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The Nature and Origins of Greek Myth

When asked what exactly is time, St. Augustine wrote, "I know very well what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked and try to explain, I am baffled."[1] Time, like myth, is elusive and nebulous, which is what prompted K. K. Ruthven in citing St. Augustine to compare the challenges and difficulties in defining either one. For it is the actual question that presents the dilemma and caused the articulate author's hesitation regarding time, just as we still pause when devising a definition of myth. As even today we know more about particular myths, their derivatives and visual compositions, and less of myth as a subject. For myth is a mammoth and amorphous topic only deemed more challenging through the study of it. Despite its seeming simplicity and the "primitive" cultures that produced it in the remote past, myth entices yet defies sophisticated attempts to consign it to neat explicatory envelopes for comprehension in the modern world. This is in part because myth is not monogenetic but multifactorial. Furthermore, its elusive quality is not only part of its mystique but also essential to its applicability in encompassing the miscellaneous and metamorphic aspects of the human experience. It is precisely for these innate qualities of myth that visual expressions of it have such enduring elasticity, and thus our understanding of its diversified formulae and their varied applications is essential to our comprehension of the nature of myth in art.

Modern Minds on Ancient Myth

Since the eighteenth century, scholars have proposed many varied definitions for myth. It has been as simplistically and eloquently defined as "the result of the working of naïve imagination upon the facts of experience"[2] and as "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary life."[3] A more exacting characterization defines a myth as a "traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon."[4] More philosophically, myths might be considered expressions of indiscernible realities in terms of perceptible phenomena. Another definition emphasizes who or what mythic content is and, equally important, what it is not: "a story which is manifestly about one or more extraordinary persons or preternatural psychic beings . . . or about a group or society as a unit, earnestly and wholly engaged in a series of important, critical endeavors . . . not about trivial people involved in inconsequential interactions."[5] Some feel the need to divide myth into categories involving divine characters, heroic legends, and folktales about commoners,[6] while others see its external disparities as dressing for its inner simplicity, one party stating that "a Greek myth is a set of multiforms or variants of the same story."[7] Taking shelter in simplicity, one might agree that at the bottom line, "myths are traditional tales."[8] But the real strength of myths, their unwavering contribution to humanity, extends beyond the simplicity of being traditional tales to include their ability to express something of universal significance regarding human experience.

However we define myth, in most societies, and certainly in ancient Greek culture, myth harbors an atypical approach by modern standards to both fact and fiction, each having a portion of the other in myth. The validity of myth encompasses something beyond the real and tangible, so that one can say, "myth has a truth of its own that transcends mere fact."[9] Myth is unrestricted in numerous aspects. It moves readily between what is ostensibly real and what seems illogical; demarcations between reality and symbol are nebulous. Often like a dream, myth can contain incongruities in time and space. But these are not deterrents in their communication, since myths "have a power which transcends their inaccuracy, [and] even depends on it."[10] Myth then is a societal language; it incorporates and transmits cultural heritage. It guides, ratifies, admonishes, edifies, and entertains the people of which it is an integral part.

Greek religion, like Greek myth, harbored diverse and conflicting narratives. Although Greek myth overlaps in numerous instances with Greek religion when focused on the gods, and although both were intricately linked with the structure of Greek society, one cannot be simply equated with the other.[11] Rituals compose a large portion of religious practice and are repetitive actions lacking pragmatic value. They are designed to demonstrate, initiate, or instruct. Rituals are much older than myths, since animals performed the former while the latter evolved with humans. Although myths are often verbalizations or demonstrations of human activity, they need not always be attached to rituals. Many myths survived the affiliation long after the rituals were defunct in antiquity. In fact, the sphere of myth is far greater than that of ritual since the former has the capacity to cast as real what the latter must maintain as symbolic. Even though some myths seem to exhibit affiliations with rituals, an aspect of their commonalities in a societal endeavor to edify and explain, the diversity of myths would eventually far outnumber an affiliated ritual. More often these myths appear to reiterate or promote ritual as opposed to being derived from it. Such is likely the case with Apollo slaying Python at Delphi, a narrative that perhaps originally recounted the symbolic succession of one religion over another at this locale.[12] Furthermore, not all myths are affiliated with spiritual beliefs and therefore need not have roots in religion. They often are more closely aligned with social and political aspects of a culture. Penelope relying on the ruse of weaving and then unweaving a shroud to forestall the suitors at her door, or Penthesilea enamored of Achilles, or Semele dying in giving birth to Dionysus, or Europa whisked away from her homeland on the wide back of a great bull across the sea lack any pretensions to religious attitudes. Such stories are more likely the reflections of the trials of ancient womanhood.

