

Introduction: A Comparative Approach to the Myth of *Pythian Twelve*

1 Methodological Premises

The myth of Pindar's *Pythian Twelve* is isolated in the Greek literary panorama. Even though a number of literary sources connect Athena with the discovery of the *aulos*, the goddess is credited with the invention of the *nomos polykephalos* only by Pindar and Nonnus. However, Nonnus' account relies upon the Pindaric model (cf. chapter 6). The question concerning Pindar's source(s) is apparently unsolvable (cf. chapter 5, section 2, 7). In this section any supposed issue concerning Pindar's historical source will be left unaddressed. The methodological premise of my comparative study is that, whether the case is that Pindar invented the myth himself or that he re-elaborated a lost, pre-existing tradition, his mythological digression is built with phraseological tools, which are an inheritance from a previous stage of poetic language. I should stress here that, given the fact that the main comparandum considered in my study is an Old Indic one, such a 'previous stage' will not be called 'Proto-Indo-European',¹ but simply 'Indo-European' or, to use even more specific terminology, 'Graeco-Aryan'. This label refers to a stage in which Greek and Indo-Iranian were joined together. Despite the fact that both Greek and Old Indic are IE languages of old attestation, it is commonly assumed that they branched off from the IE family tree at quite a late stage. For this reason, common traits evidenced at level of 'Graeco-Aryan' may be defined as *descriptively Indo-European*; they are actually reconstructions projected at the level of 'Late (or Recent) Indo-European'.

As already touched upon (cf. 'Preface'), a variety of studies successfully showed that thematic structures, collocations, and fixed combinations of lexemes work as building blocks of narrative texts in Greek and other Indo-European traditions. Due to the highly conservative character of such devices,

1 In this book I use the term Proto-Indo-European to designate what lies at the 'roots' of the Indo-European family tree, i.e. a linguistic stage in which no Indo-European languages had stemmed from the others. This stage can be reconstructed by including the linguistic evidence from the Anatolian and the Tocharian branches, i.e. the first branches which split from the IE family tree. On the methodological problem connected with the label(s) '(Proto-)Indo-European' see the overview provided by West 2007:19–24.

some Pindaric phraseological usages may be traced back to the poetic stock which the Greek poetic tradition as a whole inherited from a previous linguistic phase.² For this reason, comparative investigations that examine a set of Greek texts and different but related comparanda in parallel may be legitimately undertaken.

2 *Rigveda* 10.67 as a Comparandum

The following section consists of a comparison between structures and content of Pindar's *Pythian Twelve* and a hymn from the *Rigveda Samhitā* (RV), the oldest collection of religious hymns written in Vedic Sanskrit.³ Specifically, my choice of my main Old Indic comparandum is conditioned by a striking phraseological match RV 10.67 shares with *Pythian Twelve*: the collocation [GOD-INVENTS (: FINDS)–MELODY/SONG–MULTIPLE-HEADS_{adj./gen.}].

Although Pindar's text does not preserve the collocation in this exact form, it can be reconstructed as such on the basis of 22–23 of *Pythian Twelve* (cf. chapter 4, sections 3–4, chapter 5, section 2, 22–23):

εὔρεν θεός· ἀλλὰ νιν εὐροῖσ' ἀνδράσι θνατοῖς ἔχειν,
ὠνύμασεν κεφαλᾶν πολλᾶν νόμον

Here the creation of the *nomos* as a 'named *nomos*', i.e. as a distinct and recognizable tune that can be referenced, is simultaneous with the creation of the *nomos* itself (cf. νιν εὐροῖσα, i.e. νόμον/μέλος εὐροῖσα*). Indeed, by giving a name to the *nomos*, Athena makes her invention identifiable and for this reason reproducible. The collocation [(Ἀθάνα/)θεός–εὐρίσχω–νόμος_{acc.}–πολλά

2 On this topic see the methodological remarks made in the 'Preface' of this study. Cf. also the results of Massetti 2019, discussing the Pindaric collocations of [FAME/GLORY], [EXCELLENCE/ACHIEVEMENTS (ἀρετή/ἀρεταί)], and [SONG/POETIC WORD] and IE (mostly Indo-Iranian) comparanda.

3 The collection (Skr. *samhitā*) of Rigvedic hymns derives from an oral tradition. Different parts of the *Samhitā* are dated to different ages. Since no Rigvedic hymn mentions iron, the latest parts of the collections are to be dated earlier than 1200–1000 BCE, i.e. the period to which the first archaeological record of iron in northwest India is dated and the Kuru hegemony emerged (cf. Lincoln 1981, Jamison 1993, Houben 2019). As for the composition of the earliest hymns, the second half of the second millennium BCE has been proposed as an approximate date (Witzel 1997, Dunkel 2021).

κεφαλά^{gen.pl.}]* can thus be assumed to underlie *P.* 12.22–23. Strikingly, a comparable phraseme opens RV 10.67, a hymn ultimately dealing with the aetiology of Vedic sacrifice, cf.

RV 10.67.1ab

*imāṃ dhīyaṃ saptásīrṣṇīm pitá na
ṛtáprajātām bṛhatīm avindat*

This seven-headed poetic thought here, born of truth and lofty, did our father find.

