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What is a Greek Myth?

Jan Bremmer

What exactly is a Greek myth?¹ In the past, many solutions to this problem have been proposed, but in the course of time all have proved to be unsatisfactory.² The most recent analyses stress that myth belongs to the more general class of traditional tales. For example, Walter Burkert, the greatest living expert on Greek religion, has stated that 'myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance'.³ This definition raises three important problems that we will discuss briefly in this introduction. First, how traditional is a Greek myth? Second, to what degree does Greek myth contain matter of collective importance? And finally, if myth is a traditional tale — what then is the difference between myth and other genres of traditional tales, such as the fairy-tale or the legend?

1. How Traditional is Greek Myth?

It is extremely difficult to determine the age of the average Greek myth. Many tales were recorded relatively late, and therefore we cannot ascertain the precise date of their origin. Yet Homer already refers to the Theban Cycle, the Argonauts and the deeds of Herakles. Moreover, there are a number of vignette-like passages in his poems in which he briefly mentions heroes such as Hippokoon, Phorbas and Anchises, all of whom are located in the Peloponnese and are also found in mainland traditions. Homer also makes fleeting reference to details that apparently have been derived from little-known sagas that range in setting from Crete

to Northern Thessaly, such as 'the grave of Aipyros where men like to fight hand to hand' (*Iliad* 2.604), Areithoos 'the club-bearer' (7.8f, 137f) or Amyntor who lived in a 'strong home' in Eleon (10.266). None of these persons comes from Ionia, Aeolia or the islands, so they most probably derive from sources dating back at least to the time before the Greeks emigrated to those areas at the end of the second millennium BC. Taking the mainland as our point of departure, we can also observe that the archaic poet Alcman (about 600 BC) mentions details about Odysseus and Circe that are different from those found in Homer but not necessarily of a later date. If, indeed, various figures originate in pre-emigration sources, then the existence of a Mycenaean layer in Greek mythology seems assured.⁴

Can we go back further? The great philologists of the last century discovered that Greek and Vedic poetry shared the formulas *kleos aphthiton*, or 'imperishable glory', and *klea andron*, or 'glories of men'. Further investigations have confirmed the existence of a common Indo-European poetic language; organisations of poets such as the Homeridai of Chios or the Kreophyloi of Samos would have been bearers of this poetic tradition.⁵ Investigations into Indo-European mythological themes have been less successful. The whole fabric of Indo-European mythology, which Max Müller and his contemporaries erected in the course of the nineteenth century, had already collapsed by the end of that century. Yet some complexes stood the test of time. The myth of Helen, for example, has been shown to have close analogies in Vedic and Latvian mythology. In Sparta, Helen was worshipped as the goddess who supervised the life of girls between adolescence and motherhood. As the wedding also plays an important role in Vedic and Latvian traditions, the proto-myth of Helen was probably part of Indo-European wedding poetry.⁶

Can we go back even further? Burkert recently has studied Herakles' capture of cattle, which were hidden in a cave, from a shape-changing opponent. This capture, as he shows, is closely analogous to the Vedic Indra's fight against the demon Visvarupa, or 'of all shapes', who had also hidden his cows in a cave. But Burkert also showed that there are close analogies for these fights in the mythology of various hunting peoples of Siberia and the Arctic.⁷

