



Coluthus

'The Rape of Helen'

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Ancient Classics Series

The Complete Works of

COLUTHUS

(fl. 6th century AD)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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'The Rape of Helen' by
COLUTHUS OF LYCOPOLIS



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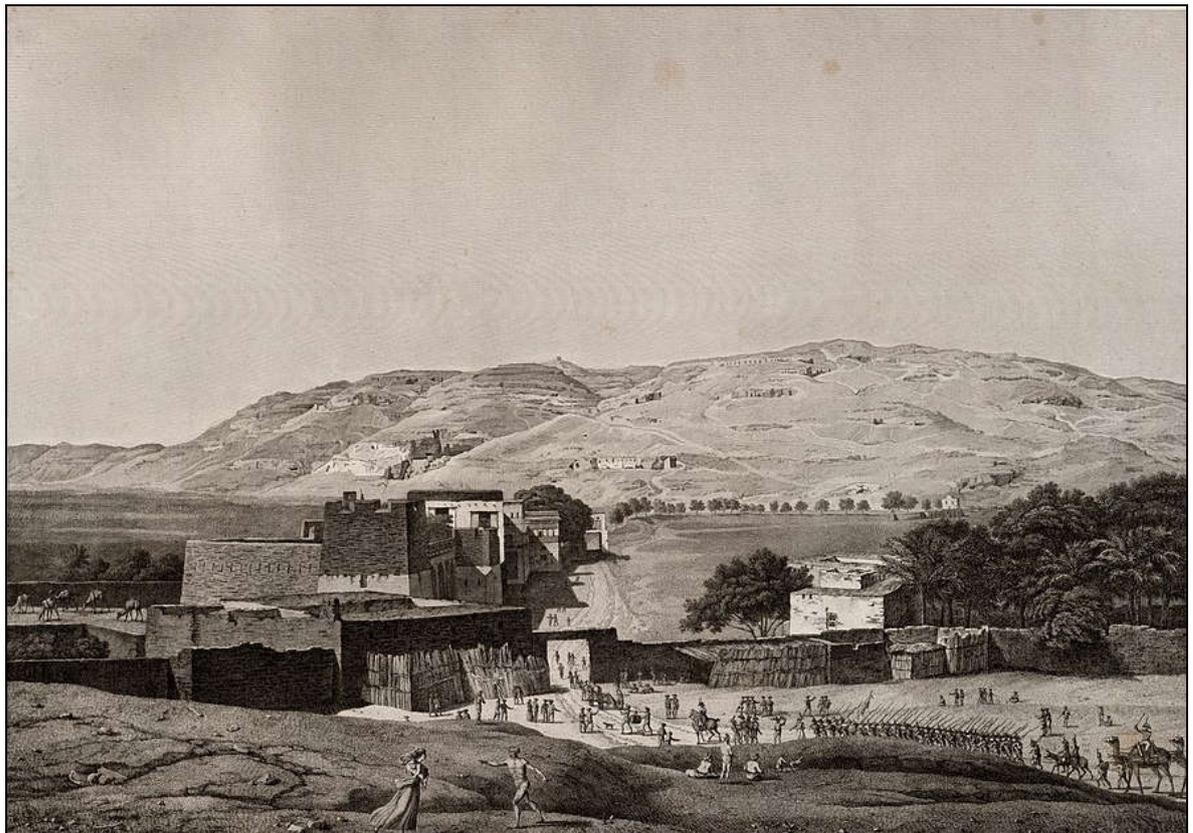
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The Translation



Asyut, Egypt, the site of ancient Lycopolis in the Egyptian Thebaid — Coluthus' assumed birthplace



Eighteenth century depiction of Lycopolis

The Rape of Helen



Translated by A. W. Mair, 1928

According to the Suda (the tenth century Byzantine encyclopaedia of the ancient world), the epic poet Coluthus flourished in the early sixth century AD, during the reign of Anastasius I (491-518). He reportedly came from Lycopolis in the Egyptian Thebaid. We know very little about his life and work, apart from that he was the author of a *Calydoniaca* in six books, providing an account of the mythological Calydonian boar hunt. He also wrote *Persica*, most likely an encomium on Anastasius composed at the end of the Persian wars, and *Encomia*, a selection of laudatory poems. Sadly, all of these works were lost in the Dark Ages. His sole extant work, *The Rape of Helen*, is surprisingly not mentioned by the Suda.

Ἄρπαγή Ἑλένης, a long poem of 392 hexameters, was discovered in Calabria by Bessarion (1403-1472), a Roman Catholic cardinal bishop and the titular Latin Patriarch of Constantinople, who was one of the illustrious Greek scholars of the great revival of letters in the fifteenth century. Bessarion contributed greatly to the extension of speculative thought in the department of theology. It was due to his important work that the *Bibliotheca* (Pseudo-Apollodorus), an important compendium of Greek Mythology, has also survived to the present.

