans Deiter Betz, "Magic in Graeco-Roman Antiquity" from Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Volume 9*, Macmillan Publishing (New York, NY: 1987), p. 93.

⁶⁹ Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA: 1967).

past and the civilising present. They are hybrids, intolerant of culture and disrespectful of its laws and customs, especially marriage.⁷⁰ The Centaurs' mythic habitat was Thessaly, a region also on the threshold of the 'Dark Age'.⁷¹ Page duBois summarises how Chiron and the other Centaurs represent a world before culture:

Cheiron was the only Centaur to be immortal, to be married; he shared his vast knowledge of hunting with the heroes entrusted to his care. He also possessed the knowledge about *pharmaka*, drugs and taught his craft to his pupils. Cheiron's benevolence shows how the Centaurs inhabited a threshold, were liminal in another sense, that is, they lived in nature both as violent, uncivilized beasts, and as characters from a lost past, before the necessity for separation between gods and men, before work, cooking, death, all the evils that culture brings. They demonstrate the Greek's fundamental ambivalence about nature and the prehistory of mankind. The world before culture was viewed with nostalgia as well as loathing⁷².

This 'world before culture' was epitomised by the Centaur as well as the region they inhabited, Thessaly. The centaur symbolises anti-culture. On the other hand Chiron represents the wisdom of the ancient traditions; an exception which proved the rule. However both belong to the past, and both represent the past. But by the middle of the 5th century BCE the centaur symbolised the barbarian, while Chiron personified the ancient healing tradition. Both were located in Thessaly therefore these primitive and supernatural fragments from the past biased the outlook towards the region.

As an elder in the Greek myths Chiron demonstrates traces of a tradition which linked heroism and healing, a tradition reminiscent of shamanism.⁷³ However few traces of the mystical traditions in Greek myth remain. As early as Homer Chiron was banished to 'the sidelines of the Iliad'⁷⁴ as an

⁷⁰ For an exploration of the centaur, see G.S. Kirk, *Myth, Its Meanings and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1986), pp. 152-161.

⁷¹ The term dark age is being used in the context of Westlake's opinion that Thessaly remained in the Dark Ages until nearly the 4th Century: 'the Dark Ages may scarcely be considered at an end until the close of the fifth century'. See footnote 25.

⁷² Page duBois, *Centaurs and Amazons, Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being*, p. 30.

⁷³ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 387-8 suggests the link to shamanism: 'the myths and legends of the centaurs and the first divine healers and doctors...show faint traces of primordial shamanism'. For a discussion on Greek myth and shamanism refer to Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 387-93; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA: 1951), pp. 135-178; Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA: 1979), pp. 88-98.

⁷⁴ Bryan Hainsworth, *The Iliad: A Commentary Volume III: Books 9-12* (Cambridge: 1993), 9.442. For amplification on Chiron's role in the *Iliad* and his mentoring of Achilles see Chris Mackie, "Achilles' Teachers: Chiron and Phoenix in the *Iliad*", *Greece & Rome*, Volume XLIV, No. 1, April 1997, pp. 1-17. The tradition of marginalising Chiron (i.e. the healing legacy of Thessaly) continues on into subsequent centuries. Euripides in *Alcestis*, lines 968-970, suggests it is Apollo who

unsuitable mentor for heroic Achilles. Chiron, as a carrier of archaic rituals and traditions, becomes marginalised in epic as early as the 8th century. While there are few sources, which clearly point to Chiron's magical healing legacy, fragments are evident in the myths of his students. Asclepius, the god of healing, learned the art of medicine and surgery from Chiron.⁷⁵ Homer refers to Asclepius as a physician but seems to ignore his status as a god. His birth myth parallels the shaman's encounter with death⁷⁶ in that Asclepius was delivered from the womb of his dead mother as she lay on the funeral pyre and relinquished to the care of Chiron.⁷⁷ Like a shaman, Asclepius also has the power retrieve the soul from the underworld through his power to raise the dead. It is this ability which Edelstein suggests makes him a sorcerer:

Asclepius was entrusted to Chiron from whom he learned the arts of hunting and of medicine. He became an especially good surgeon; he healed the sick and revived the dead. But besides being a physician, he was a sorcerer as well.⁷⁸

During the archaic period the poets and myth makers judged this a sin, punishable by death.⁷⁹ Edelstein reminds us of the amalgam of healing and sorcery, an association, which became denigrated throughout the 5th century. However the evidence of Homer and Hesiod seems to make it clear that the process of excluding magic from the Greek myths begins much earlier in the 8th century BCE. The myths of both Chiron and Asclepius suggest the epic poets had deleted supernatural fragments.

As previously discussed, Chiron also teaches Achilles the art of healing: 'The notion of healing is germane to the Iliadic Achilles',⁸⁰. Another magical aspect of Achilles' myth is his ability to communicate with his horse, Xanthus.⁸¹ Like Achilles, Jason was also a great Thessalian hero, from the previous generation who was fostered and mentored by Chiron. It was Chiron who gave him his name Iason, meaning 'healer'.⁸² While the ancient sources do not provide us with any references to his healing or magical abilities, a fragment from a Corinthian column-crater (575 BC) suggests Jason may

gave the medicines to the sons of Asclepius: 'the herbs that Phoebus shredded as antidotes and gave to the sons of Asclepius'.

⁷⁵ Pindar, Pythian III: 30-54.

⁷⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, p. 32 ff.

⁷⁷ Pindar, Pythian III: 30 –46.

⁷⁸ Emma J. and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius, A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, The John Hopkins Press (Baltimore, MD: 1945), p. 23.

⁷⁹ Pindar in Pythian III is condemning of Asclepius. See also Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Grammarians*, 260-2.

⁸⁰ Chris Mackie, 'In the Centaurs Cave' from an unpublished manuscript. p. 3. G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, Penguin (London: 1974) also refers to this theme.

⁸¹ Homer, *Iliad* 19: 400ff. See also Chapter 1 of this thesis.

also have been skilled at the art of healing. The scene on the fragment has been interpreted as Jason healing Phineus' blindness through the laying on of hands.⁸³ This evidence could suggest that earlier versions of the myth might have ascribed more of the magical notions to Jason, rather than to Medea.

