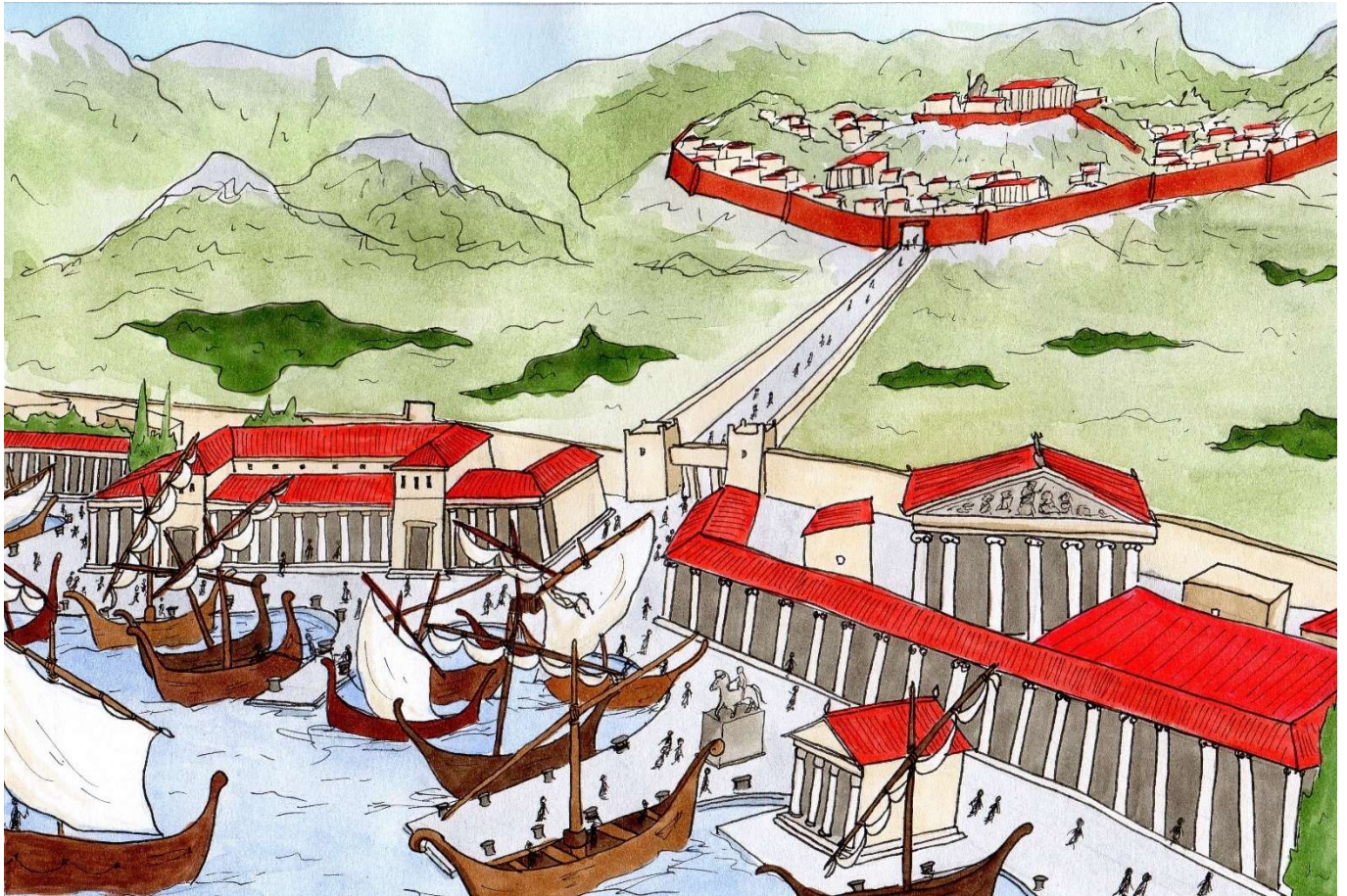


CHAPTER 2

DELPHI AT THE DOCKS

Say it like this!
Puh-ray-us

The docks at Piraeus were the centre of the world.



OK, they weren't actually the centre of the world. The Ancient Greeks thought the centre of the world was at a place high up in the mountains where they built a temple and a large stone belly button. This place was called Delphi.

