

Vehicle accidents are nothing new, nor is the concept of the demolition derby (as you may recall if you have watched the chariot-racing scene in the old movie "Ben Hur"). In Homer's Iliad, chariots are used merely as taxis to deliver heroes to the battlefield. However, in several other Greek stories they have a more exciting role to play.

The first myth we shall consider is that of Pelops. As a boy, Pelops had been cut into pieces by his cruel father Tantalus and served to the gods as stew. The gods reassembled him, but he was driven from his Asian homeland by the Trojans and fled to Greece. Here he decided to seek the hand of Hippodamia, the beautiful daughter of King Oenomaus of Pisa. Oenomaus challenged each prospective suitor to a chariot race to the Isthmus of Corinth. Oenomaus invariably won every race, whereupon he would kill the suitor and nail his head over the palace gate.

Pelops was helped by his patron god Poseidon, who provided him with a golden chariot pulled by flying horses. Leaving nothing to chance, Pelops also bribed Oenomaus' charioteer, Myrtilus, with a promise of half the kingdom and a free night in bed with Hippodamia. Myrtilus deliberately sabotaged Oenomaus' chariot so that, soon after the race began, a wheel fell off the axle. Oenomaus conveniently perished in this accident(?) and Pelops married Hippodamia, but now Myrtilus demanded his reward. The treacherous Pelops took him for a spin in his flying chariot and, at high altitude, shoved him out.

Myrtilus was not the only mythological character to be thrown from a flying chariot. Phaethon, son of the sun-god Helios, is like the typical teenager who asks to borrow the family car, except that in this family the car was the four-horse chariot that pulled the fireball of the sun across the sky. Phaethon was confident of his driving ability but the horses, sensing an unskilled hand on the reins, went for a joyride. One moment they flew high into the heavens, leaving the human world in frigid darkness; the next, they "buzzed" the earth, evaporating rivers and charring the inhabitants of Ethiopia, who remain dark-skinned to this day. Finally Zeus intervened, striking Phaethon dead with a thunderbolt, and his burning body fell into the river Eridanus. Years later, when the Argonauts sailed along this mythical river, they could smell the stench from Phaethon's corpse.

Our last victim is Hippolytus, son of the Athenian hero Theseus by the Amazon queen Antiope. After Antiope's death, Theseus married the Cretan princess Phaedra. Phaedra fell in love with the handsome Hippolytus, but he was a staunch follower of the virgin huntress Artemis and rejected Phaedra's amorous advances. The frustrated Phaedra hanged herself, but got even with Hippolytus by leaving a suicide note in which she accused him of raping her. When Theseus found the body and the note, he sent Hippolytus into exile and then prayed to Poseidon to punish him. Poseidon sent a bull from the sea, which spooked Hippolytus' horses; Hippolytus was thrown from his chariot and dragged to death. Only after this did Theseus learn from Artemis of Hippolytus' innocence.

Seat belts could probably have lessened the death toll from such incidents, but would have deprived us of some of the most colourful Greek myths!