But it is Medea who has the reputation as the great magical practitioner in Greek myth. She becomes the first sorceress to perform rituals in Thessaly. Our fullest account of this is Ovid, however Attic vases and Pindar are earlier sources. Ovid retells the account of Medea's magical ritual, which rejuvenates Aeson and then later the old ram. After the old ram has been youthfully resurrected Medea tricks the daughters of Pelias into unwittingly killing their own father. This motif of dismemberment and rejuvenation had been part of a mythic tradition since the archaic period, first referred to in *The Returns*:

Medea made Aeson a sweet young boy and stripped his old age from him by cunning skill, when she made a brew of many herbs in her golden cauldrons.⁸⁴

Pindar also alludes to Medea's cunning trick, which killed Pelias.⁸⁵ In 530 BCE 'a series of Attic vases with the ram and the cauldron begins' retelling the magical acts of Medea.⁸⁶

Medea is a barbarian from Colchis, not a Thessalian. However she is consistently associated with Iolcus, one of Thessaly's Mycenaean settlements at the foot of Mt. Pelion and its premier port in the ancient world. Medea is a transitory figure. However Richard Gordon suggests that if 'there was anywhere that Medea belonged it was in Thessaly, home of witchcraft; and it was in Thessaly that she performed one of her most famous feats of magic'⁸⁷. Thessaly being the 'home of witchcraft' cannot be substantiated by archaeological or textual evidence. It is more probable that the tradition of Thessalian witchcraft developed out of the mythic alliance of Medea with Thessaly reinforced by the fragments of myths, which linked Thessaly with the supernatural. Chiron's healing and magic already existed in an older tradition. Medea symbolises the theme of the outsider magician transposed into the

⁸² See Chris Mackie, "The Earliest Jason. What's in a Name?", *Greece & Rome*, Volume 48, No. 1, April 2001, pp. 4-5 and B.K. Braswell, *A Commentary on the Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar* (New York, NY: 1988), p. 340.

⁸³ For a more detailed account of the fragmentary evidence as well as the interpretation see C.J. Mackie, "The Earliest Jason: What's in a Name?", pp. 7-9 and T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth, Volume 1*, John Hopkins University Press (Baltimore, MD: 1993), p. 354-5.

⁸⁴ *The Returns*, 2, from Hesiod, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA: 1967), p. 527.

⁸⁵ Pindar, Pythian IV: 251.

⁸⁶ Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth, Volume 1*, pp. 366-8.

⁸⁷ Richard Gordon, "Aelians's peony: the location of magic in the Graeco-Roman tradition", p. 81.

myths of Thessaly. As an alien resident she reflects the uneasy ambivalence that the Greeks felt towards the foreigner. Medea is an enigma: one who is ‘foreign yet intestine, a stranger but close’⁸⁸.

The myths of Thessaly imbued the region with a supernatural mystique. While Medea’s magical ritual is the most blatant example of witchcraft the confluence of the other myths endowed the region with a primitive and ‘otherworldly’ reputation. Lacking the high standard of cultural development that the south had experienced the magical reputation of Thessaly lingered into the classical period. Even throughout the archaic period the tendency of poets to marginalise supernatural elements of the myths had begun.⁸⁹ The motif of healing and magic in Thessaly lies behind our earliest sources of myth, including Homer. Chiron and his healing tradition suggest Thessaly was a ‘magical’ sphere in the pre-historic, pre-Homeric world. Jason, Chiron’s student trained in this tradition, brings Medea to Thessaly. Medea became the transitional figure in Thessaly’s magical legacy. She mediates between the archaic traditions of healing first mentioned in Homer and the figure of the Thessalian witch.

However it was in the atmosphere of the 5th century that the figure of the Thessalian witch was fostered. While supernatural remains were still visible in the myths of Thessaly, by the last half of the 5th century the gulf between the primitive and the civilised, the supernatural and the scientific, had widened. In southern Greece this split was evident in the Athenian attitudes towards the ‘other’. From the rational and cultural perspective of the Athenian, the primitive became viewed as irrational, which then became equated with magical. Certainly Thessaly underwent this transformation from primitive to magical evident in the shift from Chiron’s healing magic to the spells of the Thessalian witch.

⁸⁸ Richard Gordon, “Aelians’s peony: the location of magic in the Graeco-Roman tradition”, p.81.

⁸⁹ This is evident in Homer’s lack of acknowledgment of Chiron’s influence as mentor to Achilles, Hesiod and Pindar’s condemnation of Asclepius’ raising the dead.

CHAPTER 3 THE 5th CENTURY: Inventing the Thessalian Witch

*It was not until the fifth century that the archaic world's ranks of divine, supernatural, and inhuman antagonists of civilization were to be joined forever by the barbarian.*⁹⁰

During the 5th Century BCE there was a marked shift in the Athenian attitude towards magic which became more and more marginalised from Athenian culture. As well as this the attitude towards the Thessalian became more negative. To the Athenian magic and Thessalians had associations with Persia hence both were categorised as 'other'. This chapter aims to demonstrate the ways that these changes in perspective contributed to shaping the image of the Thessalian witch.

Early in the 5th Century BCE, the experience of the Persian invasion altered forever the way the Athenian conceived of the 'other'. Having fled their city when the Persians invaded, the Athenians returned in 479 to find it levelled, sacked and ruined; temples were destroyed, houses burnt, treasures looted. The elation of their victories against the Persians at Marathon in 490, Salamis in 480 and Plataia in 479 had waned when confronted by the total destruction of their city. However what still remained intact was the Athenian resolve and determination to prosper, which subsequently catapulted Athens into its 'golden age'. A new foreign policy was quickly adopted, spurred by the spirit that 'the best defence was a sound offence'.⁹¹

The Athenian psyche had now been impressed with the image of the other, the outsider, and the barbarian. The tendency to project anything non-Athenian onto the 'other' was a defence, which entered the Athenian ethos at this time. Images of the barbarian were etched on their monuments as a visual reminder of destructive external forces, unleashed by the aggressors against Athens. The most popular images were Centaurs, barbaric warring hybrids and Amazons, warrior women who embody the notion of rejecting the ways of the *polis*. Everything Persian became seen as other to the Greeks, barbaric and on the fringe. In 472 BCE Aeschylus produced his play *Persians* which condemned the Persians on moral, ethical, and religious grounds. Aeschylus' voice confirmed that 'the Athenian rationale for the victory over the barbarians had already begun to take shape'.⁹² Hence magic, commonly associated with the Persian *magos*, also began to be marginalised and denigrated.

⁹⁰ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1989), p. 53.

⁹¹ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1999), p. 138.

⁹² David Castriota, *Myth, Ethos and Actuality*, University of Wisconsin Press (Madison, WI: 1992), p. 23.