But in the story-telling sense, in the sense that if there was a direction that most people at the time seemed to be facing, it was the docks at Piraeus. Every boat, every traveller, every soldier or trader came through Piraeus at some point. In its stinking storehouses, jars and cargo holds were every kind of food, precious stone, spice, metal, weapon and slave imaginable.

The docks were about six or seven miles from the city of Athens, but were considered so important that they had stretched their city walls out to envelop them, in a kind of enormous stone hug. We can see the stone walls from even up here, as well as the ancient centre of the city in the distance. But ignore the view for now.

Look closer at the docks. If we zoom in, we can take in the huge number of ships, making a strange forest of masts with white sailcloth leaves. The air smells of salt, and sweat, and worse, but there is a hint of spice on the breeze too.



But if we get even closer, we can see someone else who believes that she is in the centre of the world, if only because she is there, and she's nine, and that's the way she tends to think. The girl wears a stubborn frown, a dirty tunic and no shoes, and is resting her chin on her fist. She is the kind of girl who makes deals with demons but then forgets all about it. Strangely, her name is Delphi too.

The door to the warehouse swung open with a smack of timber.



"I don't believe it!"

Delphi leapt up. She had been sitting outside a warehouse on the dockside, watching the men unloading cargo from the ships. The man who had stormed out was an elderly sea captain, with skin like old leather and dressed in a toga that had seen better years. He appeared to be talking to the sea.

"Don't believe what?" asked Delphi.

The man looked round and peered at her from over a frayed beard. He was clearly rather baffled by something.

"Oh, hello Delphi," he said, which was strange because Delphi had no idea who he was. "Has your father... been feeling well over the last few days?"

Delphi shrugged. "I think so. Why?"

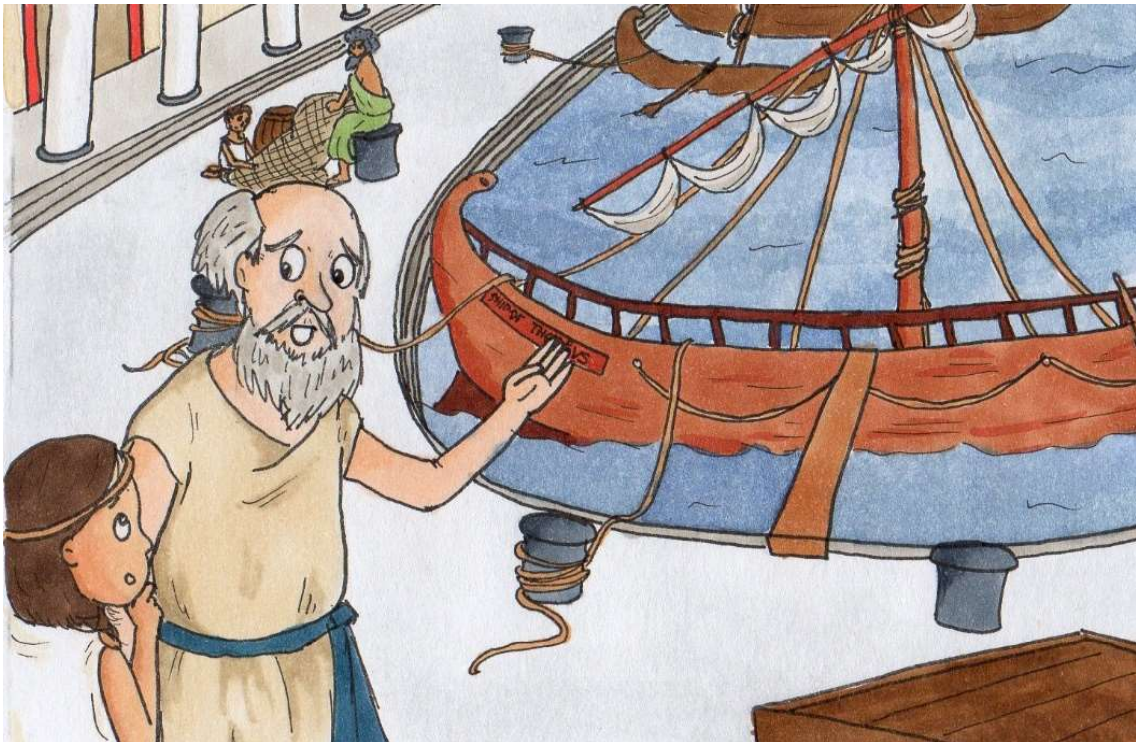
"Oh, he's just made a mistake or something, I think..." The old man wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Probably," Delphi replied. "I'm always having to fix things my dad gets wrong. Like this one time, when he was cooking, he..."

