

Η ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ

(THE EPISTOLE)

a quarterly newsletter for Hellenic polytheists

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THE NEOKOROI* are a group of Hellenic polytheists who feel called to a path of service and devotion to the gods. We support mysticism, hard polytheism, and tend to favor reconstructionism as an approach to developing Hellenismos, while also recognizing the importance of personal experience and local cultus. We are especially dedicated to fostering communities, festivals, and public shrines, and providing guidance and information on religious matters – all to ensure the strength and longevity of the worship of the Greek gods.

HE EPISTOLE (a “message” or “letter”) is published four times a year. We offer articles, hymns, prayers, poetry, reviews, information, rituals, community notices, fiction, recipes, and anything else of interest to the Hellenic polytheist community. We welcome feedback, and submissions from guest writers. He Epistole is a free publication and can be found in many locations nationwide. If you would like the newsletter delivered to you directly, subscriptions cost \$20 per year – contact us for more information. And please contact us if you would like to distribute copies in your area – in return you receive the issues in electronic format for free. Back issues can be downloaded in PDF form from the website for free.

To contact the editor, email: info@neokoroi.org - or visit the Neokoroi website: www.neokoroi.org. (We have even more articles online, as well as information on the gods, photos, links and more!) Our next issue will be coming out in March 2008. The deadline for submissions is February 20th.

*The word *neokoros* is derived from the Greek words *naos* (temple) and *koreo* (to sweep) and originally meant "the one who sweeps the temple" or "the temple keeper". It was a humble position, but an important one, for it was the neokoros' responsibility to make sure that the temple was kept clean and free of any pollution, and also to tend to the daily service of the god in whose temple he or she served.

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Consulting Trophonios

By *Oinokhoe*

Trophonios is what the Greeks called a *heros*. Not quite a “hero” in the modern sense of the word, a *heros* is a sort of demi-god, a divinized human with special powers. Unlike the pan-Hellenic heroes such as Herakles or Theseus, Trophonios was only worshipped in one place: Lebadeia, not far from Delphi in central Greece. At that place, he had an underground oracle, which became quite famous in its day.

This was almost all I knew of Trophonios at the time I became involved with him, several years ago. But for some reason he had been on my mind that spring. I had read a little about the oracle, where questioners would prepare and purify themselves for days before descending into a hole in the earth to encounter him directly. The idea fascinated me, and tugged at me, and I started wondering whether one could approach Trophonios still.

Then, as I was preparing for the first day of the Thargelia festival, an enormous bee appeared in my kitchen. It got my attention, especially as I was somewhat phobic about bees. The next day, at work, another enormous bee, trapped in the office. And the next day, and the next. I knew this was an omen of some kind, somehow related to Apollon (since it happened during His festival) but not from Him directly. Then I recalled that Trophonios was sometimes said to be a son of Apollon. I told myself that I would look into Trophonios’ myth further, and that if he was related to bees at all, I would know that he was communicating with me, and that perhaps he would be willing to teach me something relating to his type of oracle. I looked it up, and of course there it was: the oracle of Trophonios was originally found by someone following a swarm of bees into the ground.

Trophonios and his brother Agamedes were architects, and built the first temple to Apollon at Delphi. One story says that they stole gold from a client, who set a trap for them which caught Agamedes, and Trophonios cut off his

brother’s head so he couldn’t be identified; at which act the earth opened up and swallowed him. Another story says Apollon himself killed the brothers after they built His temple, so that they would always be remembered for it. In either case, awhile later, during a drought in Boiotia, the locals sent envoys to Delphi to ask for a cure; the oracle told them to consult Trophonios at Lebadeia. They could not find the oracle, until one of the envoys was inspired to follow a swarm of bees on their way – they flew into a hole in the ground, and that’s where he found the oracle. He was said to have been taught from Trophonios directly what the customs and rites there should be.

