

*The Pelion region is known as the home of the Centaurs and the summer playground of the Olympian gods. But the region is also important in antiquity and in the following article **Brian Clark** meanders through some of the myths of the region.*

## PELION: THE LAND APOLLO LOVED

### *Majestic Pelion*

Driving across the plains of Thessaly towards the Pagasitic Gulf, the mountain range on the Pelion peninsula rises out of the sea. The gulf derives its name from Pagasae, a principal seaport in antiquity. Pelion is the southern boundary of Thessaly while Olympus guards this northern region of Greece. These famous mountains, immortalised in many of the legends of ancient Greece, contain Thessaly. The Pelion region of Thessaly is rich with mythology and both the Pelion peninsula and the plains of Thessaly were of great interest in antiquity. Olympus was the land of the gods, the estate of the divine Olympians, and its peak was heaven itself. Poseidon's two giant, arrogant sons Ephialtes and Otus, known as the 'Aloidae', decided to attack Mount Olympus. Myth tells how they stacked Mount Pelion on Mount Ossa, another of Thessaly's famous mountains, in order to storm the gods' sanctuary.

The Pelion region was known as the 'healing mountains' because the slopes were prolific with both medicinal and magical plants. 'Healing waters' flow in the crystal clear mountain streams. Homoeopathic, herbal, flower essence and even poisonous remedies were distilled from the carpet of herbs that cover Pelion: meadow saffron<sup>1</sup>, hemlock, henbane, nightshade, mandrake, St. John's wort, mullein, yarrow. Today they are just as profuse as in antiquity, still gathered in the fields, and sold in markets and villages throughout Pelion. Entering the eastern Pelion town of Makrinitza ('the

balcony of Pelion’) the smell of fresh-cut herbs invites the traveler to linger with the herb merchants, taking in the aromas from the endless variety of herbs. The mountainside is also densely populated with a wide variety of different species of trees, growing side by side. Pelion rises dramatically out of the Aegean and its eastern side is sheer cliff face, while its western side more gently falls into the Pagasitic Gulf. Along the coastline are beaches and peaceful tourist towns. Our tours have stayed in Kala Nera (‘Good Waters’) on the western bay where poplar, plane and even eucalyptus trees line the beach front with the olive groves sloping up the sides of the mountain. Pelion has two sides: the wild, untamed, rugged side of the mountain and a more civilised, tranquil side.

As astrologers we know Pelion as the home of the Centaurs and especially as the original home of Chiron, the most famous of the Centaurs, known for his healing and mentoring. The Centaurs were descended from Centaurus, the son of Nephele and Ixion. Ixion was a Lapith, one of the clans of Thessaly, who Zeus had cursed for falling in love with his wife Hera. Zeus was furious, and to deceive Ixion he shaped a cloud Nephele in the form of Hera. Ixion, filled with desire for the goddess, ravaged her in this form. From this sinister union, Nephele bore Centaurus. The curse passed to Centaurus who mated with the mares on Pelion, and from these unions the hybrid race of the Centaurs, who were half-man, half-horse, was born. Horses were important to the area; one of the epithets for Thessaly was “horse breeding” since the Thessali, who gave their name to the region, were renown for their calvary.

### *Chiron's Cave*

Chiron, while a Centaur, was not part of the Centaur tribe. His genealogy was different. Being the son of Philyra and the Titan Chronus, he was semi-divine. Chiron's original home was his cave/sanctuary on Mount Pelion. Many heroes came to Chiron's cave, to be fostered, trained, initiated and prepared for the heroic trials and labours that lay before them. Their master teacher was Chiron, a hybrid and healer; gentle, wise and just.

Apollo's son, Asclepius was brought to Chiron as an infant by Hermes, who had rescued him from the womb of his dead mother. Asclepius' destiny was to become the god of healing. Throughout the ancient world sanctuaries devoted to his healing rituals prospered. Thessaly also claimed Asclepius as theirs since he had been born in Tricca and raised on Pelion. At his birthplace in Thessaly there was also a healing sanctuary devoted to the god. Chiron taught Asclepius the mysteries of healing: attending to the soul by honouring the interior, divine and sacred images. Asclepian ritual honours the divine nature of disease; illness was the embodiment of the soul's longing to be tended.

