ANDRÁS PATAY-HORVÁTH

The Contest between Athena and Poseidon. Myth, History and Art

The myth was a well-known one in antiquity, and it is well-known even today. There are many versions in various extant literary sources[1] and even some depictions in sculpture, vase painting and minor arts[2]. Surprisingly enough, the famous myth has not attracted much scholarly interest[3]. The modern commentaries simply list the relevant passages, but hardly attempt a thorough comparative analysis[4]. The present paper (an updated, revised and abbreviated version of Patay-Horváth 2002a) would like to present a study, suggesting strong interconnections between Athenian history and the evolution of the myth. Beside the many familiar texts and works of art, I will also introduce a new piece of evidence, which has never been considered in this context and hope that it will become apparent, that the role of Poseidon and the sea is much more important in this myth than has generally been acknowledged.

It is appropriate to begin with a fairly detailed version of the myth from the mythological textbook of Apollodorus (*Bibl.* III 14). It can serve as a very practical introduction to the subject because it contains not only one version but some alternatives as well.

> Cecrops, a son of the soil, with a body compounded of man and serpent, was the first king of Attica, and the country which was formerly called Acte he named Cecropia after himself. In his time, they say, the gods resolved to take possession of cities in which each of them should receive his own peculiar worship. So Poseidon was the first that came to Attica, and with a blow of his trident on the middle of the acropolis, he produced a sea which they now call

[1] Collected *e.g.* by Gruppe 1906, 995, n. 5. See also Patay-Horváth 2002a.
[2] Simon 1994, nrr. 236 – 248.
[3] Most important and influential: Farnell 1896, 270 f. For earlier discussions, mostly related to the west pediment of the Parthenon cf. *RE* II 1951 (s.v. Athena).
[4] *E.g.* Macan 1908, 442 (*ad* Hdt. VIII 55); Frazer 1898, II, 340 ff. (*ad* Paus. I 26, 5); Bömer 1977, 27 ff. (*ad* Ov. *Met.* VI 70).

> Erechtheis. After him came Athena, and, having called on Cecrops to witness her act of taking possession, she planted an olive tree, which is still shown in the Pandrosium. But when the two strove for possession of the country, Zeus parted them and appointed arbiters, not, as some have affirmed, Cecrops and Cranaus, nor yet Erysichthon, but the twelve gods. And in accordance with their verdict the country was adjudged to Athena, because Cecrops bore witness that she had been the first to plant the olive. Athena, therefore, called the city Athens after herself, and Poseidon in hot anger flooded the Thriasian plain and laid Attica under the sea[5].

From the many short allusions to the myth (*e.g.* Eur. *Ion* 1433-36 and *Tro.* 799-803; Xen. *Mem.* III 5, 10; Plat. *Menex.* 237c; Isocr. *Panath.* 193) one can conclude the following: constant elements of the story are the protagonists (Athena and Poseidon), the place of action (the Athenian Acropolis) and the olive tree of Athena, which is explicitly called the very first olive tree on earth. The token of Poseidon is universally called *thalassa Erechtheis* (the sea of Erechtheus) and it is only replaced by later Roman authors (Verg. *Georg.* 1, 12 and Servius *ad loc.*) with a horse. The outcome of the contest is equally clear: Poseidon is defeated and takes revenge on the city named after Athena. The ambiguities concern the identity of the judges (gods or mortals) and the criterium on which the contest is judged (who was the first to arrive, or which one of the tokens is more valuable). We shall return to these questions after having considered some similar myths.

There are several stories (Paus. II 30, 6: Troizen; Paus. II 1,6: Corinth), where Poseidon contests with a god or goddess for the patronship of a town, but it should be remarked that in these cases, the contest is not definitely decided in favor of one candidate, but a peaceful agreement is made dividing the land between them. Pausanias, who relates these stories, is most probably right in assuming that these myths were derived from the Athenian legend. Anyway, they do not offer much for the analysis: the criterium is not mentioned, and the contest is judged in one case by Zeus in the other one by a monster, Briareos. On the other hand, there is an Argive myth (Paus. II 15, 5), which is much more telling.

> There is also another legend which says that Phoroneus was the first inhabitant of this land and that Inachus, the father of Phoroneus, was not a man but the river. This river, with the rivers Cephisus and Asterion, judged concerning the land between Poseidon and Hera. They decided that the land belonged to Hera, and so Poseidon made their waters disappear. For this reason, neither Inachus nor either of the other rivers I have mentioned provides any water except after rain. In summer, their streams are dry except those at Lerna[6].