Greek myths contain profound truths, universal truths, despite their implausibility at face value. And yet, despite their inclusive nature, we are aware of Greek myths only through glimpses and fragments. Before the work of the Hellenistic mythographers, there were no earnest attempts to produce a definitive version of Greek myth. And in spite of the laudable endeavors by these later poets, the only version that survives substantially intact and offers the broadest assemblage of myths (although by no means incorporating all known previous accounts) is the *Bibliotheca* and its abridgement, the *Epitome*, attributed to Apollodorus of Athens but probably of the first century. Yet, the only myth that has survived into modern times in a complete form is the *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius (third century BCE).

Therefore, myths in Greek literature, as well as in Greek art, exist largely piecemeal, mere allusions to an inclusive account. They do not strive for completeness, or to reveal derivatives or even to denote logical order. This is perhaps due in part to the innate character of myth in Greek culture – so endemic to the fiber of Greek thought and learning that there was no need or impulse to recount a myth in a comprehensive and expository form. A distinct measure of its magical spell was leaving aspects of its narrative to the fertile minds of its audience. But this fragmented impression of Greek myths is due also to another important fact: they were constantly evolving, undergoing unceasing metamorphoses in the minds and hands of poets, playwrights, and painters. Greek myth is unquestionably an evolutionary subject, and that contributes to its universal significance. Varied applications of Greek myth emerged with the versions of the myths themselves as author and artist, priest and politician, singer and reciter molded myths to fit their meaning, commentary, or narrative of the time. Myths evolved to fit the needed explanatory applications of the cultural climate of the period. With this in mind, we may not take too strong umbrage at one definition that states that a myth includes all of its versions, all of its deviations, and all of its varied interpretations over time.[13]

Taken at face value, myths are often delightful narratives of entertaining stories. They can captivate us with adventure, danger, violence, magic, exotic atmospheres, and erotic activities. But they are also much more than this, for embedded in their fabric are the rudiments of universal experiences and conceptions, aspirations and anxieties that reflect the myriad and kaleidoscopic impressions of human existence. Thus, we must explore the realm of iconology in regard to Greek myth, specifically that which gives meaning to its application in art. Identifying the various applications of myth over time in regard to their potential meaning and commentary, specifically in the discipline of visual expression, is a good portion of the purpose of this book. In the course of time, various different theories have been applied by divergent schools of thought, some of which have been abandoned by modern scholars of myth while others remain in vogue. There are many approaches, some with derivatives, such as etiological, allegorical, anthropological, etymological, euhemeristic (rationalizing), psychoanalytical, and structural, to list the more prominent theories. As the specific origins, aspects, and popularity of the various interpretive theories of myth have been well documented elsewhere, there is no need to reiterate them here in any detail.[14] References to these interpretive applications of myth and their respective iconologies will be noted when appropriate in the process

of analyzing specific artworks in the course of tracing Greek myths through their pictorial manifestations over the history of Western art. However, it must be stated at the outset, as a reiteration of Kirk and Grant, that myth cannot be encapsulated in any single theory or related set of theories, as its form far exceeds the limitations in such an approach.[15] As stated previously, the nature of myth is multifunctional, so that any particular myth may reveal several diverse interpretative aspects, depending on the perspectives of those applying it as well as those scrutinizing it.

Finally, difficult as it is to provide working definitions agreeable to all interested parties, some clarity for this work is needed here in regard to the application of the notoriously ambiguous terms *myth*, *myths*, *a/the myth*, *mythology*, *mythological*, *mythic*, and *mythical*.[16] In using the word *myth*, I refer to the concept of traditional fictional narratives or the whole embodiment of them. *A/the myth* refers to a specific traditional fictional narrative, such as that of Perseus rescuing Andromeda, and/or the various versions of it. The word *myths* can simply be a synonym for *myth* or it can reference more than one specific myth, as in the "myths of Circe and Calypso." Far easier to define than *myth* is the term *mythology*, although it has often been misused and substituted for its more elusive derivation, myth. In ancient Greek parlance *mythologos* was a "teller of tales," yet the word itself comprises two words, *mythos* and *logos*, which for the later Greeks were charged with a polarity of meanings, with *logos* signifying something empirical, leaving *mythos* to denote something fabricated. Today, the term *mythology* is more likely to be considered a body of myths, predominantly literary and generally belonging to a people or culture, and/or the study of myth, generally by people of a much later age. The terms *mythological*, *mythic*, and *mythical* are all modifiers signifying something or someone derived from myth. They are used here synonymously, although *mythological* is often used elsewhere to reference some aspect of mythology. It is important, however, to distinguish between a myth and a mythical character. The latter, for instance Zeus, is only animated by a traditional fictional narrative, a myth. Outside of a myth such figures are merely symbolic.