Thereafter it became a respected oracular center. However, unlike most of the large oracles of Greece, where a prophet would speak on behalf of the god (like at Delphi, or Claros) or interpret signs from the god (like at Dodona), at Lebadeia the person seeking an oracle would descend into Trophonios’ cave themselves and consult the god directly. The procedure was quite lengthy, but fortunately we know most of the details due to the reporting of Pausanias, who consulted the oracle himself.

First, the querent would stay in a building at the site for several days. While there, he would have to bathe in the cold river Herkyna, taking no hot baths. He would sacrifice to a slew of gods, including Trophonios, Apollon, Kronos, Zeus, Hera and Demeter (and also eat some of the meat from those sacrifices). Each time, diviners would interpret the entrails of the animals to decide whether Trophonios would grant him an audience.

If all went well with the sacrifices, on the final night he would be washed in the river and anointed with oil. He would then be taken to two fountains called Lethe and Mnemosyne (Forgetting and Memory, two legendary rivers of the underworld). He would drink the first in order to forget all that was in his mind before, and the second to remember what he would see below. He would then worship at a secret statue said to have been made by Daidalos.

Dressed in a linen garment with ribbons, and wearing locally made shoes, he would be led to the entrance of the oracle. Descending down a ladder, he would reach a stopping point with an even smaller hole. Holding two honeyed barley cakes as offerings (probably to the sacred snakes), he would put himself feet first into the hole, and get sucked down into the chasm.

Within the cave, he would receive the answer he was looking for, sometimes by visions, sometimes by things heard. Then he would return to the world above feet first again. The priests would sit him upon the Chair of Memory and ask him what he learned, which was then written on a tablet and kept in the shrine. The experience was said to be so terrifying and traumatic that the querent would be paralyzed in a sort of trance, and afterwards unable to laugh for quite some time, though eventually he would return to his normal self. However, this did not seem to deter many people from seeking the advice of Trophonios.

We know very little about what actually happened down in the chasm. Of course, many people will say that it was a theatrical performance of the priests, who would manufacture “visions” for gullible querents. But I do not hold such a poor view of the ancient Greeks, and I believe that when oracles maintain solid reputations for centuries, it is because a god or *daimon* is involved. Plutarch relates a story about Timarchus descending to consult Trophonios: he lies down in the darkness but cannot tell if he is asleep or awake; he feels something like a blow to his head which releases his soul to have visions and hear voices; he feels another pain in his head and passes out, only to come to almost two days later, returning to describe the many wonders he witnessed.

Unless the priests physically knocked him out (a risky way to go about it), then it is likely that this describes a metaphysical experience, some sort of trance being induced, in which he could leave his body and see beyond this world. (Dreams have also been suggested as the method of oracle here, as they were for Amphiaraios or Asklepios, but there is no

evidence for that, especially in the otherwise detailed account of Pausanias – for a more thorough refutation of the dream theory, see Clark, cited at the end of this article.)

What this actually sounds like is some form of “astral travel” or other sort of trance. How was this altered state of consciousness consistently induced in people who were otherwise ordinary and not experienced in such states? Some scholars jump quickly to the theory that there was some kind of drug added to the water that the querent drank from before going into the chasm. But not only is there no evidence of that, it simply wasn’t necessary. The preliminary rites were clearly designed (whether by the *heros* himself, or humans, or both) to break down the personality

and allow for such a transformation of consciousness. First, the possibly long journey to the oracle, building up anticipation. Several days staying in special quarters, taking cold baths, eating an unusual diet (probably fasting to some degree), poor sleeping conditions, and hints of rhythmic dances and music, possibly even flagellation, all taking place at night in the darkness. The frequent sacrifices to see if Trophonios was still willing to speak to them. These things, along with the constant reinforcement of the belief that they were about to descend to the underworld and encounter a demi-god, were certainly effective enough on their own to produce an ecstatic experience of some kind in most people.