During the 5th century the concept of magic became more aligned with the ways of the barbarian and was viewed by the elite as an archaic remnant from the period before culture. The negative attitude towards magical practices continued on into the following centuries. Plato refers to the sorcerer as *thériodés*, meaning beast-like, reminiscent of the Homeric description of the Thessalian Centaurs (beast men, *Iliad* 2:741) as well as the Persians. During the mid 5th Century Athenians used the motif of the Centaurography, which occurred in Thessaly, on the south metopes of the Parthenon and the temple of Hephaestus in the Agora.⁹³ This reminded Athenians of their struggles with barbarians and the continual conflict of opposites: nature/culture, divine/beast etc. This 5th Century principle of polarity is often described by the extremes of *sophrosyne* versus *hybris*. Moderation and self-restraint (*sophrosyne*), an Athenian attribute, was a polar opposite to the lack of moderation and impiety (*hybris*) of their enemies (i.e. the Persians).⁹⁴ Magic during the 5th Century had also become categorised as ‘other’. Magic was associated with Persia and the *magos*, the root of magic, referred to the Persian priest. ‘*Magos* appears for the first time in a Greek text at the end of the 6th Century BCE and becomes more frequent during the classical period; it is a non-Greek word with an undisputed origin in the religious language of Persia’.⁹⁵ With its close association to Persia magic is viewed suspiciously in classical Athens. While tracing the evolution of magical practice is a ‘muddle’⁹⁶ it is apparent that the 5th Century Athenian attitude towards magic began to shift. Practitioners of magic began to be denigrated and the practice of magic became criticised by the elite. Magic and barbarians were synonymous.

In the ethos of this century women were also the ‘other’ and female practitioners of magic were the least differentiated yet the most maligned.

The least differentiated magical practice, as well as the most widespread, was the activity of “wise women”⁹⁷.

‘Wise women’ were often just rural or peasant women who collected and used herbs for medicinal purposes. They often became enmeshed with the wider group of magical practitioners. As female they

⁹³ Robin Osborne in “Framing the Centaur” from *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1994), p. 52 states: ‘The most important surviving sculptural sequences from fifth century BCE Greek temples all prominently feature centaurs’.

⁹⁴ David Castriota, *Myth, Ethos and Actuality*, p.17ff.

⁹⁵ Fritz Graf, “Excluding the charming: the development of the Greek concept of magic” from M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (eds.) *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, E.J. Brill (Leiden: 1995). p. 30.

⁹⁶ Richard Gordon, “Aelians’s peony: the location of magic in the Graeco-Roman tradition”, p.61.

⁹⁷ Richard Gordon, “Aelians’s peony: the location of magic in the Graeco-Roman tradition”, p. 64. Gordon discusses the differing attitudes towards male and female magical practitioners in the classical period.

were easily cast as the ‘other’, the most feared, and the least understood. In the latter part of the 5th century another barbarian, the witch of Thessaly, also emerged. Being female, outside the *polis* and located in the wilds of Thessaly, she too was barbaric. No longer was she the seductive, magical enchantress from a far away island like Homer’s Circe, but an outsider on the fringe of the *polis*; a woman who defied the course of nature by ‘drawing down the moon’.

The first surviving textual reference to the Thessalian witch appears in the last quarter of the 5th Century. In Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, produced in 423 BCE, the main character, Strepsiades, suggests to Socrates that if he ‘bought a Thessalian sorceress’ to draw down the moon then he might be able to utilise magic to keep from paying interest.⁹⁸ Socrates, a representative of the new Athenian ethos seems unfamiliar with the skills of the Thessalian sorceress. However the old farmer, Strepsiades, knows the ways of the past, which include the uses of magic. This appears to be the first textual evidence for a Thessalian witch and the first reference point, excluding mythology⁹⁹, for the amalgamation of the witch figure with Thessaly. It is also one of the few direct references to magical ritual in Attic fifth-century literature.¹⁰⁰ While the reference seems to imply that the audience was already familiar with tales of Thessalian witches and their penchant for drawing down the moon, no previous textual evidence is available to suggest when the women of Thessaly became known for their witchcraft. However it is clear that both magical practitioners and Thessalians were marginalised during the second half of the 5th Century. Therefore both magic and Thessaly were associated with Persia, the polar opposite of Athens. This coupled with the emerging Athenian tendency to ‘analyse phenomena in terms of opposing principles’¹⁰¹ suggests that the legend of the Thessalian witch may have been articulated for the first time during this period. At least the tendency to transpose what was outcast in Athenian society onto Thessaly became possible.

The Athenian attitude towards Thessaly during this century became suspicious and mistrustful. During the fifth century the Thessalian also became ‘other’ to the Athenians politically and culturally. Thessalians began to be stereotyped as untrustworthy and crafty, attributes that later would also describe witches. Eteocles’ Thessalian trick in Euripides’ *Phoenissae* (1407-13)¹⁰² reflects the

⁹⁸ Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, translated by Alan H. Sommerstein, Aris & Phillips Ltd. (Warminster: 1982), lines 750-55. In Penguin’s translation by A. H. Sommerstein (London: 1973), ‘slave’ replaces ‘sorceress’, p. 143. Pliny also refers to a comedy about Thessalian witches written by Menander (342 – 291 BCE) called ‘Thessalia’ which ‘deals fully with the tricks of the women for calling down the moon’. See Pliny, *Natural History*, Book XXX. II. 8.

⁹⁹ The myths concerning Thessaly had consistently included traces of the supernatural. See Chapter 2 of this thesis.

¹⁰⁰ Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational*, p. 205, n. 99.

¹⁰¹ David Castriota, *Myth, Ethos and Actuality*, p.19.

¹⁰² E.K. Borthwick, “Two Scenes of Combat in Euripides”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies (JHS)*, Volume LXXXIX, 1969, p.17 quotes the fragment from Euripides titled ‘The Thessalian Trick’. See also *The Phoenissae of Euripides*, edited by

generalisation which labelled the Thessalian as deceitful and conniving. While there is no mention of witches in Euripides' fragment, tricks and Thessaly are becoming fused together in the Athenian mind. Westlake suggests the treacherous Thessalian persona emerges in the second half of the century, shortly before Aristophanes' reference to Thessalian witchcraft:

The Thessalian reputation for treachery, notorious in later times, dates from the second half of the fifth century and probably originated in Athens. The earliest reference to it seems to be by Euripides (Fr. 426, Nauck).¹⁰³