Another ancient tradition lies behind the epic of the Trojan

War. Various leading figures, such as Achilles, display the characteristics of the ephebe, the Greek warrior at the brink of adulthood. Many details of Achilles' life correspond to such figures as CuChulainn, the exemplary ephebic warrior of Ulster; Nestor's youthful exploits are part of a similar initiatory tradition. Moreover, among a number of European peoples the storming of a (fake) castle was part of the young men's rituals. As Fritz Graf observes, the convergence of Greek and Irish tradition strongly suggests an Indo-European epic tradition closely connected with the young warrior's initiation. Myths associated with the central institutions of archaic societies, such as the wedding and the rites of puberty, or with matters of vital concern, such as the quest for animals (Herakles and Indra), have a much better chance of survival, indeed, than myths connected with more temporary institutions, such as the foundation of clans or temples. In the case of initiation, a poetic tradition is all the more probable because some Greek poets (still?) acted as initiators in the archaic age.⁸ The close association of poets with initiation can also be found in *The Book of Dede Korkut*, a collection of tales set in the heroic age of the Oghuz Turks, who in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries emigrated from Siberia in the direction of Anatolia. Moreover, the tradition of the Trojan war finds a close parallel in Caucasian myths, in which a hero besieges a king who has offended his honour, and takes his castle through a ruse; the storming of a castle is also part of Caucasian folklore. Do we perhaps encounter here mythical themes of Eurasian pastoral peoples that reach back into time immemorial?⁹

On the other hand, myth was also often untraditional. The suitors of Penelope request the newest song (*Odyssey* 1.352), and archaic poets regularly stress their own originality.¹⁰ In fact, many *mythoi* clearly are not very old. Hesiod derived part of his theogony from the Orient (cf. Burkert, this volume); the epic of the *Nostoi*, the homecoming of the Trojan heroes, presupposes Greek colonisation in Southern Italy; and the myth of Theseus' foundation of democracy illustrates the decline of the aristocracy's power in the late archaic age. The respective audiences of these *mythoi* must surely have recognised the novelty of these tales at the time of their first performances, even though they soon became incorporated into the traditional corpus of myths. Mythology, then, was an open-ended system. As has been pointed out recently, it is precisely

this improvisatory character of myth that guarantees its centrality in Greek religion. 'It is not bound to forms hardened and stiffened by canonical authority, but mobile, fluent and free to respond to a changing experience of the world.'¹¹ On the other hand, the divine authority of the archaic poet assured the truthfulness of the tale (cf. below). It was only in Hellenistic times that Callimachus (fr. 612) had to write: 'I sing nothing which is not attested'. When the poet had no more divine authority, tradition had to be invoked as the legitimising factor.

2. The Collective Importance of Myth

Having seen that myths can be tales from time immemorial but also contemporary inventions, we will now look at their place in Greek society. In the modern Western world, myths of the Greeks and other peoples are primarily *read*, but in the earliest Greek literature, the Homeric epic, *mythos* meant 'word, tale'.¹² The oldest *mythoi*, then, were tales recited in front of an audience. The fact of oral performance means that myth cannot be looked at in isolation; we must always consider by whom and to whom the tales were told. It is impossible to trace here in detail the development of the triad narrator – *mythos* – audience through the whole of Greek history; for our purpose it is sufficient to make a few observations about the main differences between the archaic age and later periods.

In Homer, the narrator of *mythoi* was the poet, the *aoidos*, who was society's bearer of tradition and its educator *par excellence*. Public performance obliged him to remain aware of his public's taste; unpopular new myths or unacceptable versions of old ones would be rejected by the public and, surely, not repeated in further performances. The poet's stature in society was reflected by his, in a certain sense, near-supernatural status. He and his songs were called 'divine' and he himself 'of the gods'. His epic poetry was believed to have been transmitted by the Muses who 'watch everything'. The divine origin of his poetry enabled him to invent new myths or change the content of the old ones; he could also freely change the poetic form — the original Indo-European eight-syllable line was developed into the hexameter.¹³

In the course of the archaic age, a whole complex of factors, such as colonisation, the growth of democracy, and the introduction of

What is a Greek Myth?