And so it can still be today. Fasting, cold baths, sleep deprivation, rhythmic music are all still viable methods for altering consciousness. (And while altering consciousness is not inherently a religious rite, it can be successful at bridging the gap between human and divine when in combination with other elements of ritual and worship.) We know enough of the other details (honey cake offerings, clean linen clothes, divinations to ascertain approval) to replicate most of the procedures to some degree. What is missing is the sacred setting of the original oracle (and implied presence of the *heros*) with its opening to the underworld, sacred springs, holy grove. Bonnechere calls a

holy grove “the natural manifestation of a median space between two worlds.” So while we cannot create a new Trophonion per se, we can find such a median space in our own surroundings. A cave, tunnel, haunted glade, deep lake, etc. We cannot drink from the original sacred springs, but we can ask the nymphs of the nearest spring or river to bless the water and help us forget what we need to, and remember the oracle. And furthermore, we can gain instruction from Trophonios himself – after all, that is how the ancient oracle was founded, with direct counsel from Trophonios.

My personal understanding is that the consultation of Trophonios is very much like a dream incubation, only the journey is taken while awake rather than asleep. And thus it can be done with the use of an incubation chamber of some sort – a small, enclosed space that will cause sensory deprivation during the rite, and in which one can lie down, which with most people promotes the ability to leave one’s body. If created as sacred space and used only for this purpose, it can over time become the sort of median space I mentioned above. Completing all the preliminary rites (including not only the purifications and mental/emotional provocations but also the very important prayers, offerings, etc. to Trophonios), then enclosing oneself, stretched out on the ground, in an incubation chamber should induce the trance state necessary to encounter Trophonios and see whatever he has to show you.

Normally, I would not advocate deliberately setting out to worship an ancient localized hero within modern Hellenic religion, but rather searching out one’s own local heroes, since that is more true to the spirit of Hellenic practice. But then Trophonios came knocking at my door. So clearly he is still willing to reveal his mysteries to us, and they are mysteries distinct from other gods and heroes, which at least some of us might wish to experience.

Yes, I am deliberately using the term “mysteries,” because the Trophonios ritual is in many ways closer to a traditional mystery initiation than an oracular consultation. It involves confrontation of death and the

underworld, and its springs of memory and forgetfulness. As I mentioned already, it is different from other oracles in that it doesn’t employ mechanical divination or an intermediary prophet, but rather the querent himself encounters the divine in some kind of altered state of consciousness – reminiscent of certain mystery procedures. And the effects are similar as well. Bonnechere says, “The sacred experience in Trophonios’ cave which left the consultant ‘unconscious of himself and others’ but opened him to majestic visions, must have marked him for life, as did an initiation at Eleusis.”

Trophonios is one of those *daimones* who is closer to us in some ways than the gods, closer to our world because he was (at least according to legend) once human. He is also a boundary crosser, connected with thresholds (he built the one at Delphi), and with the so-called “Greek shamans” who straddled the worlds of gods and men. He is chthonic, and thus can speak of matters beyond life or death. And he will speak to you directly, without intercession, if you respect the proper rites.

I have actually started a sort of limited patron relationship with Trophonios, restricted mostly to learning the techniques of his oracle. I don’t believe anyone did this historically, but then again hundreds of people paid him cultus then, and few know of him now. I feel that part of my duty as his “apprentice” is to speak of him and my work with him so that others may be called. Trophonios is not easy to bear – he resides in a dark place below, and his mysteries and oracles often create unease. In ancient times, this was so well known that a common phrase to describe a sad person was that he’d “consulted Trophonios.” People came out of that cave paralyzed with terror. And yet, they had true visions, amazing enough for word to spread and the oracle to be popular for many years, despite the risks. Trophonios is still there, and if you can face the fear, you may learn more than you expected.

Further Reading:

Bonnechere, Pierre. "Trophonius of Lebadea: Mystery Aspects of an Oracular Cult in Boeotia," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos. London/New York: Routledge, 2003.