[5] English translation by Sir J.G. Frazer, Cambridge, MA, 1921.
[6] English translation by W.H.S. Jones, Cambridge, MA, 1918.

Here we have a contest, in which Poseidon clearly loses against a goddess and similarly to the Athenian myth, he also takes revenge, i.e. the structure of the two myths is basically identical. The only relevant difference is, and this has not been pointed out so far, that in Argos the story agrees very well with the hydrological-geological realities (the small rivers may be completely dry during the summer), while in Athens there is an obvious contradiction in this respect: there can be absolutely no salt water on the Acropolis because it is made up entirely of limestone. If there was some kind of natural water on top of it, it must have been pure rain water, otherwise, the thalassa must have been an artificial basin, specifically constructed to underscore the credibility of the legend. This can not be verified archaeologically, because there are absolutely no traces remaining (the actual place of this *thalassa*, inside the Erechtheion, has been completely destroyed by a large cistern hollowed out during the Turkish occupation[7]), but we can be fairly sure that the sea of Erechtheus on the Acropolis was considered in Antiquity to contain salt water. This is not only demonstrated by its name but also by the only objective description of it, which has come down to us from antiquity (Paus. I 26, 5). Having realized this major difference, one can, I think, quite safely conclude that the Athenian myth was modeled on the basis of the Argive legend and that therefore the judges must have been originally the old Athenian kings and not Zeus or the other Olympians. This conclusion can be supported by another simple consideration as well. The revenge of Poseidon is only justified if the judges were the Athenians themselves. No doubt, the contest between Athena and Poseidon was thus basically a divine contest judged by mortals.

This simple observation is a very important one and may indeed help us to determine the criterium, which is not explicitly stated in the Argive version. Consider the very well-known divine contest commonly referred to as the Judgement of Paris.[8] In this case, which was certainly a very well-known, popular and old myth, there are three goddesses instead of two, but the structure of the myth is very similar (a human judge decides the contest, and the rejected deities take revenge on his city); and in this case the criterium is explicitly stated. Paris decides the contest of the Olympians contemplating nothing else but the value of the gifts offered by them. Similarly, the ancestors of the Athenians in the myth must have decided the dispute of Athena and Poseidon considering the value of the gifts offered by them. In addition, I think, it is not only the similarity with the judgement of Paris which favors this conclusion but another general consideration too. That the decision of a human judge may be influenced by the value of the gifts (bribes) offered by the contestants must have been a very old and common experience

[7] Stevens 1927, 169-171.
[8] See *e.g.* Gantz 1993, 567 ff.; Kaeser 2006.

indeed and this must have been the most natural assumption in the case of any divine contest as well[9].

That the gifts had a decisive role in the Athenian legend is most clearly attested by the fact, that they were, or at least the sea of Poseidon was, surely created artificially to underscore its credibility. Now, the value of an olive tree and that of a water basin can hardly be compared to each other, so one must assume that they were objects of symbolic character. I would refer to the judgement of Paris again because he was also offered the choice between different abstractions and not just between objects. The symbolic character of the gifts is made quite explicit in the case of the water basin, which was most often called *thalassa* and must have symbolized the navigation, sea trade, maritime power or some similar concept. The olive tree, on the contrary, can have only stood for the fertile soil or agriculture in general. The myth of the divine contest implied, therefore, that according to the Athenians their mythical ancestors decided for some reason to choose the latter one and rejected the former option. It remains to be asked, why and when this myth was coined and how did it become so widespread and popular.

The first explicit appearance of the myth in our extant sources (Hdt. VIII 55) offers a very strange context for this story:

> In that acropolis is a shrine of Erechtheus, called the "Earthborn", and in the shrine are an olive tree and a pool of salt water. The story among the Athenians is that they were set there by Poseidon and Athena as tokens when they contended for the land. It happened that the olive tree was burnt by the barbarians with the rest of the sacred precinct, but on the day after its burning, when the Athenians ordered by the king to sacrifice went up to the sacred precinct, they saw a shoot of about a cubit's length sprung from the stump, and they reported this[10].

According to Herodotus, the olive tree, originally planted by Athena was growing again rapidly on the ruins of the Acropolis on the eve of the battle of Salamis. The story served thus as an explanation for a good omen before a decisive naval battle, invented, as always of course, only after the victory. It must be assumed that the legend was well-known already at this time and must have gained much more popularity afterwards. This is very well demonstrated by the

[9] This must be emphasized because an influential modern discussion of the contest between Athena and Poseidon (Binder 1984) concluded that the first god to arrive has been selected as the winner.