Coluthus' poem opens with an invocation to the nymphs of the Troad, whom the poet asks for information about Paris, the originator of the Trojan conflict. This is followed by an account of how the gods attended the wedding of Thetis and Peleus and how they forgot to invite Eris, who sought retaliation by throwing a golden apple amongst the gods, triggering the unfolding events that would lead up to the abduction of Helen and ultimately the ten-year Trojan war. The narrative features the famous 'Judgment of Paris', the shepherd's subsequent visit to Sparta to meet Helen, her abduction and their doomed arrival at Troy.

Although the poem is in many ways a slavish imitation of Homer, framed in the technical rules of Nonnus, it can still be enjoyed as a short and charming miniature epic. It is also an invaluable resource for all new students of classical Greek, offering an undaunting-sized text for translation purposes.

The first printed edition was completed by Aldus Manutius in Venice, possibly in 1505. This was followed with early editions by John Daniel van Lennep (1747, the first critical edition), G.F. Schafer (1825), E. Abel (1880) and W. Weinberger (Teubner, 1896). The best manuscript of this difficult and corrupt text is the *Codex Mutinensis* (Bibliothèque nationale suppl. graec. 388) which was brought by the French in the Napoleonic wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century from North Italy.



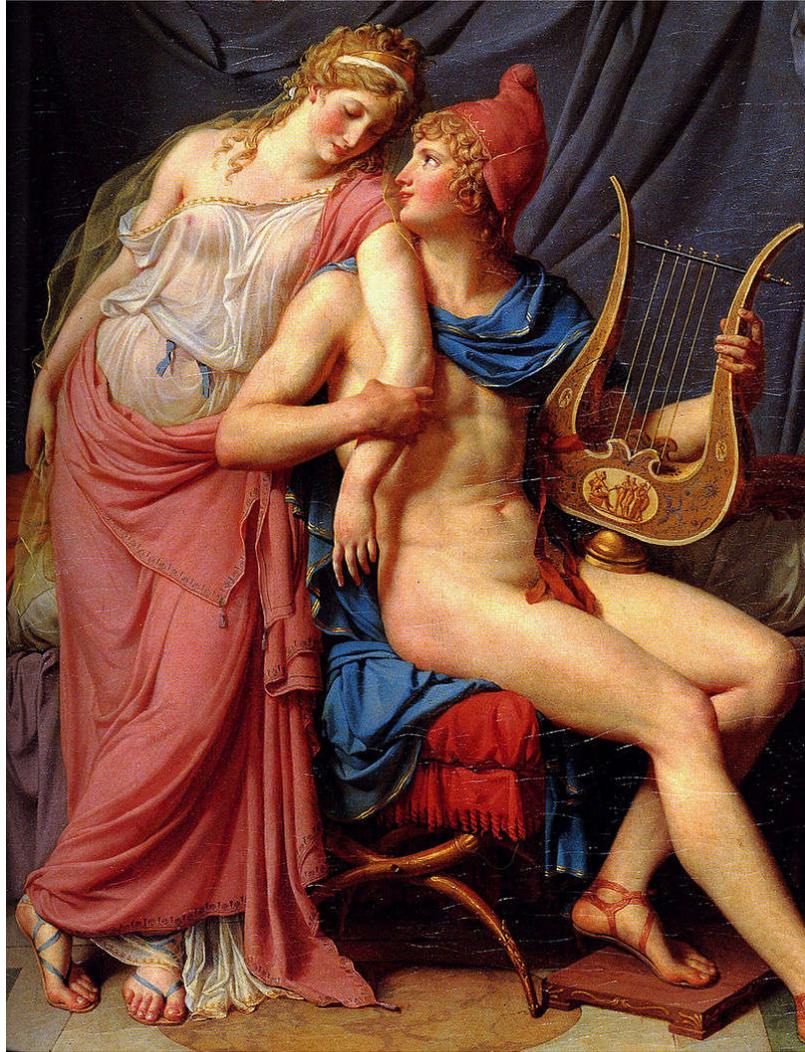
Helen and Paris as depicted on an Apulian red-figure bell-krater, c. 370 BC