Bonnechere, Pierre. "The Place of the Sacred Grove (Alsos) in the Mantic Rituals of Greece: The example of the Alsos of Trophonios at Lebadeia (Boeotia)," in *Sacred Gardens and Landscapes: Ritual and Agency*, ed. Michel Conan. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2007.

Clark, Raymond J. "Trophonios: The Manner of His Revelation," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 99, 1968 (1968), pp. 63-75



Photo by Autolykos

Athene

Let us now praise glorious Athene
Paradoxical granddaughter of Time
Clever in counsel, terrible in war
Teacher of reason, patroness of rhyme.

Virgin complete in her Goddess body
She loves philosophers and heroes best
Showed Socrates how to delve for causes
Brought brave Odysseus home to his rest.

Her house is the paragon of temples
Her gifts are the oil, the lamp and the light
She is the just protector of cities,
The ruler of air, the owl in the night.

By Corbin

Crown of Winter

By Samantha Frye

The Muses settle at the Hearth
Where Hestia lights the bright flame within the hearts
The gentle fire blooms and sisterly love prevails
To warm the highest beams in winter night chill.
Sweetly their voices rise to ancestral tune
Seeing of the great families and times that past
Where generations come alive and renew their tie
To the hearts of the children, all united beyond time.
And to their song all the deep-sleeping ones dream along
To timeless memories that run unbound in winter's night.

There at the fire's side where the shadows play at the walls
Weaving forth the stories of death and of life
Demeter, corn crowned and dark veiled
Turns her face away from the light, and hides her eyes
Surrounded by the warmth of love she remains
Nursing the children by her grain, the loaves of bread at her feet
As Ge dreams in her restless sleep where the dragons dream
And the winter mantle stretches across the land
Where the bright-browed grains had risen and been shorn.

At the forest edge of the frosted hanging limbs
Long-pelted dogs pace with misted breath
Striding among the legs of a regal goddess.
Adorn in gentle light, high crowned huntress
Draped in the softest pelts of her fleet-footed prey
Her eyes like the hawk they scan the distances far away.
Her bow is held at ready in the strength of her hand
As there she turns away to head again into the forest depth
To rise the clear brass horn and sing with the pack one hundred strong
Agrotera long in stride leads the hunt into winter's night.

The forest recedes away and below the mountain shade
The sun does not reside in his temple upon the stone
Phoebus has departed for the farthest lands away from his holy seat
Where it rests neither abandoned nor empty in winter months
The bright glow of heaven's light has given over the throne
Surrendered to the dusky glow of the lamp of Dionysos.
Beneath the rock of Delphi, the cavernous temple below
He utters the part of his brother, the word of Zeus to men.
There is Dionysos beneath the deep bosomed earth
The seed that is planted for the vine to once more grow
When the spring sun returns to his throne
And breathes upon him the dawning light of life.

(Continued on page eight)

Winter sinks the wide-reaching sleep, and the warrior retreats
From the battle where he has played Ares lays the sword and shield
To take comfort in the love-warmed bed Aphrodite made
And take his seat at her hearth and rest his battle-worn brow.
There she weaves her colored threads for a starry veil
To settle upon her daughter's head, there to grace her form
As Athena's drapes in golden beauty upon her own
And his great voice sings in deep raspy songs of battles won
To the children of generations gathered around
Great above their vibrant shouts from where they rest at his feet,
Singing for the valor of great men and the risen battle of Olympians
As the frost paints its patterns upon the sheltered window panes.

And the windows of classes where the children learn
There the winter passes away as they sit under tutelage
From Athena grasping the teaching hand to lead the lesson along.
Bright blooming minds are hers to protect and feed,
To nourish in the months of winters grasp stretching on so long
As Hermes has left the slumbering pastures of summer
To dwell in the houses of learning at Athena's side.
Feeding the fires of bright minds, as winter sleeps on
To kindled the spark of creativity and scientific discovery
For learning letters and the patterns of the universe
As the snow drifts down from the downy clouds of heaven.