"That's very kind of you, but I'm not sure you can," he said quickly, before Delphi could get going. "You see I was supposed to collect the shipment of statues from him, but..."

"I can help!" interrupted Delphi back, who was rather better at interrupting. "What happened?"

The old sailor sighed.



"I was supposed to pick up the statues for transport aboard my Ship of Theseus," he said, nodding towards his ship at the dockside, "But your father..."

"Yes?"

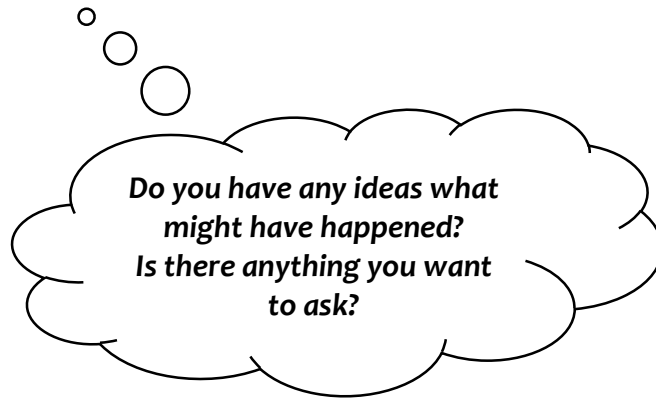
Say it like this!
Thee-see-us

"He says that he's already given the statues to another Ship of Theseus who arrived for them yesterday!" He looked as if he was about to cry.

Delphi pulled a face. It was one of her thinking faces.

"What? So your ship was here yesterday?"

The man shook his head, blinking furiously. "He says there was another Ship of Theseus. Said he recognised it anywhere and it can't have been a copy. But I was still out at sea yesterday! I ask you," he mumbled, not really asking. "How can there be another ship which is also a Ship of Theseus?"



"Well can you tell me if..." Delphi began, but the sailor had already shuffled away, muttering under his breath and staring at the floor. Delphi felt rather sorry for him.

"Don't worry!" she shouted to him. "I'll sort it out!" He didn't hear her, or perhaps just ignored her.

Delphi looked over to the ship. It didn't look like anything special, and seemed to have all the usual bits that ships have. She had never been taught to read, but she knew enough letters to guess that the wooden nameplate on the side said 'Ship of Theseus'.

There didn't seem much to argue about. Her dad must have got it wrong, and this was the real one. Names were real, weren't they? If you called it something, then that's what it was.

She considered pointing this out to her dad but suspected he wouldn't appreciate it. His last instruction to her had been to 'wait here' and 'not to argue with anybody', but Delphi had done that and was a bit bored now, and besides, maybe someone had seen a similar ship to the Ship of Theseus or something. Her father had specifically told her that there were dangerous people at the docks, and it was no place for children to wander about, so of course, she also wanted to go and see what all the fuss was about.



She started to walk along the dockside a little way. Her eyes kept getting pulled back towards the sight of the sea, however she had to keep looking where she was going as the docks were crowded with people pushing and shoving, counting and waiting, arguing and fighting.

Her path took her past a particularly shouty man, who was trying to drag an enormous sack off a ship and down a loading plank, while yelling at an empty space on the dockside. Delphi looked around to try and see who he was speaking to. She stopped walking and accidentally caught his eye, just as he turned round.



"Oh where's that little *pes* run off to now?" he shouted, in Delphi's general direction, and then swore with some interesting new swear words that Delphi hadn't heard before. "What do you want?" he added, to Delphi.

"Have you seen a..?"

"Where's that boy gone? I don't care if you need work, I don't need help from a little girl!" he shouted again and grunted as he pulled the sack onto the dockside. He was sweating.

Delphi looked around. There was still no-one there. She watched him puff and pant for a few seconds more without achieving very much.