writing and money, dramatically changed the character of society. These developments also changed the status of the poet, the acceptance of myth, and the nature of the poet's audience. As Claude Calame has shown, the Muses played an increasingly subordinate role in archaic poetry. This declining position, as he persuasively suggests, reflected the poet's more secular role in society and growing consciousness of his own creativity. Moreover, the arrival of literacy enabled intellectuals to fix and scrutinise the tradition. The traditional *mythoi* now came under attack from philosophers and historians — authors who wrote in prose and who did not subject their opinions to the censure of the community in public performance. At first sight, the myths' audience remained the same, as the poets continued to perform in aristocratic circles, but their patrons were now in the process of losing part of their political power — a development that must also have had repercussions for the poet's position in society. These developments accelerated in the course of the classical period, although poets still continued to relate myths (tragedy!), and in the Hellenistic age the poet's function in society had largely been lost to philosophers and historians. The versions of myths that Callimachus and his friends wrote were no longer directed at society at large, but rather primarily at a small circle of literary friends. Post-Hellenistic travellers, such as Pausanias, still recorded the archaic myths connected with the temples they visited, but these tales now had lost completely their erstwhile relevance to the community.¹⁴

In one area, however, certain aspects of myth continued to prosper. The Greek colonisation of the East promoted feverish activity in the invention of mythical founders and genealogies, and in the explanation of strange names. In general, however, the new myths, which were mostly *bricolages* of the old, established ones, no longer were composed by poets but by historians, who wrote in prose and did not claim to be divinely inspired. The popularity of myth lasted well into the Roman Empire, but the *mythoi*, which once helped men to understand or order the world, now functioned primarily as a major part of a cultural tradition whose importance increased as Greek independence diminished. As various cities lost their political significance, it was their mythical past that could still furnish them with an identity and help them to distinguish themselves from other cities. Myth, then, meant rather

different things to the Greeks at different stages of their history.¹⁵

3. Myths and Other Traditional Tales

When we take the triad poet–*mythos*–audience as our point of departure, it becomes easier to see the difference between Greek myth and other genres of popular tales, such as the fairy-tale or the legend. Fairy-tales are told primarily in private and in prose; they are situated, furthermore, outside a specific time and place. Whereas Greek myth always details the place and origin of its heroes, fairy-tales content themselves with stating that ‘once upon a time’ a king was ruling — we never hear in which country or in which age. An individual fairy-tale therefore exists in isolation, while a Greek myth evokes further myths in which the same named heroes are involved; it is almost true that every Greek myth is ultimately connected in a chain of association with every other Greek myth. Moreover, fairy-tales are told not to order or explain the world, but to entertain their audience, although moralistic overtones were often introduced.

The English word ‘legend’ comprises two genres of tales that in German are distinguished as *Legende* and *Sage*. The *Legende* is primarily a hagiographical legend, a story in prose about a holy person whose life is held up to the community with the exhortation: ‘go and do likewise’. These stories, then, clearly were invented or told by the church to influence the lives of the faithful. As such, they are restricted in scope and also are typical products of a more literary age — ‘legend’ comes from the Latin *legenda*, or ‘things to be read’.

The *Sage* is a legend that explains buildings or stresses the boundaries between man and animals (cf. Buxton, this volume, Ch. 4); it accounts for extraordinary events and catastrophes; and it describes a world peopled by spirits and demons. For those who believed these legends, *Sagen* will have functioned very much like *mythoi* in archaic Greece. And just as *mythoi* helped to bolster the identity of the Greeks under the Roman Empire, *Sagen* acquired a political significance in the later nineteenth century when they were collected by German bourgeoisie in search of a common past.¹⁶

On the other hand, although these legends claim to be true,

What is a Greek Myth?

there are no claims of divine inspiration; moreover, the stories normally are told in private and in prose; It has recently been persuasively suggested that the word *Sage* presupposes an archaic, perhaps even Indo-European, narrative prose tradition. Unlike at Rome, however, where the foundation myth of Romulus and Remus was apparently handed down in prose, in archaic Greece myths were the exclusive territory of poets. It is true that distinguished scholars, such as G. S. Kirk, have made use of the notion of the folktale to explain motifs of Greek myth, but it must be stressed that such tales simply are not attested in archaic Greece.¹⁷