There Zeus is shaking down the drops of rain, thunder-less,
For Hephaestus has retired from his forges to a winter's rest,
The rain falling as blossomed stars fashioned by the wind of the north
And gathered around as a crown upon Hera's regal head.
Shining in winter's gown of white brilliance
The Heaven's king and queen recline as one behind the veil
Hanging upon the tall pillared bridal bed where they rest
Adorned in the diamonds and frost-flowers of winter's glass
A sparkling radiance of winter's highest purity
Clasped together in love's embrace of the love of tender youth,
Where they once shared innocent love's first kiss beneath the winter moon
When Rhea's daughter held to her breast the fading cuckoo.
Here their harmony rests that winter hearts rise above the rest
To bloom in spring in greatest beauty; Here is winter's love.

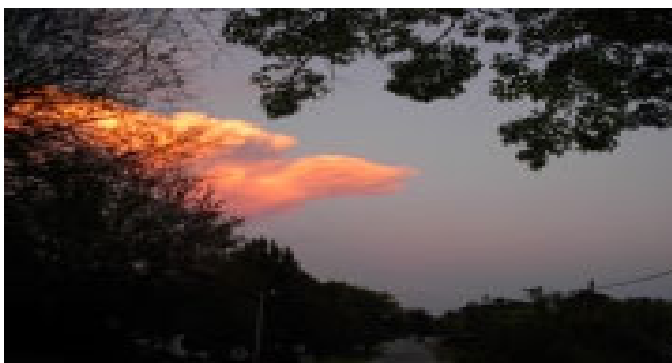


Photo by Autolykos

God of War

By *Laura M. LaVoie*

It was a Saturday in November; I was on our mountain in Western North Carolina. It isn't a very big mountain, modest at best, but it is our mountain. I found myself there on a specific weekend normally reserved for the monthly Hellenion libations with my local Atlanta ritual group. Instead, I was in Asheville with my partner, who is not a Hellenic polytheist but is frequently involved in my spiritual quests. I asked if he would hike to the top of the ridge on our land and help me pour libations to Ares. He said yes, though I am certain it was more about the climbing than the libating. At the top of the ridge, I was told, there were some amazing rock formations. I wanted to go there to sing my praises to Ares, the God of War.

We climbed the mountain. Let me begin by telling you I am not the "outdoorsiest" type of person. I am getting better; I do enjoy camping and I am relatively okay with not showering for two days. I am much less of an athletic person. I do not exercise regularly and I am not much of a fan of the process. Climbing a mountain for me is no metaphor - it is hand over hand, huffing and puffing, asthma-inducing hard labor. We weren't rock climbing, just walking, but there is no forged trail to this part of our land so we found ourselves forging our own path. The trees were mostly leafless; the rhododendrons provided us some railings to grasp onto as we pulled ourselves to the top. Sometimes we crawled, which I found particularly useful. Eventually we got to a place where above us we saw sky rather than just more mountain, and we knew we must be close. Matt left me sitting on the side of the mountain while he made sure we weren't too far off course. I sat on my little piece of land overlooking our slice of western North Carolina. Eventually he hollered at me from the distance to say that he had found the rocks.

I had not yet been in the presence of these rocks. When I was told we had "really cool rock formations" on the land I figured they were just really neat configurations of reasonably large rocks. However, as I climbed my way toward the sound Matt's voice, I was shocked by what I found. It wasn't a "really cool rock formation" but an enormously large cliff of dark gray rock covered in soft greeny moss. Matt stood right on the edge of the rock, a solid looking tree holding him up. I sat upon the rock looking down. I handed him a bottle of water from my backpack as asked if he would pour libations to Ares as I read hymns and a liturgy of epithets in his honor.