[10] English translation by A.D. Godley, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1920.

fact that it was chosen soon for the decoration of the west pediment of the Parthenon,[11] a temple which was a great victory monument or a monumental thanksgiving of Athens for the successes in the Persian wars in general[12] and which was reported to have been built by the victors of the battle of Salamis (Demosth. *Androtion* 13). Considering that a major naval success could most naturally be attributed to the favour of Poseidon, it is perhaps not surprising to find a myth involving Poseidon on the most prominent place of this temple. But the choice is actually astonishing if we consider that according to the myth Poseidon was harshly rejected by the Athenians and had absolutely no reason to favour the city. It is not help but wrath which would suit him in such a case and it is precisely this apparent contradiction, which is the problem with the first appearance of the myth. The most plausible hypothesis is, I think, to suppose that the myth of the divine contest between Athena and Poseidon was already a well-established Athenian legend at this time, and it has been remodeled according to the new situation. After the Athenian naval victories against the Barbarians and after the founding of the Delian league, the myth was reshaped in order to justify the divine help of Poseidon. This was clearly a *tour de force* (achieved by cutting off the story and omitting the wrath of Poseidon) and was definitely dictated by the new situation in which Athens-based its power on its maritime supremacy. But a quite similar remodeling of ancient legends can be observed at the same time in the case of Theseus as well: his father was originally the Athenian king Aegeus, but he was suddenly replaced by Poseidon[13].

In these cases, it is absolutely clear, I think, that the evolution of the myths was intimately connected with the real history of Athens. But what about the preceding phase? What can we know about the myth of Athena and Poseidon before Herodotus and the battle of Salamis? This has never been scrutinized, as far as I know. This seems to be a bit strange, because actually, there is a text (Plut. *Them.* 19), which refers to the earlier history of the myth, but it was usually dismissed as a useless anachronism[14].

> After this he (Themistocles) equipped the Piraeus, because he had noticed the favorable shape of its harbors, and wished to attach the whole city to the sea; thus in a certain manner counteracting the policies of the ancient Athenian kings. For they, as it is said, in their efforts to draw the citizens away from the sea and accustom them to live not by navigation but by agriculture, disseminated the story about Athena, how when Poseidon was contending with her for

[11] In general, see Palagia 1993. For the reconstruction and interpretation of the scene: Simon 1980; Binder 1984; Pollitt 2000; Patay-Horváth 2002b.

[12] Herington 1955, 49.

[13] Survinou-Inwood 1979; Shapiro 1982 and 1992; Castriota 1992, 62.

[14] Frost 1980, 177.

> possession of the country, she displayed the sacred olive-tree of the Acropolis to the judges, and so won the day[15].

I think the story told by Plutarch can be taken seriously, because it agrees very well with the previous conclusions reached on the basis of other considerations that there must have been an old version of the myth predating the Persian wars and symbolizing the preference of the Athenians for agriculture instead of the sea-trade. Moreover, there were some periods in the early history of Athens when agricultural production played a much more important role than maritime trade. It is only to be asked if the myth of Athena and Poseidon had anything to do with this economic situation or if they were totally independent of each other.

There is a valuable piece of information, which I think might offer an answer for this question, but has never been mentioned in the discussions of the mythic contest. It is again Herodotus who tells the story of the old hatred between Athens and Aegina and in this famous passage (V 82-89) there is a brief reference to the olive trees of Athens. In explaining the causes of the war Herodotus (V 82) says:

> So the men of Epidaurus asked the Athenians to permit them to cut down some olive trees, supposing the olives there to be the holiest. Indeed, it is said that at that time there were no olives anywhere save at Athens[16].

The mention of the sacred olive trees in Attica, which are said to be the earliest or only ones, clearly implies the contest between Poseidon and Athena[17]. Why Herodotus chose not to tell the famous myth here we simply can not know. But it would certainly fit into this early war much better than to the battle of Salamis. The divine contest could provide in this case an excellent *casus belli*, because it justified the Athenian aggression against Aegina (the Aeginetans allegedly seized statues from Epidauros, which were reported to be of Attic olive trees and refused to return them to Athens) and afterwards it could serve as the best possible excuse for the disastrous defeat of the Athenian fleet, by explaining it as the wrath of the rejected Poseidon. I think this setting would be much more appropriate for the adoption / adaptation of the Argive myth than any other we know about.

The date of this war was a matter of debate for a long time, and Th.J. Figueira has even questioned its real historical existence[18]. He rightly pointed out that the

[15] English translation by B. Perrin, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1914.