Bessarion by Justus van Gent and Pedro Berruguete, 1476

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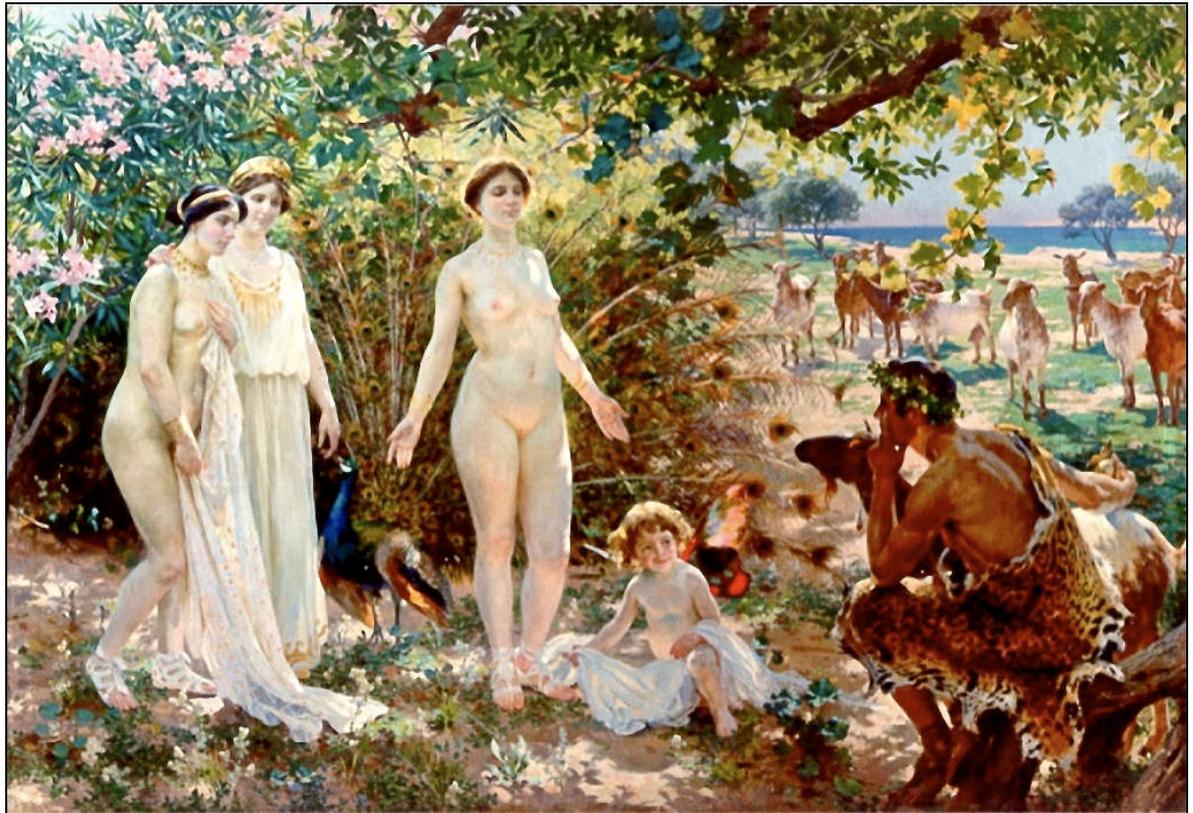
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Endnotes



'The Love of Helen and Paris' by Jacques-Louis David, 1788, Louvre, Paris



'The Judgment of Paris' by Peter Paul Rubens, National Gallery, London, c. 1636 — a key event of Coluthus' sole extant text



'The Judgment of Paris' by Enrique Simonet, c. 1904

The Rape of Helen

Ye Nymphs of Troy, children of the river Xanthus,¹ who oft-times leave on your father's sands the snoods that bind your tresses and the sacred toys of your hands, and array you for the dance on Ida,² come hither, leaving the sounding river, and declare to me the counsel of the herdsman judge:³ say whence from the hills he came, sailing the unaccustomed deep, albeit ignorant of the business of the sea; and what was the occasion of the ships that were the spring of woe, that a cowherd should stir heaven and earth together; and what was the primeval beginning of the feud, that herdsmen should deal judgement to immortals: what was the suit: whence heard he the name of the Argive nymph?⁴ For ye came yourselves and beheld, beneath the three-peaked cliff of Idaean Phalacra,⁵ Paris sitting on his shepherd seat and the queen of the Graces, even Aphrodite, glorying. So among the high-peaked hills of the Haemonians,⁶ the marriage song of Peleus was being sung while, at the bidding of Zeus, Ganymede⁷ poured the wine. And all the race of the gods hastened to do honour to the white-armed bride,⁸ own sister of Amphitrite.⁹ Zeus from Olympus and Poseidon from the sea. Out of the land of Melisseus,¹⁰ from fragrant Helicon, Apollo came leading the clear-voiced choir of the Muses. On either side, fluttering with golden locks, the unshorn cluster of his hair was buffeted by the west wind. And after him followed Hera, sister of Zeus; nor did the queen of harmony herself, even Aphrodite, loiter in coming to the groves of the Centaur.¹¹ Came also Persuasion,¹² having fashioned a bridal wreath, carrying the quiver of archer Eros. And Athena put off her mighty helmet from her brow and followed to the marriage, albeit of marriage she was untaught. Nor did Leto's daughter Artemis, sister of Apollo, disdain to come, goddess of the wilds thought she was. And iron Ares, even as, helmetless nor lifting warlike spear, he comes into the house of Hephaestus, in such wise without breastplate and without whetted sword danced smilingly. But Strife did Cheiron leave unhonoured: Cheiron did not regard her and Peleus heeded her not.

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