The *iunctura* [(Bṛhaspati/)*pitá naḥ-ved-dhí^{acc.}-saptásīrṣan^{fem.acc.sg.}*] is a phraseological structure, which consists of a relatively free combination of lexemes (i.e. a collocation) and makes reference to the main event of a certain myth. Henceforth I designate collocations of this description as *base collocations*. Before proceeding further, I need to give a brief clarification with respect to this terminological choice.

In this study, I intentionally avoid the expression ‘basic formula’, coined by Renou (1934:110–111) and consecrated by Calvert Watkins’ seminal book *How to Kill a Dragon* (= Watkins 1995). In this work, Watkins (1995:10, 308–311) identifies the expression [HERO–KILLS–SERPENT] as a ‘basic formula’, i.e. a verbal expression, which summarizes the core-event of a myth. I do not concur with this terminology because it may create confusion with the notion of ‘formula’. A formula is “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Parry 1930:80), therefore “a formula is a fixed phrase conditioned by the traditional themes of oral poetry. The formula is to the form as the theme is to the content” (Nagy 1996:18). As Watkins’ definition makes evident (see above), a ‘basic formula’ is not recognizable as a formula: it can be employed to ‘express a given essential idea’, but it is not used ‘under the same metrical conditions’. For this reason, I choose the label *base collocation* to refer to ‘a relatively free combination of lexemes, which sums up the main event of a certain myth’. I should also make clear that my use of the term ‘base’ and my choice to present the collocations in small capitals between squared brackets does not intend to suggest that a *base collocation* automatically reflects an ‘original’ or ‘proto-stage’ of something which is historically attested. On the contrary, a scheme [x–y–z etc.] provides a sort of model description of a *phraseological complex*, which summarizes the core-event of a narration found in two or more IE traditions where it is expressed by a set of nearly synonymous lexemes. Put simply, the aim of my terminology is to stress that base collocations allow considerable flexibility for the lexical

renewal and the syntax of their elements and, unlike formulas, do not correlate in a fixed way with metrical patterns.

3 *Similia inter dissimilia*

The similarity between the *base collocations* of *P.* 12.22–23 and *RV* 10.67.1ab is impressive: not only are divine figures of the Greek and the Vedic tradition connected with a musical/poetic discovery, but their newly invented work of art is associated with the notion of [HEAD]. The Greek and Old Indic phraseological structures may be schematically presented as follows:

CHART 1 Collocation [GOD–INVENTS (: FINDS)–ARTISTIC CREATION_{acc.}–MULTIPLE-HEADS_{adj./gen.}]

	GOD	INVENTS (: FINDS)	ARTISTIC CRE- ATION _{acc.}	MULTIPLE- HEADS _{adj./gen.}
Gk.	(Ἀθάνᾱ/)θεός	εὐρίσχω (εὐρε/εὐροῖσα)	νόμον	πολλᾶν κεφαλᾶν 'of many heads'
Ved.	(Bṛhaspati/)pitᾱ́ nah	ved (avindat)	dhíyam	saptáśīrṣhīm 'seven-headed'

At the same time, however, the two *iuncturae* occur in the framework of diverse mythological narratives: the myth in *Pythian Twelve* associates Athena's musical invention with Perseus' killing of the Gorgon, whereas *RV* 10.67 connects Bṛhaspati's invention with the Vala-myth, a cattle-raid episode. The two myths greatly differ in content and cannot be directly traced back to a common Indo-European mythological antecedent.

In particular, it has long been noted that the Greek saga of Perseus is heterogeneous in nature. It includes a variety of folk-tale motifs⁴ as well as components of both IE and non-IE origin. In this connection, scholars almost unanimously agree upon the Near Eastern provenience of some distinctive elements of Perseus' deed and equipment:

4 On folk-tale motifs in the story (ATU 300 'Dragon Slayer', ATU 581 'Magic Object and the Trolls'), cf. Nilsson 1932:40 (cf. also Nilsson–Vermeule 1983), who, following Hartland 1894–1896, judges Perseus' account as "unusually crowded with folk-tale motifs". For a more recent analysis of these aspects cf. Hansen 2002:119–130 (esp. 122–123), 246–251.

- The word κίβισις ‘leather pouch’, which commonly denotes a pouch or satchel carried by Perseus is interpreted by Hesychius (κ 2600 LC) as a Cypriot dialect word that was probably borrowed from Hebrew *qbs* ‘gather’ (cf. Lewy 1895:91).⁵
- Perseus’ sickle, Gk. ἄρπη, has been compared by Hopkins (1934:348) to the royal weapon of kings in Byblos.⁶

Additionally, Hopkins (1934)⁷ convincingly explains how a variety of distinctive traits of the Gorgon ultimately derive from the Assyrian figure of Humbaba, the guardian of the cedar forests, whom Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill:⁸

