



Calchas

Summary :

Son of the seer Thestor, Calchas was related through his father to a family of reputed seers and embodied the 'stratomantis' par excellence during the Trojan War. A survey through his activities before the Trojan war, during the siege and the sack of Troy and his founding of cities during his travels around Asia Minor after the fall of Troy, allows us to explore changes of his persona in the epics and other archaic poetry.

Date and Place of Birth

Mycenae, Megara

Date and Place of Death

Clarus

Main Role

Seer

1. Origin and genealogy

Depicted in the Homeric poems as the son of Thestor,¹ Calchas presents in our sources a stable genealogy.² Due to his father's descent, he is linked to the famous Argonaut Idmon.³ This specific connection makes Calchas a descendant of Melampous, a reputed seer, or Apollo himself.⁴ Transmission of the prophetic gift within a family going back to the oracular god is common in ancient literature; the case of [Mopsus](#) is also an example of this pattern.

It strengthens the exceptional abilities of the seer, a fact mentioned twice in the Iliad.⁵ The Homeric Poem⁶ also refers to another son of Thestor, Alcmaeon. One can understand that he was Calchas' brother. This interpretation must have been given already in Antiquity, since the scholion to these verses⁷ rejects it: the Thestor mentioned in the twelfth book was not the father of Calchas but a homonymous hero. However a reference to a brother of Calchas is not to be excluded since in his *Mythological Compilation* the author Hyginus⁸ recalls the name of his two sisters, Leucippe and Theone . Finally, a Byzantine dictionary⁹ points out the Colophonian Sibyl Lampoussa as a descendant of the Greek seer.

By contrast to the homogenous traditions relating to Calchas' genealogy, sources disagree about his place of birth. That he came from Mycenae may be deduced by the tragic poet Eurypides' descriptions of how the news of the seer's death reached Mycenae from Asia Minor;¹⁰ this version is followed by Hyginus.¹¹ On the other hand, Pausanias¹² states that it was in Megara that Calchas dwelled when Agamemnon came to enrol him in his task force, before their departure to [Troy](#). Modern authors have also suggested that he may have had an Argive origin, for his grandfather is sometime referred to as Abas.¹³

2. Achievements

There are many different traditions recording his various achievements which are mainly related to the [Trojan War](#). That is why one can suggest that he embodies the 'stratomantis' par excellence.¹⁴ Epics and other archaic poetry allow



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us to determine three main contexts where this character plays a specific role. These are (1) Before the Trojan War (2) During the siege and the sack of the city (3) Wandering activities in Asia Minor after the fall of Troy. As someone who knows the future, Calchas was an interesting figure to introduce in a narrative. His presence allows the poet to insert a chronological digression in a linear account or to emphasize the dramatic tension in a specific scene. It explains why ancient authors assigned him more and more achievements in the course of the centuries.

3. Before the Trojan War

In the *Iliad*¹⁵ the preparations for the departure to Troy are depicted within an interesting flash back. The Achaian fleet was assembled at Aulis ready for a sacrifice. While performing the ritual, the Greeks saw a snake gulping down eight fledglings and their mother. After this, the snake reached the altar and turned to stone. This wonder needed an explanation that was given by Calchas. He interpreted it as an omen heralding a long but victorious military campaign: the number of preys corresponded to the complete years that would have to pass before the taking of the city of [Priam](#).

This story was also told in the *Kypria*¹⁶ and in many subsequent works.¹⁷ The Homeric tradition inspired the illustration of this scene in the *IliasAmbrosiana*.¹⁸ Apollodorus specifies the chronological context in which this event took place: he refers to the first expedition led by Agamemnon to Troy, two years before the abduction of Helen.¹⁹ This campaign missed its initial objectives since it only reached Mysia, where Achilles fought [Telephus](#), and then came back to Greece. There is a variant of this omen episode. Aeschylus²⁰ describes how Agamemnon saw two eagles killing a pregnant doe here. The king asked Calchas about its significance and the seer answered in the same way, identifying the hare with Troy and the two birds of prey with the Atreidai.

Continuing an ancient tradition testified in the *Kypria* fragments,²¹ tragic poets staged or referred to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia at Aulis.²² Agamemnon and the Achaean troops were delayed there by the lack of wind (or by headwind). The king asked Calchas why the fleet could not go any further. The seer then reveals that Agamemnon has angered Artemis and that the goddess demands an exceptional sacrifice: Iphigeneia, the king's daughter. The girl is slaughtered on the altar and [Artemis](#) appeased.

