

Topic Page: [Perseus \(Greek mythology\)](#)

Definition: **Perseus** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In astronomy, a prominent northern constellation. Perseus is a rich constellation, crossed by the Milky Way.



Image from: [Perseus turning the Followers of Phineus into Stone in National Gallery Collection](#)

Summary Article: **Perseus**

From *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

A great hero, son of ZEUS and DANAE. Perseus' grandfather Acrisius, king of Argos, had been warned by an oracle that he would be killed by Danae's future son, so he kept her shut away from all contact with men by imprisoning her in a bronze, underground chamber. Nevertheless Zeus came to her through a small aperture in the roof as a shower of golden rain, pouring down into her lap (Fig. 52), and Perseus was the result of their union. Acrisius, refusing to believe that Zeus was the father, shut mother and baby into a wooden chest (Fig. 53) and had it thrown into the sea.

The chest drifted safely to the island of Seriphos where it caught in the fishing nets of Dictys, brother of the island's king, Polydectes. Dictys gave Danae and Perseus a home, and here the boy grew uneventfully to manhood. Then Polydectes fell in love with Danae and resolved to have her, by fair means or foul. Realising that the presence of a grown son, well able to protect his mother, would be an obstacle to his plan, he decided to get rid of Perseus once and for all. He pretended that he wanted to marry Hippodameia, the daughter of Oenomaus, the king of Pisa in Elis, and was collecting horses as contributions to the bride-gift. Perseus boasted that he would even fetch the head of the Gorgon Medusa if necessary; and when he failed to provide the required horse, Polydectes took him up on his offer, quite sure that he could never return alive, since the sight of the GORGONS turned a man to stone.



Fig. 135. Perseus, followed by Athena, escapes after beheading the Gorgon Medusa. He carefully averts his eyes from his victim's face, partially concealed in his bag, lest she turn him to stone.

Perseus was helped in his mission by ATHENA and HERMES. On their advice he went first to the three GRAEAE, and by taking possession of the one eye and the one tooth which the old women shared among themselves, he forced them to tell him the whereabouts of certain nymphs who would help him on his perilous quest. These nymphs provided him with winged sandals to carry him to the lair of the Gorgons at the ends of the earth, a cap of darkness belonging to Hades that would make him invisible, and a bag in which to carry the Gorgon's severed head. Added to these, Hermes gave him a sickle of adamant with which to behead her. Perseus was now armed for his task.

Using his winged sandals and wearing his cap of darkness, he flew beyond the river of OCEAN in the far west to the land of the three Gorgons, the immortal Stheno and Euryale and the mortal Medusa. He found them all asleep. Because anyone who looked at them directly would be turned to stone, he was careful to gaze only at their reflection in Athena's shield of polished bronze, while the goddess helped him by guiding his hand that held the sickle. He struck off Medusa's head, and from her severed neck were born two children by Poseidon, the winged horse PEGASUS and CHRYSAOR. Perseus thrust Medusa's head into his bag and flew swiftly away. His victim's two sisters did their best to pursue him, but to no avail because he was wearing the cap of darkness, so they returned to mourn their dead sister. Athena invented the sorrowful music of the *aulos*, the double pipe, to imitate the sound of their sad lament.

No early account of the expedition against the Gorgons exists, but the Hesiodic *Shield of Heracles*

(sixth century BC) captures the moments just after Perseus has succeeded in beheading Medusa. The poem includes a description of a wondrous shield made by Hephaestus, with many marvels depicted on it. One of these was a figure of Perseus, fashioned in gold (220–237):

On his feet he wore winged sandals, and across his shoulders on a belt of bronze was slung a sword in a black scabbard. He was flying as swift as thought. On his back was the head of a terrible monster, the Gorgon, carried in a bag of silver, a wonder to behold, and from the bag hung tassels of shining gold. Upon the hero's head lay the fearful cap of Hades with its awful darkness of night. Perseus himself, the son of Danae, was travelling at full stretch, as though he were rushing onwards and shuddering with horror. After him darted the Gorgons, unspeakably dreadful, longing to catch hold of him, and as they trod upon the pale adamant, the shield rang sharp and clear with a great clanging. Two snakes hung down from their belts, their heads arching forwards. Their tongues were flickering, they were gnashing their teeth with fury, and their eyes were glaring fiercely. And on the dreadful heads of the Gorgons, great Terror was menacing.



Fig. 136. Cellini's Perseus holding up the head of the Gorgon Medusa.