Jason (*Jason*, whose name means healing) had also been taken to Chiron as an infant, not only to be educated, but as a safe refuge from his uncle who had usurped the kingship he was now rightfully entitled to. When Jason was a young man he left the temenos of Chiron's sanctuary and journeyed down the mountain to fulfill his destiny. Jason's quest would take him to Asia on a great ship, the Argo. When the Argo was ready to set sail, Chiron also came down from the mountain to say goodbye. In his

hands was another young heroic student, Achilles, whom his father Peleus had left in Chiron's safe keeping while he joined Jason on his quest.

Achilles was destined to become the great Greek hero of the Trojan War. In order for this to take place, the gods ordained that he would be born to the sea goddess, Thetis. An oracle had prophesied that the son of Thetis would be far greater than his father. Even Poseidon and Zeus respected the oracle and did not pursue her. To ensure the great hero Achilles was born the gods manipulated Thetis' marriage to Peleus, Chiron's great friend. Chiron informed Peleus how to capture Thetis. As a sea goddess she was able to shape shift and it was imperative that when she came ashore at Pelion, Pelius would bind her until she consented to marry him. When the wedding between Peleus and Thetis took place Chiron and his wife Chariclo were prominent guests along with all the other Olympians.<sup>2</sup> Here on Mount Pelion, the last great wedding feast where gods and men mingled occurred; the last, as chaos was soon to break out when an uninvited guest Eris (Strife) arrived in the midst of the banquet. Eris disrupted the wedding feast and threw a golden apple down the banquet table. Inscribed on the apple was "to the Fairest" and three great goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, claimed this title. The rest is epic. Aphrodite won the contest. Helen was brought to Troy and the Trojan conflict was ready to erupt.

Another wedding feast on Pelion also ended in chaos. Ixion's son, Pirithous, married Hippodamia and since the Centaurs were related to the groom, they were invited to the wedding banquet. At the wedding feast the Centaurs inhaled the fumes of the wine, becoming rowdy and violent, abusing the bride and wedding guests. Heroic Heracles chased the Centaurs away and it was one of his arrows that unintentionally

injured innocent Chiron outside his cave.<sup>3</sup> Chiron's cave, a sacred precinct of healing, was now an area of agony and woundedness.

Chiron's cave stands as a great reminder of heroic initiation. However by the 8th century when the epic tradition sung the tales of the mythological cycle, Chiron's shamanism, healing and magic were being consciously edited out. Homer barely mentions Chiron in the *Iliad*; instead Phoenix is Achilles' tutor. By the classical period when the Hippocratic corpus and Platonic philosophical theology began to denigrate mystical healing ritual and practice, the mystical legacy of the Pelion region, along with the traditions of magic and shamanism, were fading. The chthonic healing legacy of Chiron was being forgotten.

### *Magical Thessaly: The Land of the Witches*

While Pelion was known for healing, Thessaly was known for magic and witchcraft. Throughout antiquity medical practitioners, philosophers, writers and the layman came here to experience the magical land. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, journeyed here, as did Pythagoras. Hippocrates died in Thessaly in the town of Larissa, north of Pelion. Lucius Apuleius, a Latin author, who popularised the tale of Cupid and Psyche in his novel *The Golden Ass*, was interested in the magical rites practiced here. His novel is a first person account of his journey to Thessaly. Scholars have suggested that this region of Greece was an ancient corridor for those traveling north to experience the shamanic rituals of the nomadic tribes. The practices of these shamans may have been brought to this region through the

interchange and experience of those returning from their adventures with these nomadic tribes.<sup>4</sup>

Myth also informs us how eastern herbal lore and magical rites influenced the region. Legend suggests that when Medea was journeying across the plains her bags of herbs broke open, scattering the magic and medicinal seeds over Thessaly. The myth of Jason and Medea suggests that eastern herbal lore came to this region from the East with the sorceress and herbalist, Medea.

Mount Pelion rises above the ancient harbour of Iolcus (modern day Volos), an important port in antiquity, and best known as the departure point for the Argo, Jason's ship, which contained a pan-Hellenic crew of heroes destined for the Black Sea. The Argo was constructed from timber forested from the Pelion region, under the supervision of Athena. The crew, known as the Argonauts, supported Jason on his quest to redeem his birthright, the throne of Iolcus.

Jason's mother brought him to Chiron shortly after birth. His uncle Pelias had seized the throne of Iolcus from Jason's father and vowed to kill any legitimate heirs to the throne. Chiron's cave was a safe refuge for the orphan. It was to Iolcus that Jason would eventually return, not only with the prized Golden Fleece, but his new wife, Medea, niece of the sorceress Circe, and a priestess of Hecate. Medea was a herbalist, a healer and a magician who carried the ancient feminine traditions of herbs, both poisonous and medicinal, as well as magic from her homeland of Colchis in Asia Minor to Pelion in Thessaly, still known today as 'the land of witches'.