The Athenian accusation of untrustworthiness was also political. Trust in the Thessalians had been broken. In 462 Thessaly had forged an alliance with Athens. Before the development of their own cavalry, the Athenians relied on their Thessalian allies for support since they were 'famed for their skill as cavalrymen'.¹⁰⁴ When Thessaly's help was needed against Sparta, the Thessalian cavalry deserted its allies at Tanagara in favour of the Spartans.¹⁰⁵ During the same campaign the Thessalian cavalry were openly hostile towards the Athenians and attacked an Athenian supply train in a premeditated raid.¹⁰⁶ This was not the first time Athens had felt betrayed by Thessaly. During the Persian wars Thessaly had 'medized'¹⁰⁷. Even before Persia marched through Thessaly in 480 BCE, Herodotus suggests a Thessalian contingent journeyed to Persia to offer their support and 'to promise all the assistance which it was in their power to give' the Persians for an invasion of Greece. He suggests this support may have contributed to the Persian decision to invade Greece.¹⁰⁸ Xerxes' army marched through Thessaly on its assault of southern Greece. After their defeat at Salamis Mardonios, the Persian general, along with the Persian army wintered in Thessaly where there was ample food and shelter. At the battle of Plataia the three sons of the Aleuas, one of Thessaly's ruling families, were

John U. Powell, Constable and Co. (London: 1911). In notes (on page 210) to line 1497 the author states 'Thessaly was celebrated for trickery'.

¹⁰³ Westlake, "The Medism of Thessaly", JHS, Volume LVI, 1936, p. 24, n. 29.

¹⁰⁴ J.J. Pollitt, "The Meaning of the Parthenon Frieze" from Diana Buitron-Oliver (ed.), *The Interpretation of Architectural Sculpture in Greece and Rome*, University Press of New England (Hanover, NH: 1997), p.53.

¹⁰⁵ There are many references to Thessaly's betrayal of Athens through the desertion of their cavalry. See Pausanias, I. 29.9; Thucydides I. 107; Diodoros XI. 80: 20-26.

¹⁰⁶ J.J. Pollitt, "The Meaning of the Parthenon Frieze", p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ 'Medism' is used to designate collaboration with the Persians, stemming from the act of siding with the Persians. See David Graf, *Medism: Greek Collaboration with Achaemenid Persia*, University Microfilms International (Ann Arbor, MI: 1984) and H.D. Westlake, "The Medism of Thessaly", JHS, Volume LVI, 1936.

¹⁰⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, translated by George Rawlinson, Wordsworth Editions Ltd. (Ware: 1996), Book 7:6, p. 513. Herodotus wrote his account of the Persian wars in the third quarter of the 5th century. His opening sentence in *Histories* suggests he is recording the history of the Persian Wars to preserve the 'great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians' (Persians). By this time the barbarian had become a familiar term to be used for the Persians as well as a concept in the mind of the Athenian.

members of the confidential staff of Mardonios.¹⁰⁹ Thessaly's allegiance with Athens could not be trusted.

This reputation for untrustworthiness in the latter part of the 5th century compounded earlier accusations that the Thessalians were intellectually inferior. The artisans of southern Greece saw Thessaly as culturally and intellectually backward and sterile. Denigrating comments about the Thessalian bridged the 5th century. Alcman, in the latter 7th century, (fragment 24 Bergk-Schaefer) suggested the Thessalian had 'the intellectual refinement of Asiatics', fusing them with the 'other', even before their association with the Persians. A century later Simonides, who had visited Thessaly, considered the Thessalians 'stupid' (Plut, Mor p.15D). Later, in the 4th century, Plato also followed these earlier leads intimating that Thessalians were without virtue. In *Crito*, Plato stated that Thessaly was a 'land of misrule' and unlike any other Greek 'well-ordered state'. Plato suggested that it would 'hardly be decent' of Socrates to 'give lectures in virtue' to the Thessalians since they lacked piety.¹¹⁰ No doubt Plato reflects the Athenian feeling of superiority to the Thessalian throughout the 5th and early 4th centuries.

From a cultural standpoint Thessaly had not matched the sophistication or accelerated intellectual development of the south. Westlake suggests that from a cultural standpoint 'the Thessalian might well be classed as a semi-barbarian for he possessed none of that lively imagination which is characteristic of the Greek genius'.¹¹¹ An invisible boundary separated the cultured Greeks of the South from the 'peasants' of the North.¹¹² Whilst it was the Persians who were the first barbarians, all 'others' were soon categorized as outsiders. Thessalians and magical practitioners became part of this category. Political events greatly contributed to shaping the negative reputation of the Thessalian during the 5th century. This maligned image may also have supported the creation of the Thessalian witch, a figure vastly different from the archaic sorceresses described by Homer and even Hesiod¹¹³. During this century, the image of the barbaric other became enshrined in Greek art and architecture constellated by

¹⁰⁹ H.D. Westlake, "The Medism of Thessaly", JHS, Volume LVI, 1936, p.14.

¹¹⁰ Plato, *Crito*, from *The Essential Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (Sydney: 1999), p. 548.

¹¹¹ H.D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century, BC*, p.46.

¹¹² The cultural separation between North and South is visible in many countries. A modern example is the sophisticated residents of northern Italy who see their southern counterparts as primitive.

¹¹³ Homer's Circe in the *Odyssey* is well known. She is an enchantress known for her use of herbs, charms and spells, especially her ability to transform men into swine and other beasts. Homer describes Circe's charm as 'malevolent guiles' (X: 289) and her spells as 'evil hurt' (X: 300). However she is also portrayed as responsive and caring towards Odysseys. In the *Iliad* (Book 11: 740-1) Homer introduces Agamede: 'fair-haired Agamede who knew of all the medicines that are grown in the broad earth'. Hesiod mentions Medea in one line however praises Hekate 'above all' (414). He devotes over 40 lines in praise of the goddess Hekate who, by the classical period, has also become marginalised due to her association with sorcery.

the Persian experience. The Persian invasion helped to consolidate the Greek notion of barbarian and ‘other’:

The all-embracing genus of anti-Greeks later to be termed ‘the barbarians’ does not appear until the fifth century.¹¹⁴

By the end of the fifth century this ‘all-embracing genus’ includes the Thessalian witch. Plato also uses the simile of the Thessalian witch in *Gorgias*. Concerned about the need for moderation, Plato uses the Thessalian witch as an example of the misuse of power and corrupting the proper course of nature. Misuse of power was *hybris* and anti-Athenian. In the Greek democratic process of the 5th Century the acquisition of great power often met with ostracism.

I would not have us risk that which is dearest on the acquisition of this power, like the Thessalian enchantresses, who, as they say, bring down the moon from heaven at the risk of their own perdition.¹¹⁵

Plato also assumes a familiarity with this witch figure: ‘as they say’ suggests that the legend of the Thessalian sorceress was already well known in his era, as was her skill at drawing down the moon.

