

The Legend of Oedipus

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- 1 Oedipus, a legendary figure in Greek mythology, becomes king of Thebes. His story is most famously told through Sophocles's plays *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, written around 430 BCE.

Early Life

- 2 Oedipus is the son of Laius and Jocasta, rulers of Thebes. After years without children, they consult the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, who foretells that any son they conceive will kill his father and marry his mother. When Jocasta eventually gives birth, Laius tries to prevent the prophecy by binding the baby's ankles and ordering him to be abandoned in the mountains. Instead, a servant secretly gives the infant to a shepherd from Corinth. Eventually, the child is brought to King Polybus and Queen Merope, who raise him as their own and name him Oedipus, meaning "swollen foot."

The Prophecy Unfolds

- 3 As a young man, Oedipus overhears a rumor that he is not truly the son of Polybus, but when he asks his parents if this is true, they deny it. Troubled, he consults the Oracle at Delphi, who does not answer his question about his parentage but instead warns him that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, Oedipus flees Corinth to avoid harming Polybus and Merope, believing them to be his true parents.
- 4 On his journey, he encounters Laius, his birth father, at a crossroads. Neither man recognizes the other, and an argument over the right of way ends with Oedipus killing Laius, unknowingly fulfilling part of the prophecy. Continuing on, he reaches Thebes, where a Sphinx terrorizes travelers with a riddle. Oedipus answers the riddle correctly, and the Sphinx destroys itself. Grateful, the people of Thebes crown Oedipus king and offer him Jocasta's hand in marriage, not knowing she is his mother, and not knowing that Oedipus has killed Laius. Together, Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: sons Eteocles and Polynices, and daughters Antigone and Ismene.

Downfall

- 5 Years later, Jocasta learns of Oedipus's true identity and hangs herself in despair. Oedipus learns from the herdsman who was supposed to leave him to die as an infant that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta; thus, Oedipus realizes that he has killed his father and married his mother. After finding Jocasta's body, Oedipus blinds himself with her brooches. Banished from Thebes, he spends the rest of his life wandering in exile. He eventually dies in Colonus.

Legacy

- 6 Oedipus remains one of the great tragic figures of Greek mythology. His story illustrates themes about humanity's flaws and the power of fate.