### *The Land Apollo Loved*

The river Peneus flows through Thessaly. It winds its way through the Vale of Tempe, a favourite haven in antiquity. Along the riverbanks, the laurel tree grows reminding us of Daphne, Peneus' daughter, who was pursued by her admirer Apollo. Wanting to escape from him, Daphne was metamorphosed into a laurel tree on the banks of the Peneus, with her father's help. The tree became sacred to Apollo and legend tells us that every nine years pilgrims from Delphi would collect the laurel in the Vale of Tempe and bring it back to Delphi to crown the winners at the Pythian Games. Peneus, the river god, was a son of the Titans Oceanus and Thetys and father also to Hypseus, the Lapith king.

Cyrene was a daughter of Hypseus. Growing up in the wilds of the Pelion region, Cyrene became an avid huntress, enjoying nature and roaming the mountainside with the animals. She would guard her father's flocks and spend her time communing with nature. Apollo loved this area where his friend and half-uncle<sup>5</sup>, Chiron, had fostered his son Asclepius in the caves on Mount Pelion. One day he spied Cyrene wrestling a lion and it was at that moment Apollo fell in love with her. He took her from the mountains of Thessaly to Libya, where Cyrene became Queen, regent of a land where hunters were prosperous and where she would become immortalized through the eponymous city. Cyrene was a replica of Apollo's sister Artemis: a huntress, independent, strong, wild, untamed and both found their home in the forest and mountains. Apollo loved his sister, who loved the wild. As the god of medicine Apollo found a home in the wilds of Pelion.

Apollo and Cyrene had two sons, Aristaeus and Idmon. When they were youths they returned to their mother's homeland, Pelion. Chiron schooled Aristaeus in the mysteries, and Idmon learnt the art of augury from his father. Apollo prepared him to take his place amongst the Argonauts who would sail from the port of Iolcus, at the foot of the mountain.

### *Pelion Three Millennium Later*

Pelion attracts the local tourists who come in winter to ski its peak or in summer to bathe in the cool and relaxing waters of the gulf or hang out at the popular beach towns. But pilgrims still can lose themselves in the majesty and beauty of the land, still be welcomed by the locals and still imagine the Centaurs roaming the wild mountain slopes. Mountain men, manual workers inhabit the region and they carry the wild aura of the Centaur. The herbs and foliage are profuse and the landscape calms the weary and soothes the soul. It still is a centre of healing in this way.

Wandering farther up the mountain you may visit tiny villages, hidden away from the frenetic pace of modern day. On my first visit to Pelion in the town Milies (*milies* is Greek for apples and known for its orchards) I saw a sign pointing to Chiron's cave. I did not follow the path as to me Chiron's cave was a metaphor, an internal not literal place. Last time we stopped in Milies the sign had disappeared. Some versions of Chiron's myth suggest that he relocated to Malea on the southern Peloponnese when the Centaurs were driven away from Mount Pelion. My 'Chiron IC line' on my astro\*carto\*graphy map cuts right through Pelion. Natally Pluto is on my IC and during my first trip to Pelion transiting Pluto was conjunct Chiron and my relocated

IC for Pelion. During the last trip Chiron was completing its first cycle, returning. And standing on Pelion I felt as if I had come home; home to a chthonic centre, a sacred place where the split between heaven and earth was not as wide.

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<sup>1</sup> Colchicum, named for Medea's homeland of Colchis. This herb is a reminder of Medea.

<sup>2</sup> The Francois vase, an Attic black figure Krater vase (ca 575 BCE) now displayed in the archeological museum of Florence, depicts the wedding feast with Chiron and Chaiclo and all the other gods attending the great marriage ceremony.

<sup>3</sup> Different versions exist as to the place and situation of Chiron's wounding.

<sup>4</sup> For amplification of the shamanistic influence on Greek thought, see E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA: 1951). On page 141 he refers to ancient poems that may "have been modeled on the psychic excursions of northern shamans".

<sup>5</sup> Chiron was the son of Chronus and Philyra. Apollo was the son of Zeus and Leto. Zeus was also the son of Chronus therefore he and Chiron were half-brothers, a fitting image of Chiron's legacy of outsider. Chiron was never part of the Olympian pantheon. As a metaphor it is interesting to note that Olympus, home to the 'legitimate' gods, and Pelion, land of the Centaurs, are the extremities of the magical sphere of Thessaly.