"Ares, exceeding in strength, chariot-rider, golden-helmed, doughty in heart, shield-bearer, Savior of cities, harnessed in bronze, strong of arm, unwearying, mighty with the spear, O defender of Olympos, father of warlike Niké, ally of Thémis, stern governor of the rebellious, leader of the righteous men, sceptered King of manliness, who whirl your fiery sphere among the planets in their sevenfold courses through the aither wherein your blazing steeds ever bear you above the third firmament of heaven; hear me, helper of men, giver of dauntless youth! Shed down a kindly ray from above upon our lives, and strength of war, that we may be able to drive away bitter cowardice from our heads and crush down the deceitful impulses of our souls. Restrain also the keen fury of our hearts which provokes us to tread the ways of blood-curdling strife. Rather, O blessed one, give us boldness to abide within the harmless laws of peace, avoiding strife and hatred and the violent fiends of death."
(Homeric Hymn to Ares)

Matt poured libations with each epithet in the litany:

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Polemistés, "warrior"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Miaiphónos, "bloody"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Híppios, "of horses"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Óbrimos, "strong"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Khálkeos, "brazen"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Thoúros, "raging"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Brotoloigós, "plague of man"*

*A libation in your honor, Ares
Rhinotóros, "shield-piercing"*

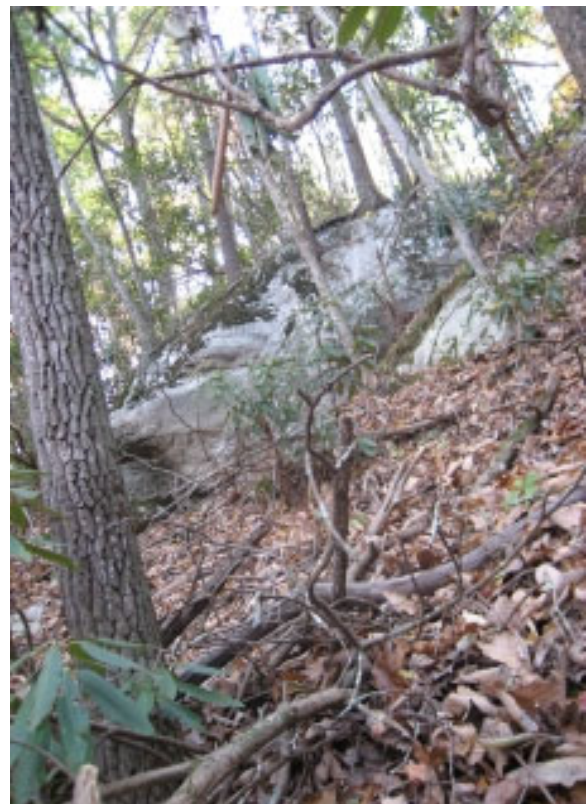
"Unbreakable, strong-spirited, mighty and powerful daimon, delighting in arms, indomitable, man-slaying, wall-battering; lord Ares, your is the din of arms, and ever bespattered with blood you find joy in killing and in the fray of battle, O horrid one, whose desire is for the rude clash of swords and spears. Stay the raging strife, relax pain's grip on my soul, and yield to the wish of Kypris and to the revels of Lyasios, exchanging the might of arms for the works of Deo, yearning for peace that nurtures youths and brings wealth."

(Orphic Hymn to Ares)

We then climbed down to the base of the rocks and sat by a tree to "watch" them for a time. This experience with Ares was vastly different than ones I had before. I thought about starting this essay off with the prior Ares encounter, but as I was writing my hand was guided to write the experience of climbing a mountain in his honor. It was then that I realized just what had happened. The year prior, as I spent the Month of November meditating on Ares and what he brought to my life, I was filled with anger; a raging and violent anger. I did not like

myself when I was working with Ares energy. The experience left me shaken and gun shy and when November rolled around this year, I didn't even construct a shrine to Him in my home. I didn't want to be around that angry energy. And as I sat at the top of my very own mountain I realized that this too was Ares energy. Physical exertion of this nature frequently reduced me to tears, and even at the beginning of this very climb there were a few shed. Yet, I pulled myself together and climbed the mountain to the top where I was greeted by nature that is indescribable. Ares is not just the god of war, but he is also the god of strength, and it was his energy that helped push me to the summit to honor him.

