

## Basic Aspects of the Greek Myths

Search the GML advanced

"About the gods I cannot say either that they are or that they are not, nor how they are constituted in shape; for there is much which prevents knowledge, the unclarity of the subject and the shortness of life." (Protagoras, On

Gods) Don Quijote: "Todo el día se le pasa en averiguar si dijo bien o mal Homero en tal verso de La Ilíada; si Marcial anduvo deshonesto, o no, en tal epigrama; si se han de entender de una manera o otra tales y tales versos de

"Que d'autres soient savants de tout ce qui se sait : L'aveugle vagabond sera toujours le maître, Sous tout ce qui se dit, de tout ce qui se tait." (Charles Péguy, Sonnets: L'Aveugle)

Virgilio." (Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quijote de la

Mancha, Segunda Parte, Capítulo XVI)

"De te fabula narratur." (Horace, Satires 1.1.69)

## Distinction of basic terms

Mythology is, in one sense, just a collection of myths, but as scientific research increased during the 19th and 20th centuries, this research has also been called mythology. So the term mythology has come to denote both the body of myths and the study of myths. Classical mythology is a term often used to designate the myths belonging to the Greek and Roman traditions. The myths are believed to have been acquired first by oral tradition, entering since Homer and Hesiod (ca. 700 BC) the literate era; later works by those who studied or collected the myths, or sometimes all literary works relating to mythology, are

known as mythography and those who wrote them as mythographers.

@ www.maicar.com 3829: Cornelis Troost 1696-1750: The Phoenix. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The Greek word mythos refers to the spoken word or speech, but it also denotes a tale, story or narrative, different from the historic tale which is called logos and is regarded as verifiable. The narrated events which form a mythic tale are not normally verifiable, their origin is nearly always unknown, and yet they have a claim to

truth, which the purely fictitious narrative, for example a novel, lacks. Both fiction and history grew out of mythology but, whereas the historic tale told by logographers might be assumed to be empirically true (in accordance with actual facts), and free fiction to be empirically untrue, the myth, told by poets and mythographers, being uncertain in this regard and having a claim to truth that fiction

lacks, may be placed between the other two. Truth cannot be completely separated from either fiction or the myths, for there are other kinds of truth, different from empirical truth, such as psychological truths or those contained in ideal values. The myths, being basically stories, arise from story-telling, itself a technique dependent on speech for the arrangement and presentation of facts (be they called true or fictitious, for information or for enjoyment) that after acquiring certain qualities may deserve to be called art. And although art (which also develops from its close

connection with the myths) is generally associated with the mythical accounts or fiction rather than with history it has been rightly remarked that "...no historian can be 'great' if he is not also a great artist ..." (Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History) since history cannot avoid, in its own narrative, to introduce fictitious or mythical personifications such as "England", "the Press" or "Public Opinion". Mythical thought, often in a degraded or profane form, has also been shown to appear in scientific theories about the genesis of our planetary system, in the reverence towards Nature and Mother Earth professed by some ecologists or, as Mircea Eliade points out, in the marxian Weltanschauung. Divine origin of the All-embracing True Tale

reveal historical facts or may describe psychological truths; they make emotional valuations and concern themselves with moral, physical or ontological issues; they may convey beliefs, superstitions, rituals, literary images, social ideas, and they may use symbols and allegories as well as reason, philosophy and ethical values. As the myths then may be said to comprise both the outer and the inner world in all their aspects, they appear as an all-embracing tale, which originally was

transmitted by the flexible instrument and primeval art of story-telling. However, this tale cannot be arbitrarily invented by a myth-maker, for if it were believed to be

the product of gratuitous fantasy it could not claim to be true and it would then be called at best fiction, but not myth. And yet the myths, as we shall soon see, are

The myths have connections with all aspects of human life and experience: they refer to the origins and the nature of the universe, the gods and mankind; they claim to

entitled to tell lies without abdicating truth. The capacity to tell an all-embracing true tale is believed to be the privilege of the gods and not of men, for human beings are notorious for having an inborn difficulty in distinguishing between true and false since they "have only hearsay and not knowledge" (Homer, Iliad 2.484). The myths have therefore been considered to be divine tales told by gods to men, who in turn transmitted them to their fellow human beings. This is why the standard procedure when telling a myth in the literate era is "Tell me Muse ..." or "Sing goddess ..." or other similar formulae, used by poets, who thus acknowledge the divine origin of the tale given to them through what may be called

