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(Not so) Dangerous Journeys: The Ancient Mediterranean and Ancient Mythological Sea Travelers in European Theme Park Attractions

I “Thalatta! Thalatta!”

Water constitutes one of the central design elements in theme parks. Indeed, theme parks may be considered perfect examples of what Anthony and Patricia Wylson have called “aquitecture”: “architecture associated with the water element, either in the utilitarian, symbolic, therapeutic, leisure, or visual context.”¹ In the shape of lakes or rivers, theme parks use water to visually organize and anchor themed spaces as well as to provide dramatic vistas, as, for instance, in Epcot’s “World Showcase,” whose individual pavilions are all gathered around a huge lake.² Fountains – especially the sounds they produce – have a soothing effect and are often employed in relaxation areas such as the wishing well next to Disneyland’s Sleeping Beauty Castle, while water play areas like “Les Jeux d’Oudous” in Parc Astérix provide refreshment on hot summer days. Such water rides as, for instance, Europa-Park’s “Tiroler Wildwasserbahn,” finally, combine all the various contexts in which water may be used in theme parks, providing visual excitement for those who watch others getting splashed as well as relaxing moments of gentle cruising, refreshment during hot weather, and fast-moving lines due to the high hourly capacity of water-based transportation systems.³ And while water rides do not necessarily always have a theme connected with seas, lakes, or rivers (Parc Astérix’s “Menhir Express,” for instance, does not), a thematic connection to existing or imaginary geographic features can enhance the level of identification and immersion. This is quite an easy result to achieve, as water is thematically “flexible” – it can represent any natural, real body of water and even several seas, lakes, or rivers at the same time, as in the case of Disney’s “Jungle Cruise,” which allows riders to visit four continents while moving on the same body of water.

1 Wylson/Wylson (1994), viii.

2 Lukas (2008), 52.

3 On water rides in general, see Clavé (2007), 376–377.

As a design element in theme parks, water is particularly important in order to represent themes that are generally associated with it in the popular mind. This is the case with Greece, which has mostly been viewed as a maritime nation, evoking images of small Mediterranean islands rather than mountain valleys or the steep terraces of the sanctuary of Delphi. Most European theme park visitors, indeed, have probably experienced Greece as a tourist destination with beaches, whether directly or indirectly (that is, through documentaries, postcards, magazines etc.). Consequently, not only are Greek-themed areas such as the Griechenland area in Europa-Park (Germany), the Grèce area in Parc Astérix (France), or the Grecia area in Terra Mítica (Spain) often designed around water, they also focus on the country's coastal regions. In Europa-Park's Griechenland (generally inspired by the island of Mykonos) and Parc Astérix's Grèce, for instance, the attractions, restaurants, and shops are all grouped around a man-made lake that is supposed to represent the Mediterranean Sea. And in Terra Mítica's Grecia, the real Mediterranean Sea is skillfully integrated into the vista: from a hill with a reconstructed acropolis, the Grecia area offers a spectacular view of the Mediterranean, the very same sea that can be seen from the Acropolis of Athens. The view thus strengthens the area's immersivity and, what is more, it also affectively connects visitors of the Spanish theme park to the ancient Greeks.⁴

Yet the popular association of Greece with water is not only due to the modern promotion of Greece as a tourist destination, but also to the popularity of ancient Greek myths about sea travels, above all the myths of Odysseus and of the Argonauts. Indeed, the modern reception of ancient Greece in general and in theme parks in particular is first and foremost the reception of its mythology rather than of specific historical periods and events. The widespread identification of the age of myths with Bronze Age Greece and its visualization through Minoan and Mycenaean architectures,⁵ however, links mythical sea travel with the time of the "thalassocracy" attributed by Herodotus and Thucydides to Minos and Crete (and by Herodotus to other, later, political powers),⁶ thus generally reinforcing the idea of ancient Greek culture as a "maritime" culture, in stark contrast to the Roman "territorial" Empire. While theme parks rely on touristic associations to generally visualize Greece, myths, and especially myths about sea travels, often provide the thematic background for the (water) rides in these areas.

⁴ Carlà/Freitag (2015b), 146.

⁵ Carlà/Freitag (2015a), 256.