Anchoring the primary references to Thessalian witches in the context of the classical Athenian atmosphere is necessary in order to reconstruct the possible conception of this legend. By the end of the 5th Century in Athens, the split between the beliefs of the intellectual elite and the common people’s more primitive ideologies had widened. During the paradigm shift of the 5th Century, classical Athens witnessed science, philosophy and medicine emerge out of prevailing practices and beliefs of the times. Many of these prevailing beliefs included magical practices and rituals. Archaeological evidence supports the practice of magical rituals in 5th and 4th Century Athens¹¹⁶ while textual evidence suggests that itinerant seers and healers, who offered private purification rituals and magical spells, were part of the Athenian atmosphere during the same period.¹¹⁷ Two voices, which

¹¹⁴ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, p. 55.

¹¹⁵ Plato, *Gorgias*, from *The Essential Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (Sydney: 1999), p.1145.

¹¹⁶ See Richard Gordon, “Aelian’s peony: the location of magic in Graeco-Roman tradition”.

¹¹⁷ E.R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, page 193 suggests that during the 5th century there was also a regressive reaction to the growth of rationalism. This increased the demand for magical healing (hence the cult of Asclepius) and foreign cults. However it also appears that the peasant, the uneducated rural populace and the commoner maintained their beliefs and superstitions throughout this period.

denounced magical practitioners and healers during this period, were Plato and the Hippocratic corpus.¹¹⁸

Plato spoke out against the mobile ritual practitioners, these ‘craftsmen of the sacred’¹¹⁹.

There are itinerant evangelists and prophets who knock at the door of the rich man’s house, and persuade him that they have some kind of divine power, and that any wrong that either he or his ancestors have done can be expiated by means of charms and sacrifices.¹²⁰

Plato’s invective against the practitioners of private purification rituals¹²¹ portrays itinerant ‘priests’ and magical practitioners as part of the Athenian life. However it also reveals the elite’s denigration of these practitioners.

Before Plato, a text written by a member of the Hippocratic corpus also confirmed the practice of magical healing as part of the contemporary culture of classical Athens. *On the Sacred Disease* is a record that demonstrates against magical practice. Focusing on the belief in a ‘sacred disease’ the author constructs a platform from which magic and healing rituals are criticised and condemned. The boundary is clearly delineated between legitimate (Hippocratic/science) and illegitimate (magic/ritual) medical practice. The author of the text consistently argues that the practice of ritual and magic has no sound theoretical base and stresses the polarity between science (natural causes) and magic (supernatural causes). The author suggests these magical practices are unnatural and that the practitioner is unable to differentiate wounding from healing: ‘The man who can get rid of a disease by magic could equally as well bring it on’ (3. 3). The conscious attempt of a healer to mobilise power to curse or wound suggests magical practice. The writings of both Plato and the Hippocratic Corpus confirm magical healing was being denigrated in classical Athens by the voices of the *polis* that viewed

¹¹⁸ See “On the Sacred Disease” from G.E.R. Lloyd (ed.), *Hippocratic Writings*, translated by J. Chadwick & W.N. Mann, Penguin (Harmondsworth: 1978) and Plato *Republic* and *Laws*, translated by H.D.P. Lee, Penguin (Harmondsworth: 1955).

¹¹⁹ Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* translated by Walter Burkert and Margaret E. Pinder, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA: 1992). On page 6 he uses this expression to reflect the itinerant seers and healers who brought their divination and purification skills into Greece from Asia during the archaic period.

¹²⁰ Plato, *Republic*, translated by HDP Lee (Harmondsworth: 1955), 2:346b.

¹²¹ Plato, *Republic*, translated by HDP Lee, 2.364b.

it as chaotic and outside the cohesive bounds of state religion.¹²² Supernatural healing and magic is defined as the extreme polarity to scientific healing. The ‘fifth century saw a gradual hardening of the boundaries between licit and illicit forms of religious activity’.¹²³ And since Thessaly was already the mythic homeland of supernatural healing, it was vulnerable to be typecast as ‘other’ to the Athenian *polis*, perhaps even a centre of ‘illicit forms of religious activity’.

Alternative practitioners are described by the Hippocratic author as ‘men in search of a living who invent these fancy tales’ (4. 5). While the author’s conscious agenda may be to discredit these healers as fraudulent in order to educate the community, an unconscious agenda may also have existed since these healers competed with the Hippocratic ‘doctors’ in the same marketplace for the same clients. From the intensity of the attack it could be inferred that magical practices were regularly commissioned. At least, it appears that folk medicine was a threat to the burgeoning Hippocratic School. To persuade clients away from the cathartic healers, it may have been an effective strategy to attack magic and ultimately discredit their practices. The ‘rejection and refutation of certain magic notions’,¹²⁴ not only records the animosity between magical and rational notions of medicine in the classical period, but also serves to record the denigration of magical practitioners.

The growing acceptance of scholarly and scientific doctrines by the elite created the necessity to shift authority from untrained practitioners and laymen onto acceptably trained members of the elite. Since the doctor had no recognised professional qualifications and anyone could claim to be a healer¹²⁵, it was important to separate practitioners of magic from physicians. In the medical sphere, the Hippocratic physicians, who ascribed to the new school of medicine, employed ‘scientific’ doctrines emphasising the natural causes of disease. This stood in contrast to practitioners who saw the origins of disease as divine and employed magical practices to heal.

On the Sacred Disease also claims these magical practitioners are actually ‘impious’ for their attempted practices and rituals which try to control natural forces. One of the rituals mentioned in the text is the attempt to ‘draw down the moon’ (4. 1), a spell which becomes particularly aligned with the Thessalian

¹²² One of the cults sanctioned by the city was the Cult of Asclepius where archaic notions of healing seemed to be mixed with the rational medicine of the day. Interestingly Asclepius also underwent a rebirth, relocating from Tricca in Thessaly to Epidauros or from the North to the South.

¹²³ Richard Gordon, “Aelian’s peony: the location of magic in Graeco-Roman tradition”, p. 79.

¹²⁴ G.E.R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the Origin and Development of Greek Science*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1979), p. 16.

¹²⁵ G.E.R. Lloyd (ed.), *Hippocratic Writings*, translated by J. Chadwick and W.N. Mann. In the introduction on page 13 Lloyd says ‘the ancient doctor possessed no legally recognised professional qualifications. Anyone could claim to heal the sick.’

sorceress in the 5th century and therefore a reference, albeit unintentional, to Thessalian healing. The figure of the Thessalian sorceress was in stark contrast to the new school of medicine, which promoted its scientific doctrines.