"And a third kind of possession and madness comes from the Muses. This takes hold upon a gentle and pure soul, arouses it and inspires it to songs and other poetry, and thus by adorning countless deeds of the ancients educates later generations. But he who without the divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art, meets with no success, and the poetry of the sane man vanishes into nothingness before that of the inspired madmen." (Plato. *Phaedrus* 245a) Story-telling achieves its greatest significance when it narrates the myths, since nothing else can be more memorable than an all-embracing tale, and for being

memorable the myths are transmitted to mortal men by the Muses, who are the daughters of Memory and who, possessing real knowledge, may or may not tell the truth at will. When they addressed Hesiod and taught him to sing they said, as he himself narrates it: "We know enough to make up lies which are convincing, but we also have the skill, when we will, to speak the truth." (The Muses to Hesiod. Hesiod, Theogony 25)

The inclusion of divine lies in the myths does not affect their being essentially a True Tale. Lies, however strange it may sound, must have a place in such a True Tale if

Prophets and priests are not authorities of the same high rank, for religious beliefs arise from the myths and they are not story-tellers, and also because the religious

"When I speak fiction, be it such fiction as persuades the listener's ear!" (Callimachus, Hymns 1.65)

The gods have unlimited power in either true or false direction, but in the case of a mortal poet the power over lies as well as over truths has to be prayed for:

When the Greek myths are told neither a system, nor doctrine, nor religious dogma, nor instructions for performing rituals or magic emerge in the first place, but a tale. The authorities in regard to this tale, at the time when the myths passed from oral tradition into literature, were then the poets, for the tale is given first to them.

system in the community in which the myths are told lacks what we know as Church, ecclesiastical hierarchy, theologists and sacred scriptures. Prophets and priests, whose inspiration has also been regarded as coming from the gods, also differ from the poets in that they may have practical purposes, which are known to corrupt truth. For these reasons the poet is the highest authority in all that concerns the myths. Yet, in this tradition no work of poetry, or for that matter no other book either, has ever been considered as a sacred book, and it has been remarked (for example by Jorge Luis Borges) that Asia appears to be the only continent in which the idea of

The Heroic myths are formed by tales related to kingdoms on earth, heroes and heroines, and the events in these tales are normally located in real geographical places such as Mycenae or Rhodes. The term heroes is to be understood in a broad sense: they may be "warriors, kings, founders, benefactors, questers, or even robbers and pirates." (Joseph Fontenrose. The Ritual Theory of Myth).

The foundation of the myths lies in divine presence, and the Heroic myths are linked to it through three devices: • divine intervention in human affairs

This is how the mythical body is kept together. A tale lacking divine presence (and there are such tales in the Greek tradition) may win acceptance as a myth for being associated with the same cultural tradition, but this kind of tale, if it happens to be separately scrutinized, is normally regarded as having a lesser mythical value, and

the gift of inspiration, although Plato called it poetical madness, a condition which must be given by the gods:

- scholars usually degrade it as it were to the category of a free-standing Legend or a free-standing Folk tale. Otherwise the analysis of the mythical body has led to its
- division into Myth proper with connected Legends and Folk tales (see below: Interpretation of the myths)

lacks all connection with the divine or the gods. One important feature of the divinity is revealed by the privilege, which the divinity alone possesses, of mastering existence itself (which must in turn be distinguished from mere biological life and death). It is in the acceptance of the union of the visible aspect (existence) and the invisible (the divinity) that the sense of the sacred appears as an emotional perception acknowledging that union. The perception that the whole existence of the universe is mastered by the divine or may be identified with the divine, places the mere supernatural beings on another and lower level, and therefore the supernatural

