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Klaus Junker

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Interpreting the Images of Greek Myths

From the age of Homer until late antiquity the culture of ancient Greece and Rome was permeated by images of Greek myths. Gods and heroes were represented as statues, on vase and wall paintings, on temples, on sarcophagi, as well as in other media. This book provides a concise introduction to the interpretation of the images of Greek myths. Its main aim is to make the pictorial versions of the myths comprehensible on their own terms. Ancient artists were well aware of the potential – but also the limitations – of these ‘silent’ images and of the strategies that made them ‘speak’ to the audience/viewer. The book explains the theoretical and methodological issues at stake and discusses in detail a number of case studies. It will be useful and stimulating for all undergraduate and graduate students taking courses in classical mythology and ancient art.

KLAUS JUNKER is Professor of Classical Archaeology at Mainz University. He has published extensively on ancient Greek sculpture, architecture and mythological imagery, as well as on the history of Classical archaeology.

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KLAUS JUNKER

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and

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Preface

The stories from Greek mythology offer the most popular route of access to the world of Classical antiquity. Great events of myth such as the Trojan War and outstanding figures like Heracles, Oedipus, Medea or the great Olympian Gods have a firm place in the cultural consciousness of the present day. At the same time, the Greek myths play a prominent role in the study of the Classical world. That such a wide range of disciplines – Classical philology, ancient history, Classical archaeology, and philosophy – draw on these myths for their research has much to do with the fact that, in antiquity, myths and their content were present in so many facets of human existence. They were narrated in various literary genres, performed for the general public in festive productions, given pictorial form for centuries on end. In practically every field of life, men and women were continually confronted by the stories of the gods and heroes.

Here we are already addressing a central issue of any engagement with ancient myth: the relation between language and image. Through their process of origin, Greek myths, no less than German saga and fairytales, are a matter of language. They were first shaped as oral narratives, passed on from one generation to the next and, at the same time, subject to continuous change. In the case of Greek culture, however, the process of putting the stories into written form began very early on. Thus a fleeting form of oral presentation was replaced by a written text, something that could be communicated, in virtually unchanged form, across great distances of space and time. What the bards of Archaic Greece sang about the great Achilles to their audiences, we can reconstruct word for word, more than two and a half millennia later.

Having collected together the literary records of the Greek myths, the text-based disciplines, above all Classical philology, study them as testimony for the development of ancient poetry and drama, the history of ideas, early religion or the analysis of historical processes. For a long time and for a simple reason, the pictorial versions of mythological subjects found little place in this research. It is an old and basic principle that thought formation lies primarily or exclusively in language. Unquestioned acceptance of this means accepting that only the verbal form provides access to the ideas

contained within the myths; pictorial versions are degraded to a secondary role as the result of simple transference from one medium to another. A depiction on a temple or a vase is thus relegated to the status of a mere visual illustration of a literary account of a myth.

A consequence of this ‘philological’ study of ancient mythology is that, in essence, pictorial representations are only used when an image can help ‘complete’ a literary account that is preserved solely in fragmentary form. Interestingly, the approach also characterises the early archaeological study of myths. The founder of this school, Carl Robert, was the first to systematically investigate the peculiarities of the pictorial medium in his two great works, *Bild und Lied. Archäologische Beiträge zur Geschichte der griechischen Heldensage* (Berlin 1881) and *Archäologische Hermeneutik* (Berlin 1919), yet he did not address the question of the degree to which the visual representations of Greek myths convey a meaning and significance of their own, one that is distinct from the literary versions.

Since then, however, there has been a fundamental change of perspective. In recent research on the forms and effects of communication, it is now commonly accepted that in addition to verbally conducted discourse, there is also a ‘discourse of images’, meaning that in every field of human activity – cultural, political or economic – different types of expression and message are closely bound to a complex use of visual media. This is as true for antiquity as it is today. The best example is Greek drama. One may analyse a tragedy by Sophocles or Euripides solely on the basis of the preserved text. The audience at a production in Classical Athens, however, did not engage just with the pure text and its intellectual possibilities; but rather subjected themselves to a whole range of additional acoustic and visual effects, with whose help the (almost exclusively mythological) subject-matter was performed.