Writers and playwrights, part of the Athenian elite, may also have crafted a literary way to differentiate magic from medicine by locating it outside the *polis*, in a remote and wild location beyond Athens, in Thessaly.¹²⁶ Athenian audiences were already familiar with the archaic tradition of Thessalian healers through the mythical legacy of Chiron, Achilles, Asclepius, Machaon, Podaleirios, Philoktetes as well as Jason (and Medea). Locating a contemporary supernatural figure like a sorceress in the wilds of Thessaly would be consistent with its mythic landscape.

As discussed Medea was the first known sorceress in ancient sources to perform magical rituals in Thessaly. However by the latter half of the century Euripides wove the archaic threads of her myth into the potent figure of Medea. Euripides' Medea, who had a knowledge of drugs and herbs (*Medea*, 718-9), was also transformed by the atmosphere towards outsiders and magic in the 5th century. She is an outsider, a non-citizen and a personification of the 'other'. She is now 'no woman' and 'more savage by nature than Etruscan Scylla'.¹²⁷ She enters Greek tragedy as a barbarian:

Medea is moved further and further out towards the periphery of Greek ethnicity by the Athenians; she began as the Greek Agamede of the *Iliad*, but her barbarianism is the result of the tragedian's efforts.¹²⁸

Medea is our first reference point for the Thessalian witch as well as the intermediary figure linking Chiron, Jason's mentor, with the witch of Thessaly.

Sweeping cultural, social and political changes occurred in 5th century Athens. As part of these changes certain practices and people became marginalised and outcast. Magic was one of the practices, which was marginalised, while both women and Thessalians were also groups who became disenfranchised. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the topography and mythology of Thessaly, which carried archaic vestiges of the supernatural, would naturally be a setting to locate magic. Athenians

¹²⁶ This furthermore exacerbated the isolation of Thessaly.

¹²⁷ Euripides, *Medea*, translated by James Morwood, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1997), 1342-3. Medea is now even more barbaric than the hideous monster, Scylla. Pindar also referred to Medea in Pythian IV.

¹²⁸ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early, Modern and Twentieth Century Representations*, Routledge (London: 1996), p. 259.

also lacked respect for the Thessalians. While it is highly probable that local Thessalian women (especially Magnesians) practiced the art of gathering plants, root-cutting and mixing herbs for medicinal purposes there is no evidence to support these rituals. More likely the Thessalian witch, whether or not she literally existed, was myth making. From a complex of associations involving magic and Thessaly she emerged out of the atmosphere of the latter 5th century into legend. Without local writers and a civilising culture we can only imagine how the mountain people of Thessaly lived. It was a combination of fear and imagination, I suspect, which led Aristophanes and others to characterise the Thessalian witch. The atmosphere of the 5th century, which denigrated magical practitioners, especially healing magic, coupled with the marginalisation of Thessaly created the *chaos* from which the witches of Thessaly emerged. While the Thessalian witch was brought to life in classical Athens it was the Roman writer who animated her potent character, named her, and transformed the way she would be depicted from that period onward.



Parthenon Metope depicting the battle between a Lapith and a Centaur

CHAPTER 4 ANIMATING THE WITCH: The Roman Revival of the Thessalian Sorceress

*By the Roman era, witches had been firmly located in an imagined Thessaly*¹²⁹

Roman writers fashioned the myth of the Thessalian sorceress out of the tradition that they had inherited from the Greeks. This chapter will demonstrate how the portrayal of the Thessalian witch created the association between witches and Thessaly, which has persisted ever since their time.

In Republican Rome magic was not marginalised or radically differentiated from the spheres of religion or medicine. However in the Augustan period ‘Roman society started to differentiate between magic on the one hand and both religion and science on the other, in order to marginalise it [magic]’¹³⁰. The shift in the attitude towards magic and its practitioners from Republican Rome to Imperial Rome paralleled a similar attitudinal change that occurred between the Archaic period and the 5th Century in Athens. As far as can be deduced from limited sources, magical practice and beliefs were tolerated throughout the archaic period. However, as shown in Chapter 3, during the 5th century magic and its practitioners were deemed as outside and hence denigrated. Scapegoating magical practitioners was common in Imperial Rome, as was falsely accusing one’s enemies of witchcraft in order to dispense with unwanted enemies.¹³¹ The enlightenment of the Augustan era cast its shadow over the practice of magic and the acceptance of the supernatural. Like classical Athens, magical practitioners became disenfranchised.

During this period Roman writers were ‘bewitched’ by magic and the supernatural. Their depiction of the witch and her rituals however were more often caricatures, comic descriptions or gross exaggerations of the witch’s powers and abilities.¹³² What is apparent in these portrayals is that the unattractive Roman depiction of the witch had eclipsed the seductive beauty and allure of Homer’s Circe. The Roman personification would now become the prototype of the witch for the next two millennia. The nameless Thessalian sorceresses of classical Athens also became identified by the Roman writers. Roman writers named the Thessalian witch, giving her an individual identity: she now was Pamphile, Chrysame, Meroe, and Erichtho.

¹²⁹ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early, Modern and Twentieth Century Representations*, p.273, n. 30.

¹³⁰ Fritz Graf, “Excluding the Charming: the Development of the Greek Concept of Magic”, p.41.

¹³¹ Fritz Graf, “Excluding the Charming: the Development of the Greek Concept of Magic”, p. 42.

Witchcraft and spells in Roman poetry were often linked with erotic passion. Roman poetry introduced magic through the erotic spell. Virgil's Eclogue VIII, the Roman equivalent of the second Idyll of Theocritus aptly named *Pharmaceutria*,¹³³ is an example. One line from the poem recalls the spell that had become aligned with the Thessalian witch: 'Magic spells can inveigle the moon from the sky',¹³⁴. A fascination for the witch began, especially when she was Thessalian or had learnt her craft from the renowned witches of Thessaly. Epic writers and playwrights also employed the character of the witch. Seneca used Medea as a centrepiece for his eponymous play. However it was Seneca's nephew, Lucan who wrote 'perhaps the most celebrated, certainly the longest, magic scene in Latin literature'¹³⁵. And appropriately, Lucan's setting is Thessaly.

Like the Persians, Roman troops also used Thessaly as a corridor between northern and southern Greece.¹³⁶ For later Roman writers, Thessaly gained historical importance, as this was the location where Julius Caesar defeated Pompey.¹³⁷ During the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Caesar marched into Thessaly and his rival followed. Lucan uses this conflict for the background to Book 6 in his epic poem *The Civil War*, which has the most elaborate description of a witch and her craft in antiquity. Lucan's geographical and mythological surveys of Thessaly open this section of Book 6. It was Thessaly's geography and mythology, which had originally contributed to shaping her reputation as a centre for witchcraft. Lucan, like other Roman writers, was entranced by the aura of Thessaly's topography and the myths connected with its landscape. The remainder of the book is a compelling description of both the witch and her perverse rituals.