⁶ Herodotus 3.122; Thucydides 1.4; on the concept of thalassocracy in ancient Greece, see Momigliano (1944).

Thanks to the loose narrative structure of ancient myths as well as their flexibility, they fit the narrative and technological exigencies of the genre of the theme park (water) ride particularly well. Already in classical mythology, sea travel is used as a motif to bring the protagonists into contact with half- or non-human beings, as a realm of possibility and of danger (in the shape of sudden storms, for instance, or of monstrous encounters) that has the function to probe the hero's courage, intelligence, strength, and values. In the words of Scott Lukas, water connotes "gaiety and adventure, propulsion and power, the unexpected and the reactionary."⁷ As visitors, in the narratives of these rides, either identify with the hero or accompany him on his travels, it is also their courage and strength which are put to the test during the ride. In fact, in some cases, visitors can even buy souvenirs and so-called on-ride photos as proofs of their having mastered the challenge.⁸

In this sense, myths such as that of Ulysses, a story of the probation of the protagonist's heroic potential that ends well (at least in the most popular and popularly known variant), are perfect for theme parks, which must, according to Disneyland designer John Hench, offer reassurance:

We offer adventures in which you survive a kind of personal challenge – a charging hippo, a runaway mine train, a wicked witch, an out-of-control bobsled. But in every case, we let you win. We let your survival instincts triumph over adversity. A trip to Disneyland is an exercise in reassurance about oneself and one's ability to maybe even handle the real challenges in life.⁹

In the following, we would like to investigate a series of water rides from different European theme parks that are all designed around themes taken from classical mythology and more specifically from myths connected with the sea. Examining how the motifs of danger from water and from encounters with the Other (and therefore the probation of the hero) have been functionalized in these rides, we seek to show how these rides have contributed to shaping an image of the (Mediterranean) sea as an archaic, powerful, and sometimes uncanny testing ground for both their protagonists and their riders. Rather than following a geographical or a chronological order, we will discuss the rides according to how the rider is involved in the challenge caused by the sea.

In a first step, we will present two rides – "Die Fahrt des Odysseus" at Belantis (Leipzig, Germany) and "El Rescate de Ulises" at Terra Mítica (Benidorm,

⁷ Lukas (2008), 43.

⁸ Schwarz (2017), 107–108

⁹ Bright (1987), 237.

Spain) – in which visitors follow the adventures of the mythological hero as companions/spectators while quietly moving on the water. Hence, while they are immersed in the narrative of the mythological challenges, their sensorial experience is limited to sight, hearing, and potentially smell, but does not include the sense of danger derived from acceleration, deceleration, or the loss of balance. In “La Furia de Tritón” and “Los Rápidos de Argo” (both in Terra Mítica as well), by contrast, riders themselves are mainly confronted with the physical components of the mythological challenge, while the narrative remains underdeveloped and is merely suggested through selected decorative elements. Finally, we will turn to “Poseidon” (Europa-Park, Rust, Germany), which combines a highly developed narrative with the physical excitement provided by a two-plunge water coaster. Whether the rides foreground physical or narrative aspects, however, the (Mediterranean) sea is always depicted as a stage on which heroes (and riders) must prove themselves and demonstrate their ability to overcome the dangerous forces hidden in the waters. Through the associations with classical mythology, travelling the ancient seas in theme parks thus constitutes a liminal experience that challenges and tests riders’ physical and/or mental borders.¹⁰

II Narrative-Based Adventures: Retracing Ulysses’ Steps

No other ancient myth connected to sea travel shares the same popularity as that of Ulysses. His story is not only known through the Homeric *Odyssey*, but also through a large variety of adaptations in virtually all media: from movies, TV shows, and books to the visual arts, from the anime *Ulysses 31* to the Cohen brothers, from James Joyce to Koncalovskij.¹¹ Given this popularity, it is no surprise that this myth forms the backbone of several theme park rides, too – especially those that rely on a strong narrative component: in order to attract as many visitors as possible, theme park themes need to be easily recognizable for a maximum amount of people.¹² Beyond its popularity, Ulysses’ myth is also an action-filled adventure, whose narrative elements can easily be adapted into a ride: Ulysses’ cunning behavior, the femmes fatales, the faithful wife, and the faithful

¹⁰ On liminality in theme parks, see Freitag/Schwarz (2015/16).