This well-known episode is frequently quoted and the role of Calchas (as interpreter and priest carrying out the sacrifice) often underlined in ancient texts²³ and images.²⁴ Once Artemis was calmed down, Calchas led the Achaeans to Troy.²⁵ It is unsurprising to find a seer indicating the way: like the helmsman, he is often associated with astral observation. Apollodorus²⁶ adds that Telephus in exchange for being healed indicated the route to Achilles when they met in Argos. Thus Calchas simply confirmed the itinerary given by Telephus. The same author recalls elsewhere²⁷ that many years before the expedition, the seer made a prophecy regarding the taking of Troy. The city would stay strong unless Achilles fought along with the Achaeans. Thetis, the mother of the hero, knowing the fatal destiny of her son if he went to Asia, hid him (when he was only nine years old) among the daughters of Lycomedes. Many years passed until Odysseus discovered him there.²⁸

4. During the Siege of Troy



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During the siege of Troy, Calchas is associated with various scenes. He reveals to Agamemnon – not without fear – why Apollo sent the plague decimating the Greeks and described in the first book of the Iliad.²⁹ Due to the valuable prophetic abilities of this colourful character, ancient authors tend to increase his role in their work. Calchas plays a pivotal role in introducing small narrative episodes. For example, he revealed to the Greeks that they would not take the city until Philoctetes fought along with them using the bow of [Hercules](#). That explains why an embassy led by Odysseus was sent to [Lemnos](#) to try to convince the wounded hero to join their ranks.³⁰ This was a valuable reinforcement since his arrows killed Paris, the son of Priam who instigated the war through the seduction of Helen. Soon after, Calchas suggested that his companions should capture the Trojan seer Helenos who kept the oracles that protected the city. He reveals the existence and the importance of the Palladium – a cult statue of Athena – and the statue is stolen by Odysseus and Diomedes.³¹

Finally, some authors attribute also a key role to Calchas in the planning of the Trojan horse stratagem.³² His active participation in the sacrifice of Iphigeneia may explain the fact that he was associated with other human sacrifices subsequent to the fall of Troy.³³

5. Wanderings in Asia Minor: The Founding of Cities and the Death of the Hero

The fall of Troy opens a new chapter in Calchas' life and traditions. He foresees the misfortune of the Achaeans planning to sail back to their home cities. A scholiast of the *Odyssey* 13.259 – referring to Lycophron – mentions that despite this prediction he embarked along with Sthenelos and Idomeneus. They did not reach their final destination since a violent storm threw them back to Asia, at [Colophon](#). The main tradition, however, shows Calchas refusing to sail and convincing some of his companions to stay in Asia.³⁴ It is due to this opposition that Calchas, Amphiloachus, son of Amphiaraus, and the ancestors of the Pamphylians arrived at [Clarus](#). This might reflect the oldest version of the myth as suggested by F.Prinz.³⁵ There, Calchas met the local but illustrious seer Mopsus.³⁶ As one can expect, a strong rivalry arose from this meeting and they were opposed in a prophetic duel. Legends vary but all agree that Calchas, though he was a renowned seer, lost the duel and his life.

In accordance with the main version of the contest, his tomb was shown in the neighbourhood of Clarus³⁷ or [Notion](#).³⁸ However, other places are described as the place of the duel and / or the place where the seer died, implying the existence of a tomb. As the contest scene against Mopsus, Sophocles points out Cilicia,³⁹ and [Conon](#), Lycia.⁴⁰ Another tradition locates this event in Gryneion near Myrina (to be located in Ionia or Aeolis) . Calchas is also described as a seer and a vine grower. One day a servant warned him that he should not drink the product of his vineyard. Laughing about this, he waited for harvest time and after recalling the insolent slave he got ready to drink. Just before taking the cup to his lips he died.⁴¹

Other tombs are also reported in Italy. One lies in Apulia (on Mont Drion) in close association with the grave of his companion Podaleirios.⁴² These monuments are reported as 'Heroa' by [Strabo](#), who adds that they were also oracular places. The second was shown at Siris,⁴³ a Colophonian colony, but is sometimes considered by ancient authors as a the grave of another seer killed by Hercules.⁴⁴ These tombs might have been associated with an oikist cult or oracular sanctuaries.⁴⁵



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Following some traditions, the wandering seer is reported to have travelled beyond Colophon. His mythical itinerary is symbolic and is bound to each local tradition referring to him as founder. Hesychius of Miletus⁴⁶ recalls that the city of [Chalcedon](#) (Bithynia) was indebted to this hero for its name. It has been suggested that the bearded head struck on the coins of this city in classical times was a representation of Calchas. This association is now considered doubtful.⁴⁷ In [Perge](#) (Pamphylia) he was among the nine founders who were honoured in Hadrianic times with statues near the south gate of the city.⁴⁸ They are now lost except for their bases. Finally, according to Strabo, Calchas is also reported as the founder of [Selge](#) in Pisidia.⁴⁹