Roots and Near Eastern Affinities of Greek Myth

The origins of Greek myth lie substantially in the pre-Homeric past. The names of gods (e.g., Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Dionysus, Artemis, and perhaps Hermes and Ares) appear on Linear B tablets from the Mycenaean Bronze Age, but with little if any context and certainly no clear understanding of their powers, personalities, or spheres of perceived influence.[17] The epic

sagas attributed to Homer are clearly part of an evolutionary process stretching back many centuries, and one that surely involved various and diverse versions of which those associated with Homer are only a part. Although we are complacent in our assumption that myths played a role in Greek culture of the Bronze Age, contemporary visual narratives illustrating those tales appear to be lacking. This disconcerting understanding, compounded by the absence of a literary record from that age, would seem to indicate that myth was restricted to verbal expression in Greek prehistory, perhaps an important aspect of social communication as part of an oral tradition but not necessarily a stimulating specter for artistic representation. Furthermore, although certain characteristics and narratives of Greek mythical personages and other mythic entities must have evolved during pre-Homeric times, the process did not stop with the historical Greeks, from Homer onward, who continued to expound on them and massage them at will. With the emergence of the Homeric Age at the end of the Greek Dark Ages comes the manifestation of narrative in the Greek visual arts, and with it the beginning of mythical subjects portrayed visually, as artists, following in the footsteps of poets, commenced what would become the time-honored process of manipulating their imagery in the evolving history of mythic display.

Whereas numerous aspects of Greek myth are indigenous to the Greek peoples, there are also abundant indicators that aspects of Greek myth were influenced by other, in many cases older, civilizations to the east. The evidence for external influence from this quarter in shaping Greek culture is overwhelming and not simply restricted to verbal and visual narratives of a mythic nature. Technologies, science and mathematics, script and alphabet, music, dance, and sport from Eastern cultures in Anatolia, Asia, and Egypt all impacted Greek civilization, as did various oral and literary forms (e.g., words, incantations, treaties, rituals, oaths, songs, and other formulae).[18]

Both the geography and timing were right for such influences to be absorbed by the Greek people into their evolving culture. During the zenith of the Late Bronze Age (c. fourteenth–thirteenth centuries BCE) the Mycenaean Greeks were expanding their trade connections eastward to Egypt and the Levant. The routes were predominately seaborne, with Cyprus serving as a major focal point. Here and in Cilicia in southeast Anatolia and along the neighboring Levantine coast, particularly at Ugarit in northern Syria, peoples from diverse cultures in Greece, Anatolia, Asia, and Egypt converged and exchanged commodities and ideas. In taking control of Crete in the late fifteenth century BCE, the Mycenaeans gained additional avenues of contact with the eastern Mediterranean. During the ninth through seventh

centuries BCE, a resurgence of overseas trade and colonization brought Greeks into contact with their contemporaries from these same eastern regions. Again, Cyprus and the Levant, particularly Al Mina in Syria, were important places for contact, but another was the Nile delta. In the West, Phoenician traders encountered Greek colonists on Sicily, on Sardinia, and at the Euboean island colony of Ischia off the Bay of Naples. Homer informs us of Phoenicians infiltrating Greek waters and specifies that foreign healers, soothsayers, skilled craftsmen, and songsters were those welcomed at Greek towns and villages (*Od.* 17.382–386). Language would not be a perpetual barrier to communication since Herodotus (1.86.4; 2.154.2; 3.19.1; 4.140.3) recounts several instances when translators were called into play. The results of these numerous and diverse contacts over extended periods paved the way for established traditional narratives and iconographies to be imparted from Eastern peoples to the Greeks.