Lucan uses the figure of Erictho, a foul and repugnant Thessalian witch, to serve as his representative. First he introduces the wide range of magical practices and supernatural feats, which are part of the witch's repertoire, before reminding the reader of the Thessalian witch and her particular powers.

And Thessaly's witches,

They were the first to draw down the stars from the circling heavens,

First to harass the lucent moon with horrible poisons¹³⁸

¹³² See Horace, *Satires* 1.8. 46-50.

¹³³ See Idyll 2, *The Idylls of Theocritus*, translated by Robert Well, Carcarnet Press (Manchester: 1988).

¹³⁴ Virgil, translated by C. Day Lewis, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 1983), Eclogue VIII, line 69.

¹³⁵ Eugene Tavenner, "Canidia and Other Witches" from Brian P. Levack (ed.), *Witchcraft in the Ancient World and the Middle Ages, Volume II Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, Garland Publishing (New York, NY: 1992), p. 26.

¹³⁶ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece, Volume I*, translated by Peter Levi, Penguin (London: 1979), p. 263.

¹³⁷ Frederick Aly, translator of Seneca *Three Tragedies*, Cornell University Press (Ithaca, NY: 1986) states this on page 259.

¹³⁸ Lucan, translated by P.F. Widdows, Book 6: 544-6.

Drawing down the moon¹³⁹ was associated with the Thessalian witch since at least the 5th Century BCE, as shown previously in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (lines 750-55). Ovid also portrayed Medea as having this ability¹⁴⁰, fusing her identity with the witches from Thessaly. Horace depicted Folia, one of his four witches, as having learned the 'Thessalian spells'¹⁴¹, which referred to her ability to draw down the moon. This magical technique had become aligned with Thessaly's witches in the minds of the Roman writers. Thessaly and the witch had also become fused together. Both the setting (Thessaly) and the character (the witch) shared the similar traits of being foreign and on the periphery.

The witch, taken straight from Lucan, inhabits a periphery because this is part of understanding her as a witch: topography interprets witchcraft.¹⁴²

The Romans had inherited a mythical Thessaly from the Greeks. Its rivers, vales and mountains were surreal, empowered with myth and poetry. Thessaly was now a literary setting, a mythic land where remnants of the supernatural still existed. For the Roman Thessaly was not just an outpost of the Roman Empire, but part of a mythic landscape.¹⁴³

Lucan also aligns the 'degenerate' son of Pompey with Erictho. Rather than pursuing a more acceptable avenue for oracular insight, Sextus Pompey seeks out the horrible Erictho to predict the outcome of the war. Through Erictho, the poet is able to describe the witches' magical skills and their ability to foretell the future with geomancy, aeromancy and hydromancy, however even the power of the witch must succumb to the power of Fate: 'Fortune is stronger than us, the witches of Thessaly'.¹⁴⁴ In Lucan's scene, the Thessalian witch uses necromancy to read the future, which includes the gruesome revivification of a corpse. The coupling of Sextus Pompey and Erictho unites two outcasts of Rome in Thessaly, on the margins of civilisation.

¹³⁹ The magical practice of drawing down the Moon may have allowed the magical ritual to proceed in the dark. David Mankin, editor of Horace, *Epodes*, Cambridge University (Cambridge: 1995) suggests 'the drawing down (*kathairesis*) of the moon, stars, or both, possibly to allow rituals to proceed in secret'. S. H. Braund, translator of Lucan, *Civil War*, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1992) suggests another motive: 'A commonly occurring idea in classical texts is that witches could render the moon's light dull and draw it down from the sky and that the moon shed poisonous foam on plants that the witches used in magic.' Erictho uses the 'lunar poison' (line 669) when opening up the corpse. Thessaly's mountainous regions (Pelion etc.) are prone to cloud and fog and one could imagine a folk connection between the witch's ritual and the obscuring of the Moon by clouds.

¹⁴⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII: 206.

¹⁴¹ Horace, Epode 5: 45-6.

¹⁴² Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early, Modern, and Twentieth Century Representations*, p. 261.

¹⁴³ In 197 BCE Thessaly became a protectorate of Rome and continued under Roman administration until the end of the 4th Century AD.

¹⁴⁴ Lucan, *The Civil War*, translated by P.F. Widdows, Book 6: 667.

The second most valuable reference to Thessalian witchcraft is written a century later by Apuleius whose novel *The Golden Ass* is set in Thessaly, the land of his hero's mother's family.¹⁴⁵ Throughout the novel the reader witnesses magical practices and rituals through the eyes of Apuleius' alter ego, Lucius, the main character. Obsessed with magic and craving to learn more about its rituals and practice, Lucius journeys to Thessaly. Apuleius also confirms the dreaded magical practices of the witches of Thessaly:

this is Thessaly you're in, where witches regularly nibble pieces off the faces of the dead to get supplies for their magic art¹⁴⁶

Like Lucan, Apuleius also lists the range of the witches' supernatural abilities: they are able to 'bring down the sky, raise up the earth, solidify springs, dissolve mountains, raise the dead, send the gods down below, blot out the stars, and illuminate Hell itself!'¹⁴⁷ By Apuleius' time the Thessalian witch and her paranormal powers are popular images in Roman literature.

Apuleius' descriptions of his two witches, Meroe and Pamphile, are reminiscent of Horace's Canidia. They use incantations, raise the spirits of the dead, turn men into animals, and practice erotic spells. With magical ointment Pamphile transforms herself into an owl and then back again. Apuleius, in the guise of Lucius, spies on the witch's ritual and describes the reality of magical practice.

Both Lucan and Apuleius have used the locale of Thessaly to animate their witches. Building on a pre-existing Greek folk tradition, the Roman writers made witchcraft and Thessaly synonymous. Horace, Ovid, Pliny, Statius and Martial all referred to either the Thessalian witches or Thessaly as a land of drugs and witches.¹⁴⁸ Through their vivid portrayals Lucan, and later Apuleius, kept the myth of the Thessalian witch alive. They also inspired the future genre for writers of horror and witchcraft. Their elaborate descriptions of the Thessalian witch and her magical rituals assumed a tradition, which had

¹⁴⁵ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass (or Metamorphoses)*, translated by E.J. Kenney, Penguin (London: 1998). Lucius states this in the opening of the novel, 1: 2.

¹⁴⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass (or Metamorphoses)*, 2:21.

¹⁴⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass (or Metamorphoses)*, 1:8.