¹¹ See, among many others, Solomon (2001), 107–111 and Verreth (2008) on cinematic versions of the *Odyssey*; on *Ulysses 31*, see Castello/Scilabra (2015), 182–183.

¹² Carlà/Freitag (2015a), 244.

dog. Most of all, as a narrative taking place mostly on the sea, it features many islands with uncommon inhabitants, the wrath of the god of the seas, numerous storms – it is indeed the sea elements that render Ulysses' story as adventurous as it is.

In fact, the narrative itself is adventurous enough to render a ride “exciting” even without physical thrills. A case in point is “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” (Ulysses' journey) at Belantis, one of the original attractions of this park, which opened in 2003. Combining the elements of the scenic ride and the boat ride, both staples of theme parks, “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” allows visitors to travel on tow boats across the central lake of the theme park, which represents the Mediterranean. Along the way, visitors encounter a total of seven scenes, all but one taken from the *Odyssey*, which are also identified and explained on maps placed inside the boats:¹³

1. The Trojan Horse
2. Charybdis' Vortex
3. Circe and the Island of the Swine
4. Poseidon, the God of the Seas
5. The Cyclops Polyphemus
6. Hercules' Snakes (the only episode not taken from the *Odyssey*)
7. The Island of the Sirens

Riders, then, follow on Ulysses' steps, reliving his adventures episode by episode – if, that is, they choose to use the maps installed in the boats in order to identify the various scenes and to learn about the dangers they contain. If they do not, however, then “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” is nothing but a pleasant, almost idyllic boat tour past carefully landscaped islands with a few props that only in some cases visually suggest the dangers they are supposed to represent. Visitors seeing a woman wearing a blue helmet standing on an island surrounded by boars, for instance, might well understand the reference to Circe,¹⁴ but such a representation does not look scary or challenging at all, unless one reads the description provided in the map:

Circe lived on the island of Aiaia, surrounded by flowers and magical herbs. During his wanderings, Ulysses alights at her island. She worked her magic on his companions, magically transformed them into swine and keeps the hero himself a prisoner on the island for an entire year. (authors' translation)

¹³ Onride video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_a8g0rOLpaI (accessed March 28, 2017).

¹⁴ On the representation of Circe from Homer to her modern receptions, see Berti (2015).

Moreover, the only scene of the attraction that does feature a visual thrill (and a physical one, too) is actually part of a different attraction. Shortly before the Circe scene, visitors pass by the neighboring water coaster “Fluch des Pharaos” (The pharaoh’s curse), located in the Egyptian area of the park. Following the big splash of the latter attraction, the ride vehicles travel down an artificial vortex before they go back to the loading station. Riders of “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” can clearly see the vortex from their boats, but for them the vortex is explained differently: according to the maps in the boats, which closely follow Homer (*Od.* 12.105–106), the vortex is caused by the sea monster Charybdis, which three times a day used to swallow and spit out sea water (together with ships and sailors). Riders of “Fluch des Pharaos” do not learn about this alternative “theme” of this part of their ride, unless they also ride “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” during their visit to the park. Then they learn that they had actually been threatened by both the pharaoh and Charybdis, and that the latter had actually swallowed them.

The example of the vortex illustrates how flexible theming can be – as flexible, in fact, as myth. Indeed, already in antiquity myths were famously characterized by a huge flexibility: the same myth came in many different variants, which could even have different outcomes. Helen, for instance, might never have gone to Troy, but stayed in Egypt while a ghost twin was with Paris, if one follows Stesichorus and Euripides. This same flexibility continues to operate in the reception of classical myths, and is one of the secrets of their popularity and success. While “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” remains relatively faithful to the Homeric narration – except for the representation of two snakes, which refers to the two snakes that tried to kill Herakles as a baby, an episode not told in the Homeric poems –, “El Rescate de Ulises” at Terra Mítica is much more original in its approach to the myth of Ulysses.