What exactly is a Greek myth? We started this chapter with Burkert's definition of myth as 'a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance'. This definition has proved to be valid for the whole period of Greek history. At the same time, however, we have seen that myths are not always traditional tales, nor is their collective importance the same during the whole of Greek history. Perhaps one could propose a slightly simpler definition: 'traditional tales relevant to society'. It is true that to us the appearance of gods and heroes is an essential part of Greek myth, but the supernatural presence is only to be expected when religion is embedded in society.¹⁸ Western secularised societies have nearly abolished the supernatural, but they usually still have their favourite (historical) tales that serve as models of behaviour or are the expression of the country's ideals. It is their relevance to Greek society that makes the *mythoi* still fascinating today, for however different the Greeks were from us, they were also very much the same.¹⁹

Notes

1. The notes are confined to the most recent literature. I am in general much indebted to Fritz Graf, *Griechische Mythologie* (Munich and Zurich, 1985).

2. For a survey of the various explanations, see G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient Mythology and Other Cultures* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1970) 1-41; W. Burkert, 'Mythos und Mythologie', in *Propyläen Geschichte der Literatur*, I (Berlin, 1981) 11-35; Graf, *Mythologie*, 15-57.

3. Traditional tales: Kirk, *Myth*, 31-41 and *The Nature of Greek Myth* (Harmondsworth, 1974) 23-37; Burkert, *SG&H*, 23; Graf, *Mythologie*, 7.

4. Pre-Homeric mythology: Graf, *Mythologie*, 58-68. Mycenaean layer: A. Hoekstra, 'Epic Verse before Homer', *Med. Ned. Ak. Wet., Afd. Letterk., N.R.*, 108 (1981) 54-66; note also A. Snodgrass, 'Poet and Painter in Eighth-Century

What is a Greek Myth?

Greece', *Proc. Cambr. Phil. Soc.*, 25 (1979) 118–30, esp. 122. Alcman: C. Calame (ed.), *Alcman* (Rome, 1983) 487, 496, 574, 612.

5. Formulas: see most recently E. D. Floyd, 'Kleos apthiton: An Indo-European Perspective on Early Greek Poetry', *Glotta*, 58 (1980) 133–57; G. Nagy, 'Another Look at Kleos Apthiton', *Würzb. Jahrb.*, 7 (1981) 113–16; but see now M. Finkelberg, *CQ*, 36 (1986) 1–5. Poetical language: the standard study is R. Schmitt, *Dichter und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1967); see most recently W. Meid, *Dichter und Dichtkunst in indogermanischer Zeit* (Innsbruck, 1978); C. Watkins, 'Aspects of IE poetics', in E. Polomé (ed.), *The Indo-Europeans in the 4th and 3rd Millennia* (Ann Arbor, 1982) 104–20. Poetic organisations: W. Burkert, 'Die Leistung eines Kreophylos: Kreophyleer, Homeriden und die archaische Heraklesepeik', *MH*, 29 (1972) 74–85.

6. Helen: M. L. West, *Immortal Helen* (London, 1975); Calame, *Chœurs* I, 333–50 (Helen in Sparta).

7. Herakles: Burkert, *S&H*, 85f, who is overlooked by J. M. Blazquez Martinez, 'Gerion y otros mitos griegos en Occidente', *Gerion*, 1 (1983) 21–38.

8. Initiation and Trojan War: Graf, *Mythologie*, 71–4. Ritual background of Trojan War: J. Bremmer, 'Heroes, Rituals and the Trojan War', *Studi Storico-Religiosi*, 2 (1978) 5–38; F. Bader, 'Rhapsodies homériques et irlandaises', in R. Bloch (ed.), *Recherches sur les religions de l'antiquité classique* (Paris and Geneva, 1980) 9–83. Poet as initiator: Calame, *Chœurs* I, 393–5; Graf, this volume, Ch. 5, section 9; note also J. F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw. The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1985) Chs. 1 and 6, on Finn as poet and initiator.