Eventually, she asked, "Don't you?"

The man sighed heavily and dropped the sack by the loading plank, before standing up and scratching his beard. "Alright, fine! Lucky for you I need to get out before the tide! I'll give you a coin if you can shovel a heap of grain from this sack onto that sheet over there," he said pointing at a large sackcloth pinned down next to a warehouse.

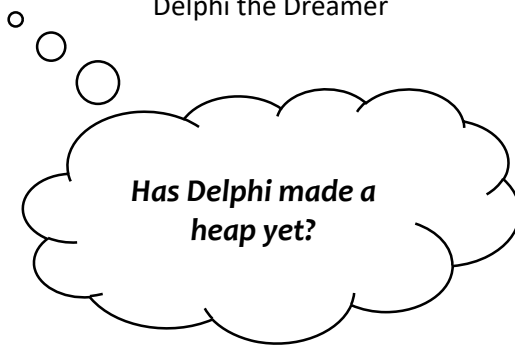
Delphi ran over and the man gave her a small shovel. It was greasy and stank of fish, but then, everything did here. Still, she didn't often get the chance to get some extra coins. "How much do you need?"

"Just a heap! Get on with it!" The man was already stomping back onto his ship, and disappeared amongst the various crates, barrels and jars that crowded its deck.



Delphi clenched her teeth and got to work. And it was work too. After a couple of minutes, she was sweating in the heat of the day, her back was aching, and she was wondering why she had ever agreed to do it. She'd managed a few spadefuls of grain and there was a small pile on the sheet, and quite a bit on the floor where she'd dropped it.

She stopped and looked at the results of her work. That was a heap, surely?



"Finished!" she declared happily, aiming her voice at the crowded deck.

The sailor's wrinkled face popped up amongst the crates, took one look at the sheet, and spat.

"Call that a heap?" he bellowed. "I make bigger heaps than that when I do a ... I mean... that's not a heap!"

Delphi looked at her heap. There was grain piled on top of other bits of grain. That was a heap, wasn't it?

"Yes, it is!"

"No, it isn't! A heap's bigger than that!"

"Oh, OK!" Delphi scooped up another shovelful of grain, then stumbled over to the pile and deposited it. She did it again just to make sure.

"Finished!"

The sailor didn't even look this time.

"You ain't finished! I told you, a heap's bigger than that!" He was getting very red now, part of Delphi's brain noticed, but most of her brain was thinking about heaps.

"It is bigger. I put more on!" Delphi pointed out. The sailor stomped back down the gangplank towards her.



"Listen girl, I know a heap when I sees one, and that ain't one!" He jabbed a finger at the offending pile.

"Oh, sorry," Delphi said. "How many grains is in a heap?"

The man moved to answer, but then hesitated, his lips flailing.

"Well, that's a heap, isn't it?" he said, pointing at the, yes, the heap of grain inside the sack. Delphi looked at it.

"So, do you want me to take grain out of this one until there isn't a heap here anymore? Then the heap will have moved, wouldn't it?" Delphi was leaning on the shovel, thinking.

"Right!" snapped the sailor.

"OK. So when is it not a heap any more then?"

"When it's..." the sailor began, but then stopped again. Delphi shovelled up another load.

"Is it still a heap now?"

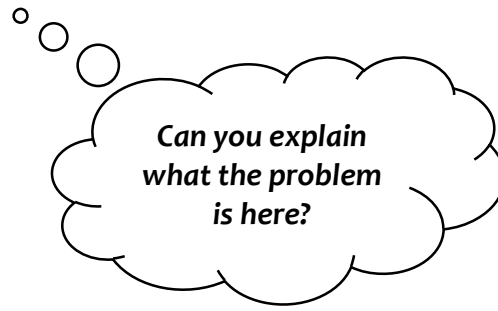
The sailor was sweating more than Delphi now. "Yes! No!"

Delphi deposited the grain on the sheet. Her heap, if that's what it was, got slightly bigger.

"Is this a heap yet?"

"No! Yes!"

Delphi stopped and looked at the baffled sailor. "I can't really help you if you don't tell me exactly what you want, can I?"



The sailor growled, and then took a coin from his pouch and threw it in her direction. She tried to catch it and missed.