One important comparison between Greek and Near Eastern versions of very old accounts is exemplified in the cosmic genealogies of the Succession Myth. According to Hesiod (*Theog*. 116–210), Gaia (Earth) joined with her brother and equal, Uranus (Sky), to produce the Titans, and among them was the daring and disgruntled Cronus, most likely a harvest entity. Gaia, oppressed by Uranus, who forcefully contained her children within her, solicited the aid of Cronus, who was given a sickle to castrate his father in a stealthful attack. The severed members splashed into the sea, creating Aphrodite, goddess of love, from the froth. Picking up Hesiod's thread (*Theog*. 453–506) after several other births, Cronus, wishing to avoid his father's fate, swallowed each of his offspring born by his sister, Rhea, until in desperation she took the advice of her parents to substitute a stone in a swaddling cloth for her last child, Zeus. Gaia hid Zeus away on Crete to grow strong, after which he forced his father to disgorge his siblings. They emerged in the reverse order of their ingestion following the stone, representing Zeus, thereby making the last born first and fit to rule over the others. There follows (*Theog*. 507–880) a would-be counterrebellion, the *Titanomachy* against the gods, which is defeated under Zeus's leadership, and another challenge from the monstrous Typhon, dispatched by Zeus with his newfound weapons, the thunderbolts. In following through these three generations to the final state of divine rule by victorious Zeus, there are many affinities with a number of Near Eastern traditional poems. Yet, before pursuing these, a quick examination of Cronus's lethal weapon is fitting here. The sickle is an appropriate attribute for Cronus as a harvest god, but the serrated, curved blade was a long-standing attribute of Near Eastern divinities and kings as a symbol of

Figure 1. Hittite Gods, *Hittite rock relief, c. 1400 BCE. Yasilikaya, Turkey. Photo Karl Kilinski.*

power and destruction (Figure 1).[19] Greek artists would place such a weapon in the hands of Heracles against the Hydra, of Perseus in decapitating Medusa (Figure 2), and of Thracian women dispatching Orpheus. The Greek word *harpē* in the ancient literature describing the sickle-shaped knife seems to be related to words for the same object in Near Eastern languages.[20]

In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, another Succession Myth occurs. The narrative commences with the primordial pair of Apsu (fresh water) and Tiamat (sea), a couple that has fewer affinities with Hesiod's Sky and Earth than with Homer's version (*Il.* 14.201), which names Oceanus (ocean) and Tethys (mother of rivers) as the primal pair. A run of other divinities in the *Enuma Elish* leads to Anu, the sky god and father of Ea (most clever), whose son is Marduk. If we equate Uranus with Apsu, who likewise suppresses his offspring despite his spouse's opposition, then emboldened and sly Cronus is matched with Ea, who overpowers Apsu, emasculating him by usurping his powerful attributes. When Tiamat plots against Ea and the other gods, Ea implores his son, Marduk, to meet the challenge, which he does in exchange for supreme power, defeating Tiamat with his weapons of wind and lightning. Marduk is then to be compared with Zeus as the ultimate savior of the gods and their reign, who defeats a formidable monster with his sky-god weapons in the ultimate confrontation.[21]