- Just like the Greek monster creature, Humbaba is always represented frontally, with a grinning face. His figurative portrayal matches the literary one, cf. *Huwawa* B 90–95 “the warrior whose face is a lion’s grimace”.⁹
- The Assyrian representations of Humbaba’s death may also lie at the basis of the typical *knielaufend* pose of the Gorgon. Comparison between the Cyprian cylinder from Bode Museum Berlin, VA 2145 (a hero with a sickle, looking backwards, i.e. resembling Perseus, kills a kneeling enemy) and the Assyrian cylinder from Bode Museum, Berlin, VA 4215 (two heroes kill a kneeling enemy, probably a demon) suggests that the Greek iconographic pattern of the kneeling enemy who is about to die derives from a Near Eastern model.
- In further support of Hopkins’ (1934) hypothesis I would like to stress a remarkable parallel: Humbaba is said to possess a ‘deadly gaze’, cf. *Huwawa* A 123 *igi mu-ci-in-bar igi uc₂-a-kam* “when he looks at someone, it is the look of death”, a characteristic which perfectly parallels Medusa’s power. Gk.

5 On κίββα ‘leather bag’ (Hsch. κ 2766 LC) cf. Kretschmer–Hartmann–Kroll 1921:247.

6 The etymology of ἄρπη is debated. Grimme 1925:17, followed by West 1997:291 (cf. Robert 1955:12, Sekunda 1996:9–17, Miller 2004:168–171), suggests that ἄρπη is an adapted borrowing from Semitic *héreb* ‘sword’. Frisk GEW and Beekes EDG s.v. ἄρπη, though favouring the hypothesis of a non-IE etymology, mention a possible connection with Balto-Sl. terms, OCS *srępę*, Latv. *siņpe* ‘sickle’, as well as with Lat. *sarpīō*, *sarpō* ‘to trim’ (on whose problematic vocalism cf. Schrijver 1991:493, EM s.v. *sarpīō*).

7 Cf. also Helck 1979:214–215, Burkert 1987:26–34, 1992:85–87, West 1997:454–455, Bremmer 2008:337. Obviously, alternative hypotheses about the origin of the Gorgon and her iconography have been formulated: Six 1885:94 and Pettazzoni 1921–1922 propose Egyptian parallels for the Gorgon’s head’s iconography (namely: the god Bes, the goddess Hathor). Robbins Dexter (2010) claims that Medusa’s figure results from a merger between the Neolithic goddess of Old Europeans, non-IE (i.e. Near-Eastern) features, and IE elements.

8 As a recent reference cf. Graff 2012.

9 On the influence of the iconographic type of Humbaba’s head on the *gorgoneion* cf. Giuliano 1959–1960, Karaghiorga 1970.

Γοργώ and the adjective γοργός often combine with terms belonging to the semantic field of eyesight, cf. *Il.* 8.349, 11.36, Aeschl. *Sept.* 537+.¹⁰

- Medusa and Humbaba die in similar ways: Enkidu beheads Humbaba and puts his head in a leather bag, cf. *Huwawa* A 178–180.
- Significantly, both Medusa’s and Humbaba’s heads later became apotropaic symbols within their respective cultural settings.¹¹

The complex background of the mythological comparanda and the macroscopic differences the Pindaric and the Vedic texts display invite us to carefully investigate to what extent Pindar’s context and his phraseological usages truly resemble the Old Indic ones.

4 Comparative Plan

My comparative investigation proceeds as follows: In chapter 8 (“Bṛhaspati and the Poetic Vision of Seven Heads. *Rigveda* 10.67: Text and Commentary”), I introduce *Rigveda* 10.67 without taking into account non-Old Indic comparanda. The hymn, which is presented in translation, is accompanied by a short commentary referencing myths and expressions connected with the Vala-myth in Vedic.

In chapter 9 (“How to Find a Song of Multiple Heads: Collocations in Context”), I concentrate on different aspects of the Gorgon myth, which are associated with the episode of Perseus and Medusa in Pindar and elsewhere, both in a direct and indirect way, since some distinctive mythological features merge or, in an opposite and complementary fashion, proliferate within interconnected narratives in contrast or in apposition. In my parallel examination of the Greek and the Vedic traditions, I focus on possible shared details for:

1. Features of the enemy and his/her abode (mytho-geography);
2. Association with the *base collocation* [HERO–KILLS–SERPENT];
3. Association with the collocation [HERO–DRIVES away–GOODS (cattle, women etc.)];
4. Acoustic dimensions of the narratives.

With my analysis I seek to show that the mythological accounts associated with the figures of Perseus and the Gorgons in Greece have a variety of traits in common with the proposed Old Indic texts recounting the myths of Vala and

¹⁰ The parallel is also noted by West 1997:454.

¹¹ On Medusa’s head as an apotropaic symbol cf. Neira 2015. Humbaba’s head may have acquired an apotropaic value, since the demon is invoked in prayers for protection, cf. Thureau-Dangin 1925:26, Graff 2013.

Vṛtra (i.e. RV 10.67 and others). In my conclusions (chapter 10, “Midas’ δόξα and Bṛhaspati’s *dákṣinā*”) I argue that the cumulative phraseological and thematic evidence suggests that, even in the case that the myth of Pindar’s *Pythian Twelve* was invented *ex novo* by the Theban poet, Pindar operated with inherited thematic and phraseological stock.