Opened in 2001 and, hence, one year after the opening of the rest of the park, “El Rescate” is located in the themed area Las Islas, which is placed in the center of a lake that mimics the Mediterranean and whose architecture and forms of reception recall the world of the Aegean, and in particular the Bronze Age and the mythical period. As such, it once again confirms the connection in popular culture between classical myth and the Bronze Age. In addition, the design of the area insists on the origins of the Greek civilization as a maritime civilization, deriving from sailing, from the colonial experience, and from the sea/lake which dominates, of course, this “insular” sector. References to myths connected to the sea, in which heroes overcome the dangers it contains,

are therefore perfectly at home here.¹⁵ Much like “Die Fahrt des Odysseus,” “El Rescate” invites riders to relive the adventures of the *Odyssey* after the end of the Trojan War, “relive” in the literal sense of the term for, in the narrative of the ride, Ulysses has been made a prisoner by Poseidon after blinding Polyphemus and his son Telemachus must rescue him. The riders join Telemachus on his mission and experience precisely the same challenges known to have been faced by Ulysses.¹⁶

Visitors enter the ride through a massive portal, built in the style of the “cyclopic walls” and rising on what looks like the top of a mountain. The building thus symbolizes the “fortress” of Troy, the place from where Ulysses’ adventure started. Passing the portal, the visitor is confronted with some features of Min-oan and Aegean architecture. The pre-show takes place in a cave which is partially flooded and features numerous ruins, thus making clear that the Trojan war is over and that the city has been conquered and destroyed. At the same time, the scene also immediately suggests that water is the dominant element of what will follow. Here, the visitor is projected inside the story and recruited to join Telemachus to put an end to Ulysses’ sufferings and Penelope’s despair. According to the script of the ride,¹⁷ Athena selects the twenty strongest and wisest people of Ithaca and convinces them to travel with Telemachus: they then gather in a boat (the ride vehicle) to collaboratively accomplish their mission. The ride technology and the narrative complement each other: the ride vehicles used to have twenty seats in addition to one seat for a park employee and guide who performed the role of Telemachus.¹⁸

Following the pre-show visitors pass altogether nine scenes, all of which correspond to sections in Homer or more generally in Greek mythology. These scenes are presented in a lot of detail, using sculptures, animatronics, light, sound, as well as special effects. Furthermore, visitors are surrounded by these scenes: with very few exceptions, from any point in the ride, they can neither see the preceding or following scene nor any other part of the park. Quite in contrast to “Die Fahrt des Odysseus,” visitors are fully immersed into the world of the ride, with no “foreign” sights or sounds distracting them. Also in contrast to the Belantis ride, the visuals in the scenes of “El Rescate” point to the atmo-

15 Carlà/Freitag (2015a), 249–252. For a general overview of Terra Mítica and its Greek-themed areas, see Carlà/Freitag (2015a), 247–252; (2015b), 143–147.

16 Onride video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoR89cJXc3U> (accessed March 28, 2018).

17 Available at: <https://benicnews.wordpress.com/2014/07/08/terra-mitica-el-guion-descriptivo-de-el-rescate-de-ulises/> (accessed March 14, 2018).

18 The ride was closed in 2005 and reopened only in 2013 with different, smaller ride vehicles that did away with the performers.

sphere of danger and challenge pervading the adventure. About half of the scenes, in fact, take place indoors, in scarcely illuminated spaces; some of the others feature frightening characters, such as sea monsters.

Right in the first scene, indeed, visitors almost encounter the dead. Inspired by the episode of the Cimmerians in the *Odyssey* (11.12–19), they first see a group of ghastly figures with luminescent green eyes on a foggy shore. In front of them is Charon, the mythical ferryman of the souls of the dead. Even if the latter never appears in the Homeric poems, the location of the Cimmerians next to the entrance of Hades makes his presence here consistent with tradition. The second scene is dominated by a huge blue mask with pursed lips, which is accompanied by two male and two female winged creatures, also in blue. They represent Aeolus, the god of wind, and possibly his daughters and sons. Whereas in the Homeric poem, however, Aeolus supports Ulysses on his travel (10.1–76), the angry face of the mask in “El Rescate” already points to the fact that his role in the ride is quite different: the strong winds he produces threaten to overturn the boat. Yet the physical danger is not a real one: the boat continues to travel at the same leisurely speed as before. Although the representation is more threatening than in “Die Fahrt des Odysseus,” here too the visitors do not face any bodily challenge.