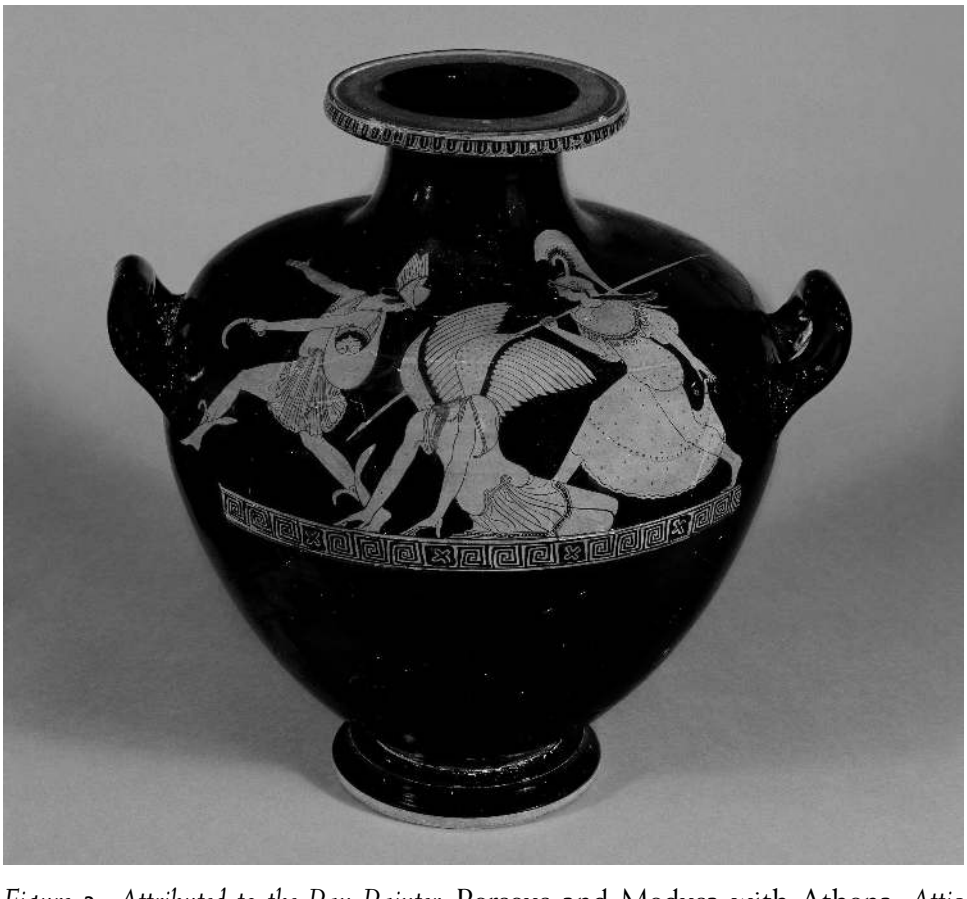

Figure 2. Attributed to the Pan Painter, Perseus and Medusa with Athena, *Attic red-figure kalpis, c. 470 BCE. London, British Museum E 181. Photo © Trustees of the British Musemum.*

From Anatolia, and five centuries before Hesiod, we can also compare the Hurrian-Hittite epic, the *Song of Kumarbi*, which narrates a similar sequence of violent successions from Anu to Kumarbi to Tessub. A predecessor to Anu, Alalu, has no analogous character in Hesiod's account, but the other three follow the line of succession corresponding respectively with Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus. Anu, the sky god, was absorbed into the Hurrian pantheon from Mesopotamia and matches the role of Uranus. Kumarbi was a god of the grain and corresponds to Cronus's position as a harvest divinity. Tessub, like Zeus, was a weather divinity. Whereas Cronus used the sickle to castrate Uranus, Kumarbi bites off the sexual members of Anu as he flees to heaven, and in doing so Kumarbi swallows the unborn gods, including Tessub, who now reside captive in him. Clarity is lacking concerning how at least some of the gods escaped from Kumarbi, perhaps through his skull (cf. Athena "born" from Zeus), but he attempts to swallow at least one but is

given a block of basalt instead. This he eventually disgorges and it, like the stone representing Zeus spewed forth by Cronus and deposited at Delphi, is set up as a cult item.[22]

Various tales about individual Greek divinities also have affinities with narratives focused on Near Eastern gods. One reason for this connection is that in a number of instances Greek divinities have closely allied counterparts in the East. For example, we can compare the love goddess, Aphrodite, who by one account sprang from the severed genitals of Uranus (Heaven), hence her epithet "Aphrodite Urania" (heavenly Aphrodite), with Near Eastern love goddesses such as the Phoenician Astarte, known as the "Queen of Heaven," and Babylonia Ishtar, daughter of Anu (Heaven). However, there are also similarities in narratives between Greek and Eastern divinities that go beyond mere epithets, derivations, and individual characteristics. A good example is that of the Greek sun god Helios, who journeyed across the heavens by day in his horse-drawn chariot (Figure 3) but sailed in his bowl from west to east each night on the surface of Oceanus (ocean), which encircled the earth. This scenario is likely a reflection of that for the Egyptian sun god Re (Figure 4) sailing across the heavens by day in his barque and back through the body of the sky goddess Nut that stretched across the heavens, to be reborn in the East each dawn. While Re was considered the Eye of Heaven in Egyptian myth, Helios was known as the all-seeing Eye of Heaven (*Il.* 3.277) in Greek mythology, as the sun observes all mortal and immortal activity upon the face of the earth.

In following the line of successive entities we turn again to Hesiod (*Op.* 106–201) for the Myth of Declining Ages, which carries us into the realm of mortals. The ages are better considered races and are represented by the four metals – gold, silver, bronze, and iron – with one other race set just before the last as the glorious age of heroes. This sequence reflects the declining status of human existence from a superlative past to a harsh present in Hesiodic terms. In Iran there exist references in Pahlavi accounts from lost books of the *Avesta*, where Zoroaster envisioned the ages to come represented by a tree with branches of gold, silver, steel, and iron. As with Hesiod's account, the golden age was a time when humans were on a footing with the gods while remaining mortal, and the age of iron experienced the toil and woes of a spiritless life.[23] A similar account, recorded in the Old Testament in the book of Daniel (2.31–45), derives from the Hebrew tradition involving a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. In this narrative Daniel deciphers the king's dream of a colossal statue with a head of gold, representing Nebuchadnezzar's reign, shoulders and chest of silver, stomach