"So it *was* a heap then!" Delphi declared, her voice ringing with triumph.

"No! That's so you'll clear off and leave me alone! I haven't got time for stupid questions from stupid, little..." but he was already turning his back so Delphi didn't hear how he finished the sentence, which is probably just as well.



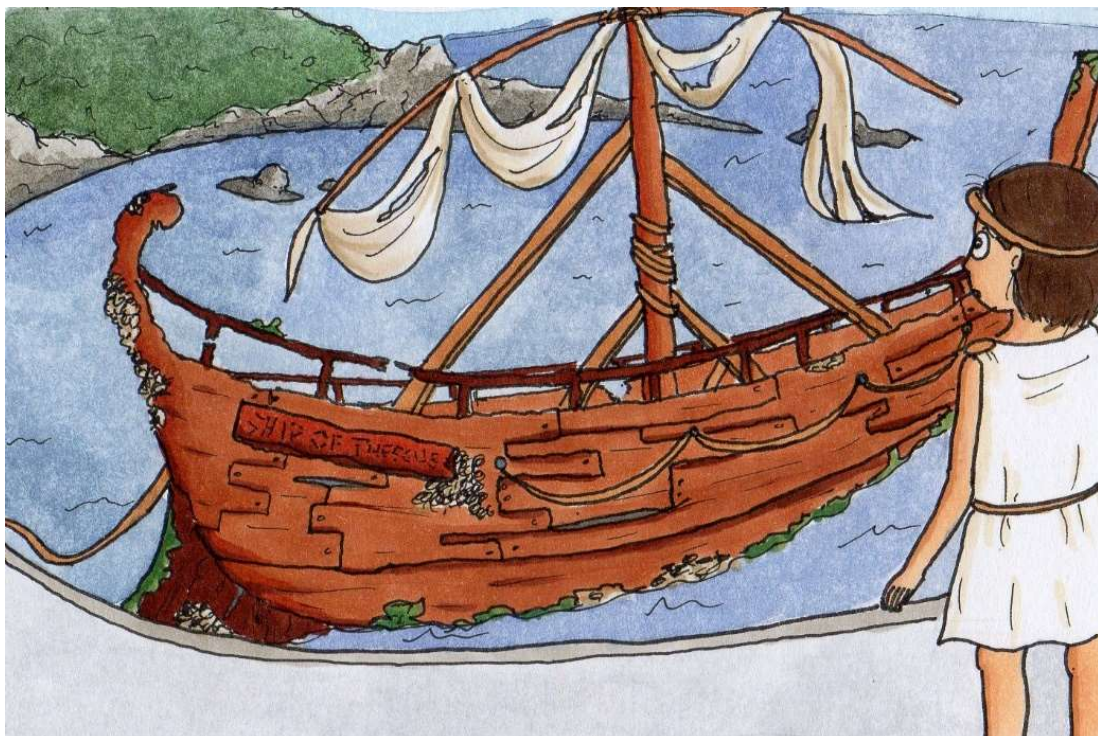
She picked up the coin from the cobbles. It was a tiny silver quarter *obol*. Not really worth getting all sweaty and being shouted at. She hadn't quite worked out where that had gone wrong. If there was a point where the grain wasn't a heap, and a point where the grain was a heap, then surely there must be a point where it changed from one to the other. It stood to reason. There must be a point where just adding one more grain would make it a heap. But when was that exactly?

On top of all of that, she had forgotten to ask the sailor if he'd seen a Ship of Theseus.



Delphi followed the path alongside the harbour, checking out all the names of the ships as she went. There was the Paralos and the Salaminia, the Asklepia and even one named the Argo, after the famous story. Each one was different in shape and size and made of different types of wood. None of them could really be confused with the Ship of Theseus.

Soon, she had almost reached the end of the docks and the forest of masts thinned out as the boats became older, smaller, and in some cases, underwater.



However, there was still one large ship she could see, and as she got closer, she realised it was a very strange one. It looked like it was made from about twenty different ships at once. Delphi didn't know the proper words to describe ships, but she could see the side bits were all worn and chipped, the big pole in the middle was held up with big sticks of wood and the pointy bits at the end were all sea-worn and covered in strange crusty, lumpy things. It looked like it had been bought second hand from the bottom of the ocean.