¹⁴⁸ See Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, Epode 5:22.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VII: 220ff.

Pliny, *Natural History*, Book XXX. II: 6-8.

Statius, *Thebaid*, translated by A.D. Melville, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1992), III: 140-6; IV: 500-18.

Martial, *Epigrams (Three Volumes)*, translated by D.L. Shackelton Bailey, Harvard University Press (Cambridge: 1993), VIII: 36; IX: 29.

been practiced since the archaic period. This assumption became fact and since the Roman period Thessaly ‘had already been known as the prime source of magical knowledge’¹⁴⁹.

Polyaenus, a contemporary of Apuleius also described a ritual of a Thessalian witch. He had dedicated a collection of stratagems to Emperor Lucius Aurelius Verus when war erupted again between Rome and Parthia.¹⁵⁰ One of his chapters described a ritual performed by a Thessalian witch, who had been summoned by the leader of the Ionians. Cnopus was in charge of leading the Ionian attack on Erythrae and had consulted an oracle for her advice. The oracle told him to bring a Thessalian priestess to his camp. Chrysame, the priestess, was skilled in drugs and used her expertise to ensure the Ionian victory. Taking a prize bull from the herd she adorned it, then fed it with a drug that would render the bull mad. However anyone who ate its flesh would also suffer from madness. The bull was led to the altar seemingly to be sacrificed, but was allowed to escape. In a frenzy, it headed towards the enemy’s camp. On seeing the bull, adorned for sacrifice, fleeing towards them, the enemy interpreted this as an omen of their victory. The bull was seized, then sacrificed to the gods of the Ionian enemies. After eating the bull a frenzy descended on them, of which Cnopus took advantage. Led by the Thessalian sorceress, Chrysame, he defeated his enemy to become the ruler of Erythrae.

On first reading the ‘witch from Thessaly and her psychedelic drug seem to be incidents of romance taken right out of Apuleius’¹⁵¹. Even though Lucan and Apuleius’ depiction of the witch were inflated and exaggerated, nonetheless they were based on actual witches.¹⁵² However Walter Burkert also suggests that the ritual performed by Chrysame, the Thessalian witch, also has parallels to other rituals described in both a Hittite and a Sanskrit text.¹⁵³ No doubt the clever Roman writer did his research into both ancient and contemporary magic rituals. However it was to Thessaly that he transposed the scene.

Roman writers continued to depict the Thessalian witch since the tradition had become so well established due to Thessaly’s geography and mythic heritage. Being northern, on the periphery of civilisation, mountainous, and relatively isolated in the ancient world, Thessaly was an ‘otherworldly’

¹⁴⁹ Hans Deiter Betz, “Magic in Graeco-Roman Antiquity” from Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Volume 9*, Macmillan Publishing (New York, NY: 1987), p. 93.

¹⁵⁰ Polyaenus, *Stratagems of War*, translated by R. Shepherd, Ares Publishers (Chicago: 1974). The story of Chrysame is told in Chapter VLIII, see page 346-7.

¹⁵¹ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA: 1979), p.60.

¹⁵² See Eugene Tavenner, “Canidia and Other Witches”, p. 29 who implies this.

¹⁵³ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, p. 60-1.

place. Its wilderness and savagery was reflected geographically as well as mythically (the Centaurs). To the Roman it was a hinterland. While Greek writers already linked Thessaly to witchcraft, Diane Purkiss suggests Thessaly's geography contributed to perpetuating the myth in Roman times:

The Thessalian witches of Lucan and Apuleius reflect and rewrite the Athenian tendency to locate the witch's origins in the far north. Drawing on both the *Odyssey* and the various Medeas of antiquity Roman writers fashioned a locale for witches, peripheral to what they saw as centre. Thessaly, marginal to the Roman world, became associated with witchcraft and wilderness, a Roman heath.¹⁵⁴

Roman writers animated the Thessalian witch. They elaborately described her workshop and her rituals. They named her. From the fragments which their Greek colleagues had bequeathed they shaped her into a mythic figure who would endure as a prototype of the witch. Now legendary, she remained undisputed and unchallenged. Through the vivid Roman portrayals of Thessalian witches and their rituals, Thessaly became renowned as a centre of witchcraft.

¹⁵⁴ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in history: Early, Modern, and Twentieth Century Representations*, p. 260. Her use of the word 'heath' captures the Roman attitude towards Thessaly, a protectorate and an uncultivated landscape filled with flora.

CONCLUSION

*In Classical Greece Thessaly and Egypt had already been known as the prime sources of magical knowledge*¹⁵⁵

Roman writers were bequeathed the phantom image of the Thessalian sorceress from the Greeks. Lucan shaped her into the grotesque figure of Erichtho; Polyaeus into a ritualistic magical assistant for the Ionians, while Statius, Martial and others also described her. Thessaly was the destination Apuleius sent his hero to be educated in the art of witchcraft while Ovid used the terrain of Thessaly as a setting to frame Medea's collection of drugs for her magical spells. Thessaly's affinity with witchcraft was fully acknowledged by the Roman writers yet Pliny, who emphatically suggests that 'magic arose in Persia', is baffled why 'nobody has explained...when it [magic] passed over to the Thessalian matrons'¹⁵⁶.

My view is that the tradition of Thessalian witchcraft emerged out of the pre-existing myths of Thessaly, which include traces of magical healing evident in our earliest sources. Thessaly's magical legacy reaches back to Chiron and his heroic pupils and is obvious when Medea performs magical spells on Thessalian soil. Since Thessaly's social, cultural and political progress was minimal compared to the sophistication of southern Greece it gained a reputation as a sphere peripheral to the Greek centre. The topography of Thessaly which kept it isolated during the pre-historical and archaic period also contributed to its disenfranchisement while its prolific plant life known in antiquity for drugs and herbs helped shape its reputation as an obscure and mysterious locale. Thessaly was a favourite mythic setting and the lack of differentiation between the fantasy and the reality of its landscape led to its mystique as a magical region.

Poets often ignored the vestiges of the magical tradition in the archaic period however during the 5th century the marginalisation of magical practitioners became more evident. During this period both magical practitioners and Thessalians were categorised as the 'other', barbarians; at the same time the first reference in literature to a Thessalian witch appears. Roman writers then shaped her into the figure that linked Thessaly with witches from that era forward. Thessaly's magical legacy had been continually reshaped since the earliest sources and its final transformation was into the figure of the Thessalian witch.

¹⁵⁵ Hans Deiter Betz, "Magic in Greco-Roman Antiquity", Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Volume 9*.

¹⁵⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, Book XXX.II.8.