Photo by Laura M. LaVoie



Arakhneiad

By Sannion

Twilight gloom in the vineyard
Summer heat laying heavy over the drooping fruit
Everyone's gone home, locked safely behind their doors
Except for the spiders, unseen lovers of the grape.
They spin their webs in the field, and crawl
Soundlessly over the gnarled vinewood,
Hunting the insects that would devour Bacchus' plump children.

The race of spiders has been friend of the wine-god for as long as they have lived,
And before that, for the sweet virgin Arakhne
lay with Lyaeus before she competed with the Weaver.
They met in an arbor and danced together while the Nymphai of Lydia watched
And sang the Hymenaeus song for them, and Bromios lifted his cup to her sweet lips
And poured the holy ecstasy-inducing poison for her to drink.
Drunk on his wine, the young girl rushed through the wood, wild as a Mainad,
A hunting companion of Lord Zagreus. Life coarsed through her supple limbs
And she grew impetuous under his yoke,
tossing back her head and calling Euoi to the dark vault of heaven.
She gave her body to him beneath the moon,
and he filled her with greater pleasure than any mortal had ever known.

And later, when Arakhne returned to her father's house and loom
She carried the memory of that night into her weaving,
Letting the ecstasy she had felt guide her nimble fingers,
And she wove scenes of startling beauty and such realism
that everyone who saw them marveled and thought that the waves she wrought
would leap off the loom and that they could almost smell the sweat of the dancing girls
or the grapes near to bursting in their ripeness.
And they whispered that her skill was more than mortal,
that she had to have been taught by Pallas herself.
But Arakhne just laughed and said that her skill was her own,
And the inspiration for it came from Dionysos her lord.
She would not give ground to the gods – in fact that stubbornness was what Dionysos loved so much about her.

Athene was jealous and challenged her to a duel, and the headstrong girl accepted
And wove the story of her seduction by Dionysos. When Athene saw the theme of her rival she grew enraged, for she thought
Arakhne was mocking the gods by weaving the stories of Zeus' seductions and of Dionysos bribing Erigone with the grape,
Little understanding what the girl was saying with her web.
So she beat the girl and destroyed the mantle she had worked so hard on,
And taunted her work, saying no god could love a foolish, frail mortal – that they
Used them for their own pleasure and then quickly forgot them.
And Arakhne was crushed, because that mantle she had meant to give to Dionysos
As a bridal present and when she saw her hard work destroyed, and the jealous goddess
Mocking her love, Arakhne's heart broke in two and she took a rope and twined it
Around the rafters of her father's home and hung herself, a victim of love.

And when Dionysos came and saw, he was doubled over in grief, for this girl had
Been more than just a trophy to him.
Athene saw her brother's grief and was moved to tears herself,
so she caught up the girl's soul and made a new vessel for it,
Giving her a spider's body so that she could continue to weave and be the grape's lifelong companion. And Dionysos picked
her up and carried her to his vineyard
And set her up there to be Queen of the Fields.
So when you see a spider creeping along the vine,
nestled tightly beneath the green covering of its leaf,
hunting even yet the vermin that would devour the young plant before it's time,
Remember this story and the power that love has to triumph over the grave.

Photo by Autolykos



“For centuries people have spoken of the Greek myths as of something to be rediscovered, reawoken. The truth is it is the myths that are still out there waiting to wake us and be seen by us, like a tree waiting to greet our newly opened eyes.”

*From The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony
By Roberto Calasso*