[16] English translation by A.D. Godley, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1920.

[17] This fact is acknowledged in practically every commentary of this passage. See most recently Haubold 2007, 232 f. No one mentions, however, this passage as the first appearance of the myth, which is generally considered instead to be Hdt. VIII 55. Cf. How - Wells 1912 *ad* V 82 and VIII 55.

[18] Figueira 1993, 56-57: "The account of the fighting itself may easily be doubted. ...

story seems to contain many aetiological and some anachronistic elements, which are derived or at least influenced by 5th-century ideas. But to suggest, as he does, that there was no such war (just animosity or raids[19]) between Aegina and Athens and the whole story was invented in order to explain some cultic peculiarities and to justify or to compensate for the disastrous historic encounter with Athens in the 5th century, seems to go beyond the evidence and strains credulity. At any rate Figueira can not prove the fictive character of the old hatred (and certainly he does not claim to do so) but simply offers a different scenario for its genesis[20], which may explain some details, but can not definitely rule out the possibility that there was a real war. Figueira accepts the straightforward claim of Herodotus, that he used different Aeginetan, Athenian and Argive sources in compiling the story, but seems to favour the Athenian version, although this is – as admitted by himself as well - the most unrealistic one[21]. If one attempts a balanced judgement, it is more reasonable, I think, to accept that there was a real war, the size and the importance of which was exaggerated by the Aeginetans and minimized by the Athenians.

It is true that Herodotus does not attempt to date the conflict by linking it with other archaic events. But this does not necessarily mean that he thought it would belong to the mythical past, but rather that it occurred before any other event known to him. Some aetiological stories (concerning the change in dress) he appends to the history of the war may indeed be suspect or even untrue, but the ban of Attic pottery seems to offer a date, which is compatible with the previous assumption and should, therefore, be considered seriously. According to Herodotus, one of the consequences of the war was an embargo on Attic pottery at the Aeginetan sanctuary of the local goddesses Damia and Auxesia. Although this sanctuary has not yet been located, there is plenty of material to confirm Herodotus' general inference, that in happier times Attic pottery was freely imported to the island. Based on the total absence of Attic LG Ib pottery on the island, J.N. Coldstream dated the war ca. 750 B.C., when the scenes of naval battles suddenly disappeared from the repertoire of the Attic grave vases[22]. S.P. Morris supposed

Illuminates nothing concerning the archaic political history of the Saronic Gulf".

[19] Figueira 1993, 49, n. 37: "There is a good probability that the Aeginetans had marked the Athenians out as victims of their raids in the period after their independence. … These raids and counter-raids of the Dark Age and early archaic period did not amount to wars or sustained confrontations".

[20] Figueira 1993, 52: "The incongruity of weapons dedicated to goddesses of childbirth and fertility may have led to the hypothesis of a war involving the cult. Thence it is a short step to positing the Athenians, recently bitter enemies of Aigina as opponents in such a war. From this perspective, the hostilities themselves can be envisaged as a part of an aetiological explanation of the cult of Damia and Auxesia".

[21] Figueira 1993, 49-50.

[22] Coldstream 1977, 135.

on the other hand that the Black-and-white style pottery was produced by Athenian potters on Aegina itself, thus circumventing the embargo, and dated the war, therefore, to ca. 675-650 B.C.[23].

Figueira criticised Morris' arguments at length[24] and I can only agree with him in rejecting such a date, but he did not advance any cogent arguments against the theory proposed by Coldstream.[25] By focusing only on the supposed Aeginetan ban on Attic pottery, he adopted an exclusively Aeginetan perspective and neglected the archaeological context of late geometric Athens and Attica[26]. He did not consider the fact that the inhabitants of Attica, who were previously so prominent in overseas adventures, had for some reason suddenly turned away from this business, although this is absolutely clear from the entire archaeological record and calls for an explanation. In the absence of any other reasonable cause, one should not, I think, doubt the kernel of the history reported by Herodotus and can safely assume that Athens suffered a great defeat from Aegina (supported or even controlled by Argos) in the second half of the 8th century B.C. This setback may explain not only the peculiarities of the archaeological material but also the historical fact, that Athens lost its importance in the orientalizing period and did not take part in Greek colonization.

Thus, it is highly probable that the mythic contest between Athena and Poseidon was invented or elaborated at this time and understandably was not very popular for several centuries until major naval victories necessitated a radical adjustment.

In this way, I think, the evolution of the famous Athenian myth can be connected with the history of the city itself and we are entitled to suppose that the changes in the myth actually reflect the changes undergone by Athenian naval power.

pathorv@gmail.com

[23] Morris 1984, 111.