Fearsome as the Gorgons were, Perseus escaped safely with his prize and began to make his way home to Seriphos. On his way he passed across the African continent. According to Ovid, he came to the land of the Hesperides (here imagined to be in north-west Africa) and asked the Titan ATLAS for hospitality. When Atlas turned him away, Perseus showed him Medusa's head and transformed his recalcitrant host into Mount Atlas, huge enough to support heaven and all its stars on his shoulders. In Egypt Perseus paid a visit to Chemmis, the home of his ancestor DANAUS, with the result that in Herodotus' day the people of Chemmis still worshipped him, the only Egyptians to do so.

He came next to the land of the Ethiopians where Cepheus was king, and saw there Cepheus' beautiful daughter ANDROMEDA chained to a rock on the sea-shore, waiting to be devoured by a sea-monster as a punishment for the boastfulness of her mother, Cassiopeia. He fell in love with Andromeda at first glance and promised her father that he would rescue her, so long as he might marry her (Fig. 19). Cepheus agreed, so when the monster appeared, cleaving its way through the ocean, Perseus flew up and attacked it from above, killing it with his sickle. He then claimed Andromeda as his bride. Unfortunately she had been betrothed to Cepheus' brother Phineus, who now stirred up opposition to the match. During a pitched battle, Perseus took Medusa's head from his bag and turned Phineus and all his supporters to stone. The marriage took place, and within the year Andromeda had given birth to their first son, Perses, who would become the ancestor of the Persian kings. Perseus then returned to Seriphos, taking his new wife with him but leaving their little son to be brought up by Cepheus, who had no male heir to succeed him.

Back in Seriphos, Perseus found his mother and Dictys being cruelly persecuted by Polydectes. Once again Medusa's head came into play. Perseus found the king and his retinue feasting within the palace and turned them all into stone. As Louis Macneice describes it in *Perseus*:

*Borrowed wings on his ankles,
Carrying a stone death,
The hero entered the hall,
All in the hall looked up,
Their breath frozen on them
And there was no more shuffle or clatter in the hall at all.*

Perseus made Dictys king in Polydectes' place. With his mission finally over, he gave the winged sandals and his other aids back to Hermes and the Gorgon's head to Athena. She put it in the centre of her *aegis*, a goatskin breastplate fringed with snakes, or on her shield, as a threat to her enemies.

Perseus returned to Argos with Andromeda and Danae, intending to settle in his homeland and make himself known to his grandfather. Acrisius, however, had heard of his impending arrival and had fled, still in fear for his life because of the sinister oracle. Perseus went on to Larissa to compete in the funeral games held by the local king, Teutamides, in honour of his father – but Acrisius was here too, and while throwing the discus Perseus accidentally struck and killed his grandfather. Thus the oracle was fulfilled.

After this, Perseus was ashamed to succeed to his rightful inheritance of the throne of Argos, so he exchanged Argos for Tiryns, the kingdom of Megapenthes, son of Proetus. He also founded Mycenae and had the CYCLOPES build the massive ("Cyclopean") walls for him. It was here, according to Apollodorus, that Andromeda bore him more children: a daughter, Gorgophone (meaning "Killer of the Gorgon"), and five more sons, ALCAEUS (1), STHENELUS (1), ELECTRYON, Mestor and Heleius. Their great-grandson would be the mighty hero HERACLES.

Aeschylus wrote a tetralogy on Perseus, now lost. Two of the tragedies seem to have told of his killing of the Gorgon (*The Children of Phorcys*) and his revenge on Polydectes (*Polydectes*), while the satyr play, the *Net-drawers*, treated Danae's arrival on Seriphus in the wooden chest. Perseus' adventures,

particularly the killing of Medusa (Fig. 135) and his flight from the pursuing Gorgons, are popular themes in ancient art from the seventh century BC; they were depicted, respectively, on the Amyclae Throne and on the Chest of Cypselus, according to Pausanias. Perseus is also a favourite subject among postclassical artists, with (to give just a few examples) paintings by Titian, Veronese, Rubens, Rembrandt, Tiepolo, Delacroix and Burne-Jones, sculptures by Canova and Rodin, and Cellini's famous bronze statue in Florence of Perseus holding up Medusa's severed head (Fig. 136).

[Homer, *Iliad* 5.741, 14.319; Hesiod, *Theogony* 274–83; Pindar, *Pythian* 12.6–21; Herodotus 2.91, 7.61; Apollodorus 2.4.1–5; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Sea Gods* 14; Pausanias 2.16.2–3, 2.21.5–7, 3.17.3, 3.18.11, 4.35.9, 5.18.5; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.605–5.249.]

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