She tried to see the name on the side, and she soon spotted the shapes of the letters, though they were faded and worn. It said: 'Ship of Theseus'.



"What do you want?"

The voice was harsh and clipped, like a set of throwing knives. The face it belonged to didn't look much friendlier. Even his short, dark beard looked sharp. The young man had appeared behind her and he was now giving her a rather stabbing look. Delphi realised too late that she was in fact, trapped.

"Um..." she said, which probably wouldn't be enough. "Is this your ship?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "Yes. Why? Who you been speakin' to?" he answered rather too quickly. It gave Delphi an idea.

"It's just that I heard the guards have arrested another sailor who pretended to be you. I mean, pretended that his boat was your boat. Ship, I mean. The Ship of Theseus. Your ship." The man was watching her, waiting for her to make sense. "So because they've found the fake Ship of Theseus, my dad sent me to go and find the real one so he can settle the bill. Is this it?"

The man appeared to relax, which, if anything, made Delphi even more tense. He started to laugh in choking, little grunts.

"Finally admitted it then, has he? Told him that my ship was the real deal. It's his fault for throwin' it all out in the first place!"

Delphi creased her eyebrows. "What do you mean? He threw what out?" she asked.

"You see that ship, kid?" he asked, pointing at the floating bundle of planks in front of them. "Want to know how I got it?" He was clearly rather pleased with himself about it.

Delphi nodded. It seemed the best thing to do.

"Well, there's this old duffer, right? And he had a ship called the Ship of Theseus, for years and years. But of course, ships wear out, don't they? Bits need replacin' and repairin', right? So every time somethin' needed replacin', he'd leave the old bits on the beach."

Delphi tried to work out where this was going. Then it clicked.

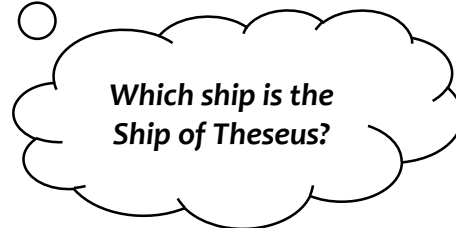
"And you... collected all the bits up?" she asked. The man grinned.

"And built meself a ship out of 'em!" he laughed, smacking his chest. "Wasn't stealin, was it? He threw it all away."

"But he's still got the Ship of Theseus..." pointed out Delphi.

"Yeah, but it's not really, is it?" snapped the man, looking annoyed. "There must be nothin' left of his ship, he's thrown it all away, bit by bit. I just took all the pieces, the mast, the nameplate, the plankin' and everythin', and put 'em back together again. So now I've got the Ship of Theseus and he's just built himself a new one, ain't he?"

Delphi opened her mouth a couple of times, but then closed it again. She had a horrible feeling that the horrible man could be right.



“Oi you!” There was a shout from behind them and Delphi saw the old sailor, who she had met outside the warehouse, running towards them. His sandals were sending little puffs of sand up into the air. He looked very red.

“There you are, you little creep! I know what you did!” he roared. Delphi took a second to realise he wasn’t talking to her.

“Nothin’ you can do about it, old man! You threw her away, and I rebuilt her, so that makes the Ship of Theseus mine!” The sailor squared up to him, looking ready for a fight.

“Oh yeah? You’re just a little thief!” replied the sailor, raising his fists.

“Yeah? Come here and say that!” He was about to throw a punch when Delphi suddenly stepped in between them.

“It’s like my hairbrush!”

Neither man was expecting her to say this. They both paused.

“I mean...” she continued. “I got a hairbrush from my mum when I was little, only then I dropped it and the handle fell off and cracked. So Dad put a new handle on it. But it was still my hairbrush, wasn’t it? And then the... what do you call ‘em... bristly bits kept falling out so we had to keep sticking new ones on. And one time we had to replace the whole back of it because it cracked when I threw it against Plato’s head by accident, sort of, but it’s still my hairbrush, isn’t it? I mean... it’s still the one I got from my mum, although now I think about it, it isn’t really.”

Delphi took a deep breath. Both men moved their lips as they tried to untangle the thread of the point from Delphi’s hairbrush.

“Exactly!” they both declared at once, and started arguing again.