The two next scenes represent what are probably the two most famous scenes of the *Odyssey*. At the beginning of the third scene, the mood almost switches to a pastoral one, as visitors see a herd of goats. The latter, however, belonged to Polyphemus (13.738–897), who, from the opposite side, already awaits the riders with a huge rock in his hands,¹⁹ which he is about to hurl at the boat. Again, the danger is only represented visually. In a way, this also applies to the encounter with the Sirens in the fourth scene (12.39–54 and 158–200). Here riders can see the Sirens and even hear their seductive songs, but the boat never leaves its prescribed track, merely passing the shipwrecks of previous adventurers who were not that lucky.

Having survived the Sirens, however, visitors next find themselves in the underworld (alluding to the famous *Nekyia* of the Homeric *Odyssey* in Book 11), represented here by a cave with the thrones of Hades and Persephone. At the same time, the Hades also recalls a Christian Hell, with dead people being “punished” (the scene is indeed called “El Infierno” in the ride’s script): Sisyphus is there, pushing his stone,²⁰ while other souls are locked in hanging cages. This is a good example of the kind of translation and adaptation required by reception:

¹⁹ In this iconic position, Polyphemus is also represented on park maps as the mascot of this ride.

²⁰ Indeed, Ulysses sees Sisyphus in the *Odyssey*, in the course of his travel to the reign of the dead (11.593–594).

the representation of the world of the dead, in order to be recognizable by modern visitors, must conform to their idea of afterlife – or better, their idea of a dangerous underworld, which functions as an adventurous testing ground.

In the sixth scene, another episode of the Homeric poem is “translated” into the cultural context of (local) visitors: the Lotus-eaters from the ninth book of the *Odyssey* (9.82–104) are transformed into *duendes*, a sort of goblin from the Iberian tradition. In the script, they are referred to as the “duendes of oblivion” in order to connect them to the Odyssean episode, but in the ride scene they are depicted as creatures living in the woods, covered by leaves, who perfectly blend into the environment. This portrayal of the Lotus-eaters-cum-*duendes* has, of course, no correspondence in the *Odyssey*, but derives once again more from the modern representations of elves, gnomes, and similar creatures. After their encounter with the *duendes*, Telemachus and his companions meet Circe, who is busy transforming people into animals. This danger, however, is avoided as well: according to the script, Circe becomes at once benevolent, either because she recognizes the son of Ulysses, her former love, or because Athena intervened on behalf of the crew.

The positive outcome of this episode is taken up again at the beginning of the next scene, in which riders witness a feast hosted by the god of music, whose drunken guests play instruments, sing, and spit water at the riders. Yet it turns out that the spitting guests rather foreshadow the next danger: Scylla and Charybdis. As in Belantis, the ride takes from Homer the idea of a vortex generated by Charybdis, which is shown, to the right side of the boat, swallowing a less fortunate ship. Yet here, the two monsters are present in the scene as well – namely, in the form of two dragons, sitting next to and not, as in the Greek tradition, opposite each other. The first dragon has one head, the second six – altogether, then, the two dragons have seven heads, which probably constitutes a reference to the Hydra killed, in yet another myth, by Heracles.

The last scene constitutes the pivotal encounter with Poseidon. Amidst the ruins of a majestic temple, the god of the sea attempts to seduce riders with the promise of eternal energy, represented by a giant pearl which he holds in his hands. Unlike Ulysses, however – the script says –, Telemachus’ companions resist the temptation and manage to rescue the hero and free him from his clam prison. Telemachus’ mission is accomplished and the ride vehicles move back to the loading station. Visitors have triumphed over the dangers and pitfalls that brought down Ulysses – but only in the narrative. In reality, as in Belantis, they simply sat comfortably in a boat for about ten minutes, not even getting wet.