[24] Figueira 1993, 58-59 (Appendix I).

[25] Figueira 1993, 38-40: "Herodotus' Aiginetan informants *seemed* to have told him about fifth-century conditions. … Such a hypothesis as that of Coldstream … *could be* confounded by a few finds on an island , where relatively few sites have been excavated. … There is, however, no certainty that the prohibition had to be old. … The belief, that Dorian Aigina was different from Ionian Athens *might have been* a factor in excluding Athenian pottery from the sanctuary at any time after Solon" (my italics).

[26] Figueira 1993, 49, n. 37 is his sole reference: "*supposed* Athenian decadence in the second half of the eighth century" (my italics).

Bibliography

Binder 1984: J. Binder, *The West Pediment of the Parthenon: Poseidon*, in *Studies Presented to Sterling Dow*, ed. by K.J. Rigsby, Durham, 15-22.
Bömer 1977: F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen: Kommentar*, Heidelberg.
Castriota 1992: D. Castriota, *Myth, Ethos and Actuality. Official Art in Fifth-Century B.C. Athens*, Madison.
Coldstream 1977: J.N. Coldstream, *Geometric Greece,* London-New York.
Farnell 1896: L.R. Farnell, *The cults of the Greek States*, Oxford.
Figueira 1993: Th.J. Figueira, *Herodotus on the Early Hostilities between Aegina and Athens*, in *Excursions in epichoric history: Aeginetan essays*, ed. by Th.J. Figueira, Lanham, 35-60 (reprinted with revisions from «AJPh» 106, 1985, 49-74).
Frazer 1898: J.G. Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, London.
Frost 1980: F. J. Frost, *Plutarch's Themistocles. A historical commentary*, Princeton.
Gantz 1993: T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth. A Guide to literary and artistic sources*, Baltimore-London.
Gruppe 1906: O. Gruppe, *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte*, München.
Haubold 2007: J. Haubold, *Athens and Aegina (5.82–9)*, in *Reading Herodotus. A Study of the logoi in Book 5 of Herodotus' Histories*, ed. by E. Irwin – E. Greenwood, Cambridge, 226-244.
Herington 1955: C.J. Herington, *Athena Parthenos and Athena Polias*, Manchester.
How - Wells 1912: W.W. How – J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus*, Oxford.
Kaeser 2006: B. Kaeser, *Ein Mensch muss über Göttinnen richten: Das Urteil des Paris*, in *Mythos Troja. Ausstellungskatalog Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek,* ed. by R. Wünsche, München, 107-119.
Macan 1908: R.W. Macan, *Herodotus, the Seventh, Eighth, & Ninth Books*, London.
Morris 1984: S.P. Morris, *The black and white style: Athens and Aigina in the orientalizing period*, New Haven.
Palagia 1993: O. Palagia, *The Pediments of the Parthenon*, Leiden-New York
Patay-Horváth 2002a: A. Patay-Horváth, *Der Götterstreit um Attika und der athenisch-äginetische Krieg*, «Specimina Nova» 16, 83-102.
Patay-Horváth 2002b: A. Patay-Horváth, *Ein Deutungsversuch des Westgiebels des Parthenon*, «AArchHung» 53, 119-129.
Pollitt 2000: J.J. Pollit, *Patriotism and the west pediment of the Parthenon*, in *Periplous. Papers on classical art and archaeology presented to Sir John Boardman*, ed. by G.R. Tsetskhladze - A.J.N.W. Prag - A.M. Snodgrass, London, 220-227.
Shapiro 1982: H.A. Shapiro, *Theseus, Athens and Troizen*, «AA», 291-297.
Shapiro 1992: H.A. Shapiro, *Theseus in Kimonian Athens: The iconography of Empire*, «MHR» 7, 29-49.
Simon 1980: E. Simon, *Die Mittelgruppe im Westgiebel des Parthenon*, in *Tainia. Festschrift R. Hampe*, ed. by H.A. Cahn - E. Simon, Mainz, 239-255
Simon 1994: E. Simon, *Poseidon*, in «LIMC» 7, 446-479.

Sourvinou-Inwood 1979: C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Theseus as Son and Stepson*, London
Stevens 1927: G.P. Stevens, *The Erechtheum*, Cambridge, MA

Abstract

Based on various literary and archaeological testimonia, an attempt is made to reconstruct the historical development of the famous myth and it is argued that its evolution can be connected to Athenian history in the following way: the changes in the myth actually reflect the changes undergone by Athenian naval power.