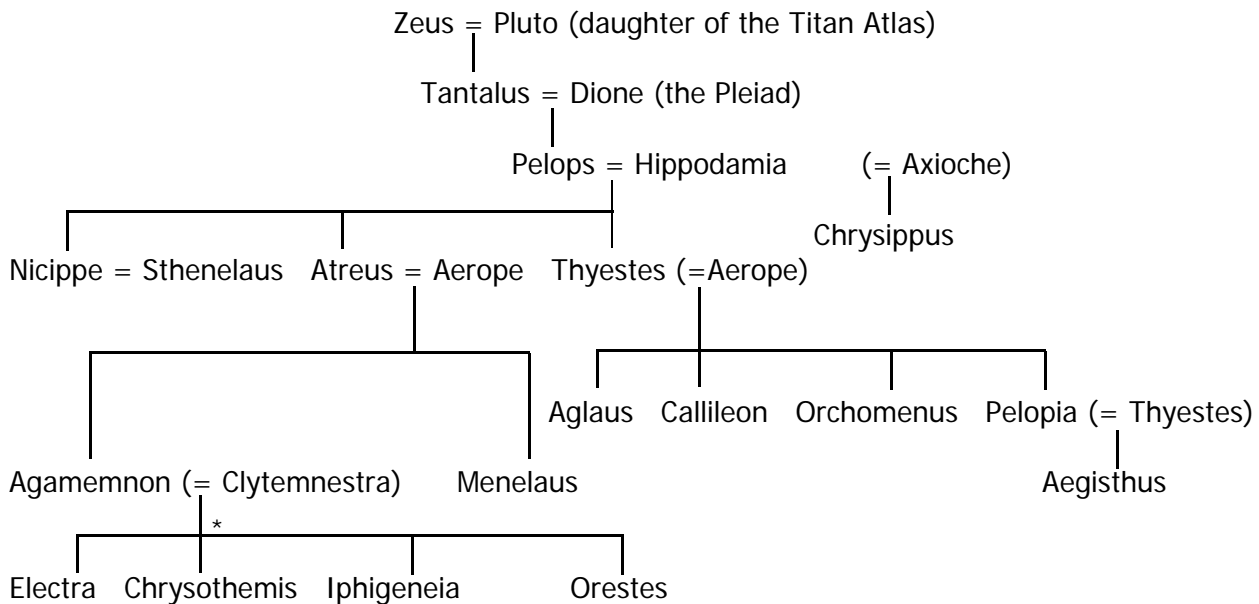


The House of Pelops



TANTALUS was an extremely wealthy king who ruled on Mount Sipylus. He was loved by the gods, who welcomed him to their feasts. There are variant traditions in regard to how he fell into disfavor. According to one tradition, he stole the immortal nectar and ambrosia and gave it to his mortal friends. Another tradition tells us that he cut up his son Pelops into small pieces, made a stew of his flesh, and served him as a dish to the gods. Only Demeter tasted the stew before recognizing the treachery of Tantalus. As a punishment, he was consigned to Tartarus, where delicious food and drink are forever just out of his reach.

PELOPS was pieced together and brought back to life, except for the piece of shoulder eaten by Demeter. The gods replaced this with an ivory prosthetic. Pelops, like his father, was tantalized by things just out of reach. Such was Hippodamia, the beautiful daughter of Oenomaus, king of Pisa in Elis. Oenomaus refused to give his daughter in marriage, except to the one who could outrace him in a chariot. He had reasons to be confident that this would never happen. For one thing, his horses were divine, gifts from Ares. Moreover, Oenomaus insisted that the suitor race with Hippodamia inside his chariot. This would prove distracting and make the charioteer more cautious. In any event, the competitors always lost—not the race only, but also their heads, for Oenomaus would kill them and nail their heads to his palace walls to warn away other prospective suitors (cf. Quintus of Smyrna, 4. 526-29). This gruesome routine steadily eroded the affection and loyalty that Hippodamia felt towards her father. When Pelops accepted the challenge, Hippodamia deceived Myrtilus, who had the care of the king's chariot and horses. She persuaded him that, if he would sabotage her father's chariot, he would be rewarded by being the first to enjoy her sexual favors. The deed was done, and

*cf. Homer, *Iliad* 9.171-74.

Oenomaus, while in the pursuit of Pelops, was killed in a fatal crash. With Hippodamia at his side, Pelops afterwards murdered Myrtilus, who, with his dying breath, pronounced a solemn curse against Pelops and all of his descendants. This is said to be the origin of the subsequent tragedies that perpetuated themselves in the House of Pelops.

ATREUS AND THYESTES were sons of Pelops and Hippodamia; Nicippe was their daughter, who married Sthenelaus, king of Mycenae. Out of wedlock, Pelops fathered Chyrissipus. Because this latter son was favored by Pelops, Hippodamia and her sons had reason to fear that their rights of birth were threatened. Mother and sons, therefore, conspired in the murder of Chyrissipus. Pelops cursed his sons and sent them into exile. They found refuge in the home of their brother-in-law, Sthenelaus, the king of Mycenae. When the only son of Sthenelaus and Nicippe, Eurytheus, died childless, an oracle advised the citizens of Mycenae to choose their king from the sons of Pelops. It is at this point that the animosity between Atreus and Thyestes becomes apparent.

Earlier, Atreus had discovered within his flocks a lamb with a golden fleece. Wanting to keep this treasure secret, he hid the lamb and placed its fleece in a chest. Now, before the elders of Mycenae, he suggested that the man who could produce a golden fleece should be made king. Atreus, however, was still unaware that his wife, Aerope, had long been unfaithful to him and had confided in Thyestes the location of the golden fleece. To Atreus's surprise, Thyestes now revealed that he had possession of the fleece. Atreus complained of this treachery to Zeus, who told Atreus that he must inform the city elders that, if the sun were to change course, it would be a sign that he (and not Thyestes) was to be made king. The elders could not but agree to this, and that very evening, after the sun set in the east, Atreus was made king of Mycenae and Thyestes was banished from his kingdom.

When, afterwards, Atreus found out the role his wife had played with Thyestes, and the children she had bore him, he became furious and considered how best to exact vengeance against his brother. Pretending to seek reconciliation, Atreus sent a message of forgiveness to Thyestes, asking him to return to Mycenae. Shortly thereafter, when Thyestes returned, Atreus prepared for him a grand feast. Following in the steps of Tantalus, Atreus killed the three sons that Aerope had given to Thyestes, cut them into small pieces, and fed them to their father in a stew. After Thyestes had dined, Atreus produced the severed heads of his victims. Thyestes, agonized by the outrage perpetrated upon himself and his sons, cursed his brother and fled the country.

The feud, however, was not over. Thyestes consulted an oracle in regard to what he must do to exact revenge and take the royal scepter of Mycenae from his brother. He was told that his hopes could be realized through only one way. He must father a son through his daughter Pelopia. This son would restore the kingdom to Thyestes.