

Mysteries of the past

I am digging carefully on this humid Greek summer afternoon. A tall and majestic oak tree sits in the middle of the excavation site. Its roots are an extensive tangle that seem to form a tight cradle around some hidden object. Suddenly, I catch sight of an amphora handle poking through a gap in the tree's protective nest of roots... Intrigued and excited; I prise back one of the ancient tree's roots and gingerly lift the amphora away from the roots that protected it. After rubbing away some mud, I see the top is sealed with clay. What should I do? It's probably best to leave the clay... but curiosity gets the better of me...

When I open it, a musty smell wafts out. With a sinking heart, I presume there is nothing inside it. My hand cautiously gropes inside... there was a crumbling papery object within... a papyrus scroll! I gently lift it out. It was in Ancient Greek (I am very glad I studied it!); I decide to read it to myself:

I, Princess Mestra of Thessaly, have written this document as a warning for the future:

Mestra? Mestra of Thessaly... wasn't she a character from a *myth*?!? No... it must be another Mestra, perhaps it was a popular name.

Last week my father king Erysichthon woke me and all his subjects early. Puzzled and tired as we were, he led us down to a grove of trees sacred to Demeter, goddess of plenty. Would this be a ceremony in honour of Demeter?

No! The very opposite. To the immense horror of all, he proudly proclaimed:

“There are no gods or goddesses! It’s all utter nonsense! I am going to prove that every prayer is wasted air!” He proceeded to order someone to do the wicked deed of cutting the tree down.

His evil command was met with refusal; his servants trembled at the mere thought.

“You’re all cowards! I’ll chop it myself!” he shouted, and then picked up a horribly sharp axe and swung it...

Red blood oozed from where he had cut, and the poor tree groaned.

“Father! Stop! This is crazy!” I cried, flabbergasted, not believing what he was doing.

Another dreadful blow, and the tree moaned again, “If you kill me, revenge will fall on you heavy as a falling oak!”

Alas, he chuckled, and sliced with more vigour than before. How could he do this? I felt so ashamed of him; he destroyed Demeter’s sacred tree in front of everyone.

I dared not look any longer but I heard the last blow of the axe. Aghast, everyone stared at the dead tree. Eventually, the crowd dispersed. But I remained and furtively took some acorns from its branches. Then I ran back to the palace. The acorns were tucked safely into my ornate peplos.

A feast was in full swing. The mood was merry, as if the grave events of earlier had been forgotten. My

father ate and ate. I had no heart for feasting, so I sloped to my bedroom to do some weaving. The noises of the feast stretched into the night, while I slept a troubled sleep, full of nightmares about moaning trees.

The following day, when I saw my father at breakfast he was eating like a starved man! Shovelling enough food for a year into his gaping mouth. I stared in shock; he ate as if he would eat the mounds of empty plates beside him! Slaves rushed around as he gorged himself and bellowed for more.

“Father...good morning?” I tentatively tried to make conversation.

“FOOD! FOOD!!” he hollered in response, “BRING ME FOOD!!”

I was at first puzzled at this response but then it dawned on me...he saw me as one of his serving-girls! He couldn't even recognise his own child. “It's me, Mestra, your daughter!” I shouted, stunned.

No response.

After watching more meals being stuffed down, I realised my dear father was behaving... like a madman! I decided to go for a walk to try and forget these strange events; perhaps he will be better when I get back? I ambled round but unhappily every route I took led to the carcass of the sad, dead oak tree.

No better than the insatiable hunger that overcame my father, I went back home to the palace.

More shock! I walked up to the door and saw an elaborately dressed figure barge in front of me and march proudly in!

“Hey!” I shouted, their bad attitude sparking mine. “Keep off, you don’t live here!”

“What do you mean, girl? I brought this palace earlier this afternoon!” replied the figure, in the main entrance. They didn’t even glance back.

Now more than ever I knew I must find my father the king. Why eat savagely and then sell the palace? Sell OUR HOME?!? What of all the riches and jewels? I must bring him to his senses fast!

I finally found him, trying to sell more land and cram food in his mouth at the same time. He looked up at me but when I desperately tried to reason with him he ignored me, and turned back to his endless meal. He has eaten us out of house and home.

I slept on the cold and dirty street that night, for every last thing had been sold. He sat nearby, the noise of his scoffing spoiling any chance of slumber.

Earlier he had chased frantically after a small, straggly dog, which (thankfully) escaped his wretched grasp. He was left with a few hairs that were shoved

into his wide, gaping mouth. What had he become? I hated the sight my beloved father in this state; he chewed vigorously on a dead slug.

With surprise, I recognised one of my father's slaves running towards me.

"Mestra! Mestra! I know what has happened to your father! Gossip spreaded like wildfire in the kitchen; it was soon an open secret that your father was possessed by the spirit of Hunger. Demeter sent a nymph to Hunger, telling her to possess the king. Thus the unstoppable hunger began. I fled as soon as I found out he isn't himself; Hunger has consumed him! I am terribly sorry to tell you, but it's for the best, in case you believed his... nonsense about the gods not existing!" burst out the slave.

I thanked him and assured him I never truly believed my father's somewhat pompous ideas.

The next morning the most horrible thing happened! Entirely destitute and starving, my father did something unthinkable. He sold me into the wicked business of slavery! He called over a rich slave dealer and sold me for the incredibly low price of: one meal!!!! I screamed at him to stop, that I was his daughter, but he didn't care. He would have sold his own soul for food at that moment.

I prayed hard to Demeter, begging her not to punish me for the atrocious deeds of my father.

My master -I call him that through gritted teeth - turned away to talk to the king, who had paused his meal. I tried to run, then realised my legs were old and frail, my hands gnarled and hardened from rope handling. Demeter had answered my prayer!

The evil man turned to face me and barked viciously: "Where did that girl go? She must have ran away!"

To buy time, I said in a gruff voice that was not my own, "She escaped into the city. Run like a fast kaiki and you might catch her."

Once he was out of sight, I melted back into the young girl I really am. I smirked with glee at the sight of that cruel man on a wild goose chase!

Then I knew how to feed my father! Every day, at various different markets, we sold a sheep, a singing bird, a prize horse - that all turned into me! This worked for a few months...

...until the day I dreaded came at last. In his zeal to eat, he bit a finger. It was the best thing he had ever eaten! He ate more, a hand, an arm, the other one... I could not bear to see any more; my father ate himself.

With his dreadful end fresh in my mind, I dug a hole near the stump of the sacred oak, and dropped the acorns into it, hoping they would grow into tall, stately trees, and right my father's wrong.

I now bury this warning near the acorns, to ensure these trees are safe forever; this amphora is also a grave marker for the tree that was cut down. May anyone cruel enough to wish to destroy this tree know the terrible fate of my father, a powerful king who was reduced to nothing.

I can't believe what I've found! That tree is probably the one Mestra planted! But surely the story of king Erysichthon was just a myth? I stare at the papyrus in wonder. I feel it's very important to look after nature and trees, whether or not the gods on Mount Olympus are real. Does this show that perhaps the tale was real? My find may spark decades of debates...