The divine is that which is related to the gods, and when anything has a relation to the divine or the gods it is regarded as sacred, as opposed to what is profane, which

should be distinguished from the divine. Supernatural powers, however extraordinary, are always subject to the absolute power of being of the divinity, and are reserved in the myths for cosmic challengers, heroes or heroines, even if the gods may enjoy, in addition to their exclusive privilege, whatever other supernatural capacities they wish to enjoy. Basic features of the myths Some basic features of the myths may now be recapitulated: The myths touch upon any field of human life and experience and, although consisting of many stories, are perceived as a single all-embracing tale which is assumed to

have been delivered to men by the gods, being in virtue of that circumstance both true and sacred. These are the reasons why the myths may be described as a Sacred All-embracing True Tale.

about by literature and other arts.

to attain.

Carlos Parada

Lund, Summer 1999

However for someone reluctant to enter the mythical context, what could remain of the description above is barely the Tale, and also this one may be dismembered in

a number of tales. A profane view would not accept the Sacred, and the idea of the All-embracing could be easily dissolved by the myriads of details never referred to in the myths. Finally what is True, which may be made dependent on the verification of actual facts, has to recede, for the myths are not verifiable. And even if verification were applied to some aspects of the myths, as those resembling historical accounts or those establishing the reality of sites and locations constituting the

whereas his counterpart, having a sense of the sacred, may be believed (even by the profane man) to lead a better life: "The religious man is happy in his imagination ..." (Ludwig A. Feuerbach (1804-1872), Das Wesen des Christentums). The typical profane view cannot be reconciled with the perception of the myths as a Sacred Allembracing True Tale, but then again the myths may be approached in a variety of intermediate ways, having a surprising potential for yielding valuable results independently of existential choice, approach or line of research. The details of the myths are neither to be believed nor to be disbelieved, the main reason being that the myths are not concerned with belief and disbelief, since belief

Interpretation of the myths The mythical mind may be rightly assumed to perceive meanings and recognize that the myths represent other realities than those appearing in the tales themselves. But the mythical mind perceives meanings and representations in the myths in a loose form if compared with the interpretative mind, which organizes systematically the different components in a purposeful effort to unveil the nature of the myths and explain consistently what they and their various parts are and whence they came. The mythical mind does not need to systematize, for it already feels it understands or, as Kerényi says, "lives in the myth". It is when understanding seems to fail that

analysis, systematization and interpretation are introduced so that they may come to the aid and, acting like surgeons, may put together what has fallen apart.

everyday life (pseudo-rationalists as Palaephatus in the 4th century BC), and their gods were turned by euhemerism into men. Euhemerism derives its name from Euhemerus (fl. 300 BC), who is known for having stripped the gods of their divine nature, so that Uranus, Cronos and Zeus became kings of a remote past (see also Brief history of the myths). In more recent times the myths have been explained through their close relation to rituals and magic manipulation (James G. Frazer, 1854-1941) or to institutions and social customs (Bronislaw Malinowski, 1884-1942). They have been seen as metaphors originating in the unconscious layers of the human mind as in Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and in the offshoots of his psychoanalytical thought, as for example, in the works of C. G. Jung (1875-1951), and they have had their internal structure

exposed and their components analyzed and compared (Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Ronald Leach, 1910-89). These are just a few examples of a large number of

During the 19th and 20th centuries scientific research introduced methods that attempt to determine the exact sources of each tale, classify them according to the

nature of their narrative elements, and try to establish their origin by using comparative methods. These methods have not seldom been related to the now traditional

• Myth proper (Mythos) includes cosmogony, theogony and natural phenomena. All myths called aetiological (concerned with the causes and origin of things) belong

names and theories arising from many fields of research such as philology, anthropology or sociology, and the efforts which may be grouped under the title of

analytical subdivisions of the myths exposed by H. J. Rose according to the following pattern (German equivalents between parentheses):

comparative mythology, of which a significant figure in the 19th century was Friedrich Max Müller.