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1. *Il.* 1,69.
 2. Pherec. *FGrHist* 3 F 108; Scholia in Apoll. Rhod., 1.139; Hyg. *Fab.*, 97.15, 128, 190. Stat., *Ach.* 1, 490-498 (i.e.), Quint. of Smyrna, 1, 56-71. Identification with the *Thestorides* in Ov., *Met.* 12, 19 and 27 is possible thanks to the context.
 3. Pherec. *FGrHist* 3 F 108. See also the Scholiast to Apoll. Rhod., I.139, who identifies Idmon with Thetor suggesting that the former name may be the surname of the latter.
 4. Through his 'human' father, Abas of Argos.
 5. Hom., *Il.* 1.72 and 86. Petr., *Sat.* 89 v. 1-4 and Stat. *Achil.*, 529.
 6. Hom. *Il.* 12.394
 7. a – b, probably referring to Aristarchus.
 8. Hyg. *Fab*, 190.
 9. Souda, s.v. Sibylla kolophonia
 10. Eur., *Iph. Taur.* V.531-532
 11. Hyg., *Fab.* 97, 15.
 12. Paus. 1.43.1.
 13. *ML* 2.1 (1890-1894), col. 921-922, s.v. Kalchas (H.W. Stoll – O. Immisch).
 14. Aesch. *Agam.* V.122.
 15. *Il.* 2.300-332.
 16. Proclus, *Chrest* = *EGF* (Davies), p. 32.
 17. Ov., *Met.* 12, 14-23; Cic. *De Div.*, 1.33 and 40; Macr., *Sat.*, 5.14.13; Apul., *de deo Socr.* 18, Quint. of Smyrna, 8, 474-477 and 6, 56-71.
 18. *LIMC* 5.1 (1990), p. 932, n. 5 (V. Saladino). See l. "Kalchas" (V. Saladino).



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19. Apoll., *Epit.* 3.15.
20. Aesch., *Agam.* V.104-159
21. Proclus *EGF* (Davies), p. 32.
22. Aesch. *Agam.* 104-159; Eur., *Iph. Taur.*, 16-24 ; *Iph. Aul.* 87-93; 106-107 and 528-535.
23. Prop., *El.* 4.1.109-114, Ov., *Met.*, 12.24-39, Paus. 9.19.6-7, Apoll. *Ep.* 3.21, Hyg., *Fab.* 98, Dictys, 1, 21. Short mention in Virg. *Aeneid*, 2, 116.
24. *LIMC* 5.1 (1990), p. 932-935, n. 8-20, with no certainty n. 21-28.
25. Hom., *Il.* 1.71, followed by Cic. *De Div.*, 1.40; *FGrHist* 49 F 5, Virg. *Aeneid*, 2.115-117.
26. Apoll., *Epit.* 3. 20.
27. Apoll., *Epit.* 3.174.
28. See also Stat., *Achil.*, 514-537.
29. Hom. *Il.* 68-100 and Dictys, 2.30. Representations in *LIMC* 5.1 (1990), p. 932-933, n. 6-7. Same scene but different protagonists (except for Agamemnon and Achilles) in *Myth. Vat.* 3,6-7.
30. Apoll. *Epit.* 5.8, Conon, *FGrHist* 26 F 1,34, Quint. of Smyrna, 6, 56-71 and 323-332.
31. Apoll. *Epit.* 5.8, Verg. *Aeneid*, 2, 162-182 and comment by Serv (166); Sil. It. 13, 36-44 (without Helenos).
32. Quint. of Smyrna, 12, 1-19, Virg. *Aeneid*, 2.162-182 and comments by Serv.; Petr. *Satyr.* 89, v. 1-4.
33. Polyxenia and Astyanax. See among others Serv. *Comm. On the Aeneid*, 3.321 and 489.
34. Quint. of Smyrna, 14, 361-369, Strab. 14.1.27, Theopompus *FGrHist* 115 F 351 in scholia I 2, 135.
35. Prinz, F., *Gründungsmythen und Sachenchronologie* (Munich 1979), p. 16-34.
36. Procl., *EGF*, p. 67· Strabo 14.1.27.
37. Callinus, *IEG* 2 F 8 if attribution is accepted. The fragment is considered by the editor as spurious. Pherec. *FGrHist* 3 F 142.
38. Apoll. *Epit.* 6.4.
39. *Tr. G.F* vol. 4 F 180 (Radt) where he is supposed to die. See the attempt of Strab. 14.5.16 to identify this location with the Ionian one.
40. Conon *FGrHist* 26 F 1.6.
41. The same is also told about the Samian Ancaios.
42. Strab. 6.3.9, Lyc. 1047-1055 and scholia Lyc. 978-983.
43. Lyc. 978-983.



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44. Following the scholiast of Lycophron v. 980.
45. About the oikist cult, see I. Malkin, *Religion and Colonisation in Ancient Greece* (Leyden 1987).
46. Hesychius of Miletus *FGrHist* 390 F 1.21
47. *LIMC* 5.1 (1990) p. 932, n. 3.
48. Her. 7.91 referred by Strab. 14.4.3 and followed by Eust. *Comment on Dion.*, 854 ; Quint. of Smyrna, 14, 361-369, statue base near the south gate of Perge in association with other heroes (*SEG* 34, 1305 D). Hadrian times see Weiss, P., 'Lebendiger Mythos. Gründerheroen und städtische Gründungstraditionen im Griechisch-römischen Osten', *WürzJBB* 10 (1984), p. 179-182, *LIMC* 5.1 (1990), p. 932, n. 2 (V. Saladino) and Scheer, T.S., *Mythische Vorväter Zur Beteutung griechischer Heldenmythen im Selbstverständnis kleinasiatischer Städte* (Munich 1993), spec. p. 187-202.
49. Strab. 12.7.3.

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