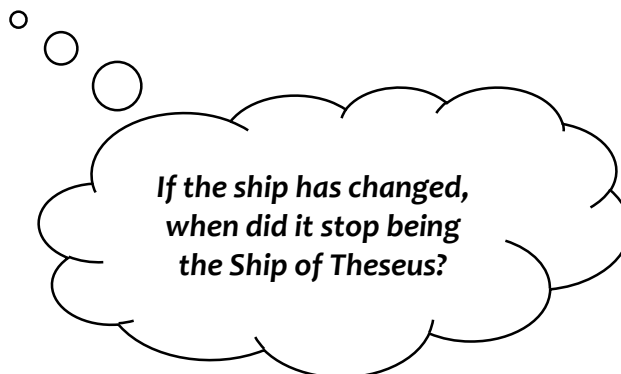
“No, listen!” Delphi shouted. “The important bit is if it did become a new hairbrush, then when did it? Was it the first time a bristle fell out? Or was it when there was nothing left of the original one? Or is it really the same hairbrush all along? Your ships are the same thing,” she added, nodding at them, wiping the sweat off the back of her neck.

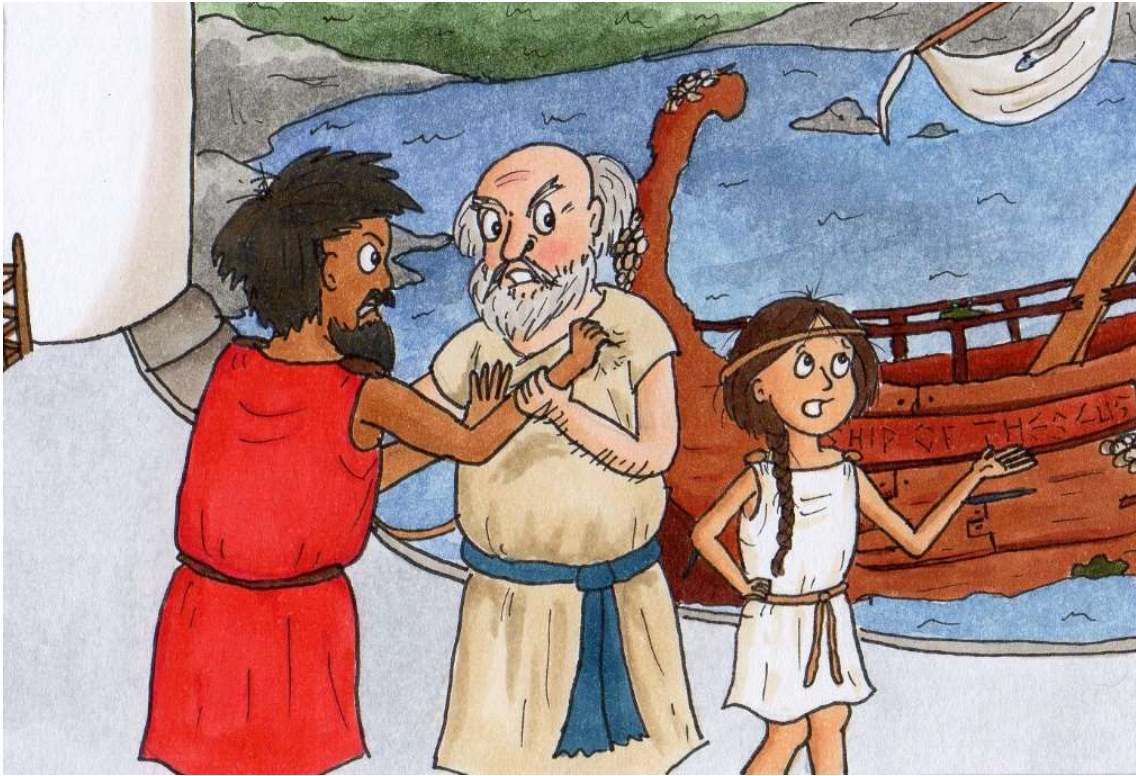
“Like a hairbrush?” asked the old sailor, his thick eyebrows furrowed.

“Yeah. Or like a pile of grain in a heap,” she added, as the thought struck her. “You’re saying that his ship stopped being the Ship of Theseus, right?” Delphi asked the younger sailor.

“Yeah, like I said, I...”