This surgery, which has had its own productive life and development, started gradually, but already in the 6th century BC the myths were believed by different currents

to represent hidden meanings, celestial bodies or natural phenomena (allegorists and symbolists). Later they were also assumed to have originated in trivial aspects of

here. • Legend (Sage) includes the stories of heroes, dealing often with what appears to be historical events (the Scandinavian term saga has a wider meaning and does not exclusively mean, in Scandinavia, historically-based tale). • Folk tale (Märchen) refers to stories of notable individuals that may be of unknown family, period of time and country. Otherwise this term is used for fairy tales, with or without fairies, and the typical example is the collection made by the Grimm brothers.

Even if interpretation has not provided a general explanation of the myths, it is indeed the result of extensive inquiries which have strained the imagination of their authors, providing interesting views and insights, and allowing them to separately reveal allegories, symbols, rational meanings, historical roots, ritual connections, moral implications, magical hints, natural representations, structural patterns, naive imagination, psychological realities, and many other things contained in the myths.

However, and despite also the many positive side-effects of these researches, the universal theories, having aimed at a general explanation and being very different in

their approaches, kill each other as if they were Sparti, involuntarily suggesting that the privilege of properly dealing with the myths ideally reverts to the poet, since

Variations in the myths, and even contradictions, are rightly perceived as beneficial, since they invite understanding in different layers and permit the subjective

reorganization of the material. Contradictory versions, which may appear in the writings of the same author, is a feature which enlivens the myths, reproducing in

the disclosure of meaning, appears to have been best achieved by the variations of the mythical accounts themselves or by the enlargements of mythical details brought

It may finally be noticed that if all theories of interpretation, both modern and ancient, were put together, a very wide range would be covered revealing not just their huge number but also the significant discrepancies among the highest authorities and the diversity of their points of departure. Let us just recall, for example, that the myths have been taken both as metaphors of the mind able to create mental health and as reflections of hierarchical social structures. These views do not need to be contradictory but, leaving details aside, let us just point out one major discrepancy which is perhaps the deepest: the myths have been considered to have been created both by high intelligent minds and by primitive ones. On one hand they have been taken as accurate representations of the world, truthful symbols of the mind or wise doctrines hidden behind a clever disguise, and on the other hand they have been equalled with naive imagination or with a primitive form of apprehension and expression.

Someone might believe that these differences have been gradually eliminated by the accuracy of scientific research thus inaugurating a new era. However, he will also

ghosts of allegorism, symbolism and euhemerism and their capacity for reincarnation, but a comparison between Sallustius' interpretation of the Judgement of Paris,

and the one offered by the distinguished neocomparativist Prof. Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) may serve as illustration. Sallustius, who is identified with the friend of

Emperor Julian called the Apostate (AD 361-3), says (quoted by H. J. Rose) that the apple of Eris signifies the universe and the different goddesses give various gifts to

military prowess (Athena); the explanation of this myth is to be found in the Indo European mentality, since these peoples are fond, in Prof. Dumézil's demonstrations,

sensuality being Aphrodite's realm. Prof. Dumézil comes to a similar conclusion: in his view Paris chooses earthly pleasure (Aphrodite) and rejects sovereignty (Hera) and

notice that the results of scientific research have sometimes exhibited a remarkable resemblance with the ancient interpretations. One could just think of the old

the universe and that is why each of them wishes to possess the apple. Paris, who lives in accordance with sense-perception only, gives the apple to Aphrodite,

of a certain law of three which leads to tripartition both in society and in the supernatural world. That the myths are works of art seems at times to pass unnoticed for the interpretative mind. The silence of Ajax in the underworld may rightly have been called sublime, although we also know that he is angry. But how are we to interpret sublimity? And what does silence represent? After more than two millennia of studies of the myths it seems reasonable and fair to ask: Can the myths be explained? And if so, is it desirable in the same way as, for example, a cure for cancer may be desirable? Can we know the origin of the myths and their meaning? Or inversely: can the myths explain anything? All knowledge is worthy of reverence, one may think. And yet knowledge cannot be everything that counts, since learning by itself does not prevent the unscrupulous, the unfair or the violent, and both cure for cancer and feeding the guns are attended by knowledge.