III Getting Wet: Action and Thrills on the Greek Seas

Riders of “La Furia de Tritón,” by contrast, will surely get wet.²¹ Located just a few steps from “El Rescate” in the Grecia area of Terra Mítica, this attraction is a very basic and short splash ride that mainly provides refreshment and visual excitement, but whose role in the theming narrative of Grecia, unlike that of other rides in the area, is minimal. During the ride, visitors take seats in large boats that are twice hoisted up artificial hills from which they plunge into a large water basin in the shape of an amphitheater. The plunges are designed to get riders as soaking wet as possible, thus providing some welcome refreshment during the hot summer days on the Costa Blanca. The shape of the water basin and the location of the plunges, in turn, offers a large amount of people an excellent view of the ride, thus providing visual excitement for those who rather prefer to stay dry: riders, of course, know that they are watched, possibly by friends or family members, and act accordingly, yelling and screaming during the plunges, which gives the whole ride a theatrical note.²² Riders thus enact the danger and at the same time play at being heroes in overcoming their fears; the other visitors, looking at them, admire their courage and in consequence may decide to become heroes as well, accept the challenge, and go on the ride, or they may decide that the challenge is too big for them and move on to the next attraction. In both cases, they perceive the sea – in its mythological presentation – as the source and as the location of danger and of heroism.

However, “La Furia de Tritón” is only minimally themed. The ride’s infrastructure is barely hidden by fake rocks and before the plunges riders get a generous view of the park’s backstage area. The only section of the ride that is themed, in fact, is the small lagoon right before the first plunge. In the middle of this lagoon there are two statues of tritons, one of which is blowing a large shell, the shell with which the mythological Triton, the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, could create sea storms and calm them down. The sound of the shell can also be heard in this scene: the lagoon is, however, the only part of the ride that features a soundtrack. The statues are one of merely two references to the ride’s titular deity. The other reference occurs shortly before the plunges. From the top

²¹ Onride video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJz7obi9yLY> (accessed March 28, 2017).

²² On such “stagings of the gaze” in theme park rides, see Schwarz (2017).

of the lift hill, riders not only see the water basin into which they are about to plunge, but also, in the distance, the Mediterranean Sea, the home of Triton.

It is the paratextual elements of the attraction that establish the ride's connection to the myth: the ride's name, its sign, and its representation on park maps. Both the sign and the drawing show Triton pushing a trident (an attribute which he shares with his father in ancient representations, too) into the water, thus creating the huge splash that soaks visitors in the attraction (fig. 1). On the ride, however, neither Triton himself nor his trident are to be seen, and riders never learn the reason for his *furia*. From a landscaping point of view, the ride, particularly the large water basin, nicely complements the classical buildings of the area, among others a replica of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Other than that, however, it is only its name and its depiction on signs and maps that justify the ride's location in Grecia.

Fig. 1: “La Furia de Tritón,” Terra Mítica, Spain. Sign at the entrance of the attraction. Photo: Filippo Carlà-Uhink

Just like “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” and “El Rescate de Ulises,” then, the sea represents a danger zone or a testing ground in “La Furia de Tritón”: not least because they are on display in front of other visitors and because the outcome

of the adventure is clear from the beginning – as the warning signs in the ride’s waiting lines announce, riders *will* get soaking wet – visitors need to be brave. Here, however, the challenge is not constructed as a narrative, but is a physical one.

This also applies to another Terra Mítica ride, “Los Rápidos de Argo,” which incidentally is located right across from “El Rescate de Ulises.” That these two rides are next to each other is no surprise: they both are located in the Las Islas area. “Los Rápidos de Argo,” however, works with a myth – that of the Argonauts – with whose details the general public is presumably much less familiar than with those of the myth of Ulysses.²³ Beyond the search for the Golden Fleece as the goal of the adventure, most people probably remember the figure and the role of Medea in the story, which, featuring themes from fratricide to infanticide, is surely not particularly appropriate for a theme park ride.

This is only a partial explanation for the very superficial theming of the ride, however. Following the waiting area, whose design is inspired by the Palace of Phaestus and is therefore consistent both with the general theme of the area and with the already explained connection between classical myth and the Bronze Age, visitors enter the round rafts of this water rapids ride.²⁴ The rafts are decorated with eyes, which recall the typical iconography of the ship Argo which, according to one tradition, had a magical prow which could speak and prophesize. Beyond this, however, the theming is barely existent. The rafts float among luxuriant vegetation, and only a few elements connect the ride to the myth: a sculpture representing an aggressive Harpy and a tunnel in the shape of the dragon’s mouth, after which visitors can see the Golden Fleece, which, incidentally, is not even golden.