“So, you have to be able to say exactly when it changed, don’t you?”





Both men seemed to be thinking about it. Or at least, the older sailor's thick lips were moving without any sound coming out. The other sailor was just glaring at her.

"It was when he threw away the nameplate," he said. "That's when his stopped being the Ship of Theseus and when I put it on my..."

"Utter nonsense!" the other sailor spat, and pushed him back a step. "You think that was the first one? I've replaced and repainted the name on the side every year since I got that ship! Doesn't mean it's a different ship, does it?"

The young sailor gave the old man a shove back.

"Yeah, but you've used different timbers for your ship. It's not even the same colour wood as the Ship of Theseus. How can it still be the same ship if it's made of somethin' different?"

Delphi thought about this. She probably should have thought about being in the middle of a dockside brawl between two violent strangers, but she was less good at noticing things like that.

"No, I don't think that matters," she said, even as the two men started grabbing handfuls of each other's shirts. "It's impossible to use exactly the same materials anyway. It's not like all the wood comes from the same tree or anything." She paused for a second. "And my dad says only foreigners and bankers start fights in the street. I mean, there's got to be an answer, hasn't there?"

Both men stopped trying to push each other into the water and looked at her. Slowly they started to release their grip.

"Right," mumbled the old sailor.

"Yeah," agreed the young sailor.

It took Delphi a few seconds to realise they were waiting for her to say what the answer was. But she didn't know what it was. Perhaps there wasn't one. Maybe both ships really were the Ship of Theseus. Maybe neither of them were. Maybe all we're doing when we name something is pointing at something, making a noise and hoping other people agree with us.

But that felt... wrong somehow. She had spent her whole life feeling sure that a heap was a heap, a ship was a ship, and her hairbrush was her hairbrush. She hadn't realised it was all so... blurry.

Delphi sighed. "There isn't an answer, is there? It's one of those big questions. I'm always running into them. I don't think I can help you."

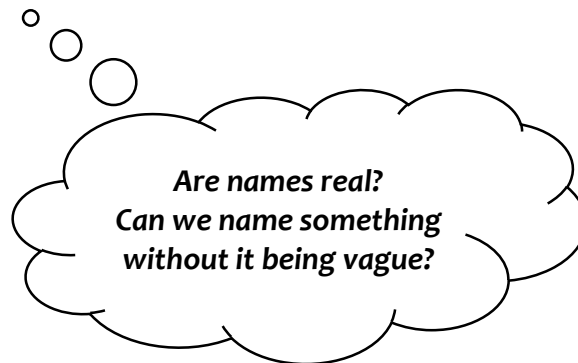
The two men stared at her for a few seconds before they realised they had stopped fighting to listen to a small girl talk about philosophy. The older man blinked first, and with a dismissive "Pah!", turned his back and marched away in the direction of the warehouses.



The younger sailor was still looking at Delphi with a slightly strange expression. He stroked his thin black beard and knelt, so he was at eye-level with her.

"So maybe names aren't real, after all?" he asked, and his eyes flashed yellow.

Delphi swallowed and turned away. For just a moment, and for a reason she couldn't quite remember, something about what he said made her feel just slightly... scared.



Delphi the Dreamer

© David Whitney 2021. Illustrations © Rosie Coulson 2021. All rights reserved.

This text is available exclusively through www.delphi-philosophy.com and should not be copied or distributed, in whole or in part, by any means.

Macedonia Font licensed under the 1001Fonts Free For Commercial Use License (FFC).

The example of the Ship of Theseus in this story is a widely discussed problem from Ancient Greece, and appears in the works of Heraclitus, Plato's Parmenides, Plutarch's Theseus, as well as in later authors such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The problem with the heap of grain in this chapter is another ancient problem called the Sorites paradox, which is often originally credited to the Megarian philosopher Eubulides in the 4th century BC.

This enquiry began life as a lesson delivered from The If Machine by Peter Worley (Bloomsbury, 2011) – a wonderful resource and the book which began all of this.

Details of life in ancient Athens are drawn from several sources, most notably The World of Athens (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Also invaluable was The Hemlock Cup by Bettany Hughes (Vintage, 2011). Delphi the Dreamer is fictional but has been written to at least be consistent with historical events and practices. Any errors in that regard are my own.