9. Oghuz Turks: G. Lewis (ed.), *The Book of Dede Korkut* (Harmondsworth, 1974) 59–87. Caucasian parallels: W. J. Abaew, 'Le Cheval de Troie. Parallèles Caucasiens', *Annales ESC*, 18 (1963) 1041–70; Bremmer, 'Heroes', 31 (storming castle). For other possible age-old traditions, see Burkert, *S&H*, 85, 95.

10. Originality of poet: Hom. *Od.* 1.351f; Alcman fr. 14 Page = 4 Calame; Pind. *Ol.* 3.4, 9.48f; W. J. Verdenius, 'The Principles of Greek Literary Criticism', *Mnem.* IV 36 (1983) 14–59, esp. 22f (with extensive bibliographies).

11. J. Gould, 'On Making Sense of Greek Religion', in P. Easterling and J. V. Muir (eds), *Greek Religion and Society* (Cambridge, 1985) 1–33, 219–21.

12. For the meaning of *mythos*, see C. Spicq, *Notes de lexicographie néo-testamentaire*, II (Fribourg, 1978) 576–8; Detienne, *Invention*; L. Brisson, *Platon, les mots et les mythes* (Paris, 1982).

13. Poet: H. Maehler, *Die Auffassung des Dichterberufs im frühen Griechentum bis zur Zeit Pindars* (Göttingen, 1963); B. Snell, *Dichtung und Gesellschaft* (Hamburg, 1965); Verdenius, 'Principles', 25–37. Divine origin: Hom. *Il.* 18.604; *Od.* 1.328, 8.498, 17.385 and 518f; Hes. *Th.* 94f; P. Murray, 'Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece', *JHS*, 101 (1981) 87–100; Verdenius, 'Principles', 37–46. Poetic form: N. Berg, 'Parergon metricum: der Ursprung des griechischen Hexameters', *Münch. Stud. zur Sprachw.*, 37 (1978) 11–36.

14. Declining role of Muses: C. Calame, 'Entre oralité et écriture: Énonciation et énoncé dans la poésie grecque archaïque', *Semiotica*, 43 (1983) 245–73. Critique of myth: Detienne, *Invention*, 123–54; J. Bremmer, 'Literacy and the Origins and Limitations of Greek Atheism', in J. den Boeft and A. Kessels (eds), *Actus: Studies in Honour of H. L. W. Nelson* (Utrecht, 1982) 43–55. The role of myth in Hellenistic poetry and post-Hellenistic authors is still in need of investigation; there are some good observations in P. Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (Paris, 1983).

15. Cf. P. Weiss, 'Lebendiger Mythos: Gründerheroen und städtische Gründungstraditionen im griechisch-römischen Osten', *Würzb. Jahrb.*, 10 (1984) 179–207.

What is a Greek Myth?

16. Difference between myths and other traditional tales: see most recently L. Röhrich, 'Märchen-Mythos-Sage', in W. Siegmund (ed.), *Antiker Mythos in unseren Märchen* (Kassel, 1984) 11–35, 187–9; J. Scullion, 'Märchen, Sage, Legende: Towards a clarification of some literary terms used by Old Testament scholars', *Vetus Test.*, 34 (1984) 321–36. Political significance of Sagen: R. Schenda, 'Maren von Deutschen Sagen. Bemerkungen zur Produktion von "Volkserzählungen" zwischen 1850 und 1870', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 9 (1983) 26–48.

17. Indo-European prose tradition: E. Risch, 'Homerisch *ennepo*, Lakonisch *epheneponti* und die alte Erzählprosa', *ZPE*, 60 (1985) 1–9. Folk tales: Kirk, *Myth and Nature of Greek Myth*.

18. For the notion of embedded religion, see R. C. T. Parker, 'Greek Religion', in *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (Oxford, 1986) 254–74.

19. For information, comments and correction of the English I am indebted to Fritz Graf, Nicholas Horsfall, Sarah Johnston, André Lardinois, Robert Parker, and Professor Rüdiger Schmitt.