While “Die Fahrt des Odysseus” and “El Rescate de Ulises” offered visitors explanatory maps and live narrators, respectively, to convey (their) versions of the Odyssean myth, in “La Furia de Tritón” and “Los Rápidos de Argo” visitors who are not familiar with Greek mythology are left to themselves. This is not at all surprising: while all four rides depict the sea as a zone of danger and challenge, such characterization can be grasped even without any knowledge of the underlying narrative in the case of the latter two, because of their focus on the physical challenge. In the former two, by contrast, the danger of the sea does not

²³ The myth of the Argonauts has been used for cinematic productions, too: Solomon (2001), 111–115; Blanshard/Shahabudin (2011), 125–143. This myth might well be, as Solomon states, “the best known mythological cycle” after the one connected to the Trojan War, but in general it is less popular, in its details, than the Odyssean one. This is probably also due to the main sources for the myth, as Apollonius of Rhodes is surely much less known than Homer.

²⁴ Onride video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl3QlsvP730> (accessed March 28, 2017).

become apparent unless one fully understands the narrative, whether one is already familiar with it or whether one has just learned about it from the ride's maps and narrators.

IV Poseidon's Wrath

The last ride we will consider, "Poseidon" at Europa-Park in Rust, Germany, combines the aspects of a highly-developed narrative about the dangers of the sea with the corresponding physical challenge that needs to be overcome. Opened in 2000, "Poseidon" is a well-themed thrill ride, sharing, on the one hand, the Odysseic topic with "Die Fahrt des Odysseus" and "El Rescate de Ulises," and, on the other hand, the genre of the water coaster with "La Furia de Tritón." With its white and blue steel track, its huge water basin, and the temple that serves as its loading station, Poseidon visually dominates Griechenland, the Greek area of Europa-Park (fig. 2). Noticing the coaster on the other side of the lake, visitors need to follow a long path along the lakeshore in order to get to the ride's entrance. Whereas the front section of the Greek area, and partly the lake, evoke Greece as a tourist destination, the path to the entrance of Poseidon leads visitors to a replica of the Lion's Gate of Mycenae, which marks the entrance to the area's rear section, dedicated to antiquity and archaeology.

This replica is just the first element that contributes once again to locating the age of myth in the Greek Bronze Ages: after the Gate, visitors proceed to a Trojan horse, under whose legs they pass. They thus understand that they are entering the citadel of Troy, represented here through Minoan architecture and decoration, as indicated by the crenellation in the shape of ox-horns known from Cretan palaces, by the typical inverted columns painted in red and black, and by the reproduction of Minoan and Aegean frescoes from Crete and Akrotiri. As has already been suggested by the presence of the horse, Troy has been conquered: moving on, visitors realize that the building is partially destroyed, and see a sunken ship amidst the flooded ruins. The next part of the waiting line introduces the visitors to the narrative of the ride, here in the shape of a movie projected on the walls of a rock cave also flooded by the water. According to the movie, Ulysses cunningly conquered Troy – against the will of the gods. When the latter protest against this lack of respect, he maintains that he could even march on the Olympus. Poseidon decides at this point to punish Ulysses' hubris, vowing that Ulysses will not be able to go make it back home to Ithaca by sea.

Again, the original myth has been adapted to the ride: none of Ulysses' adventures from the *Odyssey* are mentioned, and the conflict between Ulysses and Poseidon is motivated very differently from the Homeric tradition. Nevertheless,

Fig. 2: "Poseidon," Europa-Park, Germany. Photo: Filippo Carlà-Uhink

the sea still constitutes a testing ground for Ulysses as well as his companions, the riders. It is at this point that the visitors can walk around the temple and finally enter it from the side, only to discover that it has been half destroyed by Poseidon's trident, stuck in the building, and that it is actually more a harbor than a temple, with water, fishing nets, boxes everywhere.