The study of the ancient imagery of Greek myths has also benefited from the general tendency towards a holistic approach to ancient culture. That the scholarly study of images of Greek myths is, however, still striving to reach a consensus on basic methodological principles is evident from three recent publications. Susan Woodford’s *Images of Myths in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge 2003) is an elementary account of the various manifestations of Greek mythological imagery which demonstrates that the task Carl Robert set himself is as topical as ever. *The Parallel Worlds of Classical Art and Text* by Jocelyn Penny Small (Cambridge 2003) essentially analyses the ‘divergences’ between the literary and visual representations of a myth, and concludes that authors and artists worked in largely separate worlds. Luca Giuliani, by contrast, pursues a constructive concept in his *Bild und*

Mythos. Geschichte der Bilderzählung in der griechischen Kunst (Munich 2003). Taking as his point of departure the fact that a mythological image and a verbally constructed narrative *must* differ from each other because language is subject to formative laws different from those of a visual image, Giuliani demonstrates, in a broadly drawn historical outline, what different paths artists followed in order to create a pictorial form from a verbal narrative.

This present introductory text is the first to focus solely on the contextual meaning of images of Greek myths. It thus complements not only the publications just cited, but also the various works of reference which categorise myths in chronological or cyclic order so as to provide an overview of the surviving representations in the various types of monuments (see the Guide to further reading). Like any introduction to a broad field of research in the humanities, this book cannot claim to deal exhaustively with every aspect of its subject. The main concern is to set out the basic means of interpretation, and at the same time to describe actual research practices. The text is structured so that more strictly theoretical passages alternate with case studies, the choice of which reflect both personal preferences and the focus of my own research, hopefully to the reader's benefit. It seemed to me necessary to interpret the succinct title *Interpreting the Images of Greek Myths* in the broader sense of 'ancient images of Greek myths'. Not only is the tendency to make a strict distinction between Greek and Roman art somewhat artificial, but in this special instance there is the added factor that Roman sarcophagi testify to a vigorous engagement with the subject-matter of Greek myth, and that research into this particular group of monuments continually provides substantial methodological impulses that further our understanding of earlier images of Greek myth.

The book is divided into six chapters, which to a certain extent build upon each other and are also linked by cross-references; each can, however, also be read on its own. The case study presented in the first chapter is designed to highlight the potential, but also the problems, of interpreting mythological images. Next, defining 'myth' and 'mythological image' involves raising the fundamental question of how exactly mythical narratives were given visual form in Classical antiquity. The third chapter changes perspective by giving a brief historical outline of the shaping of myths in language and in image, while the fourth is devoted to the most important types of monument and their historical setting. The 'methodology' chapter is divided into a shorter first part, which explains the hermeneutic theory of images, and a longer second part which uses a complex case study to demonstrate its application. The sixth and final chapter looks at the possible results of

archaeological interpretation of myths, and suggests which aspects of content and intention were communicated by such images to contemporary viewers.

During the preparation of this book I have enjoyed valuable support on many sides. A sabbatical from my teaching position at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz made concentrated work on the manuscript possible. Frank Bernstein, Fiona Healy, Brigitte Lowis and Kirsten Simon read part or all of the text and gave critical and useful comments. I am grateful to the staff of the relevant museums for providing photographic material, and also to Angelika Schurzig, photographer at the Institute for Classical Archaeology in Mainz. I am indebted to Annemarie Künzl-Snodgrass and Anthony Snodgrass, who undertook the difficult task of translating my text into English, and to Oliver Schütze in Stuttgart and Michael Sharp in Cambridge for their editorial work. My warmest thanks to all those named.