Entering the boats and exiting the temple through a giant collapsed face of Medusa, the visitor is ready for the thrill coaster ride, which represents the storm through which Poseidon punishes Ulysses. As already mentioned, the ride itself is similar in its structure to Terra Mítica's "La Furia de Tritón": a show scene is followed by two splashes, between which the boats gently cruise the lagoon. After the show scene and before the first splash, however, a "coaster" section is inserted, which mimics the boat getting tossed around by huge waves during a sea storm. The show scene, in turn, builds upon the narrative already established in the waiting area: in fact, the ruins of the flooded city and the wrecked boat are the same that the visitors have already seen from the waiting line. In addition, however, from the boat riders now also see a blind old man, dressed in white – possibly the only survivor of the attack on the fortress – who utters incomprehensible words, perhaps warning riders of what expects them. But it is too late: the boats are already on the lift hill and the "coaster" section, and thus the "thrill" section of the ride, begins.²⁵

This, of course, is the section in which the narrated danger connected to the sea is transformed into a corporeal experience – including acceleration, drops, tossing, and getting soaked – and in which riders and Ulysses are cured of their hubris. Following the "reassurance" principle described above, it is obvious that Poseidon's wrath cannot have deadly consequences; this does not take away, however, from the fact that the coaster nevertheless represents a particular challenge. As in "La Furia de Tritón," the spectacle on the water is on display,²⁶ and the park builds upon theatrical structures to construct the image of a dangerous sea, of its challenges, and of the experience connected to their overcoming.

V The Domination of Water

Although water plays a central role in theme parks, and frequently depicts actually existing rivers and oceans, the Mediterranean Sea plays a special role.

²⁵ Onride video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hs53RHZWsxs> (accessed March 28, 2017).

²⁶ Schwarz (2017).

Not only is it by far the most frequently represented one – references to other seas and oceans, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Caribbean to the North Sea, are singularly rare in theme parks, not only in the European theme parks we looked at in this paper, but also in theme parks all over the world. We can only speculate why this is the case. Certainly these oceans do not lack myths, and while their history, as, for instance, in the case of the slave trade on the Atlantic and the Caribbean Sea, may have been particularly violent – a topic that is generally avoided in theme parks –,²⁷ this also applies to the Mediterranean, in the past as well as in the present, in these very days, in fact, as the tragedies reported almost every day in European newspapers reveal.

But in addition to modern (and disturbing) stories of violence, abuse, and death, the Mediterranean Sea can also be connoted as a place of danger in connection to Greek myths, which is perfect for theme park thrill rides. While the “violence” of other oceans refers either to myths which are quite unknown in Western culture (as in the case of the Polynesian ones), and therefore lack recognition and reception, or to modern times, thus raising problematic issues that are still closely connected with our world, the Mediterranean offers the possibility to skip the Battle of Lepanto and the Crusades and to tap into the reservoir of classical Greek myths. The latter are extremely popular and recognizable, but, at the same time, highly archetypal – they are not perceived as directly connected to the social and political circumstances of our world. Death, generally silenced at the theme park, can occur nonetheless in representations of the Trojan War because of its “distance” and “symbolic value.”²⁸ Therefore, it is not really the Mediterranean which is popular in theme parks, it is ancient Greek mythology, with its many stories of dangerous seas that need to be “mastered” – literally, stories of “thalassocracy.”

Representations of ancient Greece in theme parks can, of course, simultaneously insist on other aspects of ancient Greek civilization that are popular and recognizable today, such as, for instance, sports and the Olympic games. However, these other aspects are not present with the same consistency and regularity as classical myths connected to the seas, their explorations, the challenges faced by the heroes on the waters, and their bravery in dominating the seas. This individual form of thalassocracy is surely different from the political one with which this concept is generally connected; nevertheless, it is very strongly present in popular perceptions of ancient Greece across Europe and the Western

²⁷ Carlà/Freitag (2015a), 244.

²⁸ Carlà/Freitag (2015b), 149.

world. The popularity of the myths of Ulysses and the Argonauts, as well as the concept of Greece as a maritime nation whose seas are at once a beautiful touristic spot and the realm of angry gods, constitute the precondition for the water rides we analyzed in this chapter. The rides repeat this image of Greek antiquity for all their visitors, thus perpetuating the idea that “dominating the seas” was one of the most important, if not *the* most important, aspect of daily life in ancient Greece.

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