Today, as before, everything we learn affects the whole character of the mind and yet nothing seems to prevent external knowledge and its informative progeny from falling out of proportion, since in this respect "The larger quantity is recommended as an unquestionable good ..." (Philip Gilbert Hamerton, The Intellectual Life). That is why the relevant question is what we want to learn and how much, so that internal and external learning, finding their common ground and their just measure, might enhance our lives. Language, metre, literary history, literary analysis and literary criticism are valuable and take many years to learn. But knowing literature is not the same as experiencing or living literature. To know and to live are different things and also they should keep their proportions, lest it might be said (in Browning's words) "This man decided not to Live but Know—Bury this man there." Similarly, the significance of the myths still stands and may be perceived regardless of our ability to analytically unveil it.

Apollodorus) "In general one may say: —that myth, such as it is lived by archaic societies, constitutes the story of the deeds of Supernatural Beings; —that the story is considered absolutely true (because it refers to realities) and sacred (because it is the work of Supernatural Beings); —that myth always concerns a 'creation'; it tells how something has come into existence, or how a way of behavior, an institution, a way of working, were established; this is why myths constitute paradigms for every meaningful human act; —that in knowing the myth one knows the 'origin' of things and is thus able to master things and manipulate them at will; this is not an 'external", 'abstract' knowledge, but a knowledge that one 'lives' ritually, either by reciting the myth ceremonially, or by carrying out the ritual for which it serves as justification; —that in

"True myth is an explanation of some natural process made in a period when such explanation were religious and magical rather than scientific." (T. B. L. Webster, Everyday Life in Classical Athens (quoted by G. S. Kirk)) "True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls,

"On est convenu d'appeler 'mythe', au sens étroit, un récit se référant à un ordre du monde antérieur à l'ordre actuel et destiné, non pas à expliquer un particularité locale et limitée (c'est le rôle de la simple 'légende étiologique'), mais une loi organique de la nature des choses." (Pierre Grimal, Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine).

E. R. DODDS, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1951). MIRCEA ELIADE, Das Heilige und das Profane, 1957 (Rowohlt Taschenbuchverlag GmbH, Hamburg 1957, Swedish edition: Verbum, Stockholm 1968); The Sacred and the Profane (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987); 'Toward a Definition of Myth', in Yves Bonnefoy's Greek and Egyptian Mythologies (The University of Chicago Press 1991).

ROBERT GRAVES, The Greek Myths (Penguin Books 1986).

G. S. KIRK, The Nature of the Greek Myths (Penguin Books 1986); Homer and the Oral Tradition (Cambridge University Press, London 1976). MARK P. O. MORFORD & ROBERT J. LENARDON, Classical Mythology (Longman, New York & London 1985).

ERIK IVERSEN, "La fortune des dieux égyptiens du Moyen Âge au XVIIIe siècle", in Yves Bonnefoy's Dictionnaire des mythologies (Flammarion, Paris 1981).

MARTIN P. NILSSON, The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1972); Homeros, den grekiska epikens ursprung och utveckling (Norstedt & Söners Förlag, Stockholm 1935).

ANTONIO RUIZ DE ELVIRA, Mitología clásica (Editorial Gredos, Madrid 1995). C. SCOTT LITTLETON, The New Comparative Mythology (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1982). JEAN SEZNEC, "Moyen Âge et Renaissance: la survivance des dieux antiques", in Yves Bonnefoy's Dictionnaire des mythologies (Flammarion, Paris 1981).

ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE, A Study of History (Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford 1987).

PETER WARREN, The Aegean Civilizations (Phaidon Press, Oxford 1989)

Getting acquainted with the myths, Brief history of the Greek myths, "Is it True?", The Munificence of the Myths, The Children of the Myths Related sections

See bibliography. Sources

the sacred book has been materialized, not only once but several times. Main division of the Greek myths The Greek myths may be divided into two categories: • Divine myths, and • Heroic myths. The Divine myths consist of the tales referring to the gods, such as the creation of the world, the origin of the gods and other tales mainly related to them, such as the

castration of Uranus or the Titanomachy. The scene of these tales includes several places of imaginary nature, such as Tartarus, but refers also to visible places such as Mount Olympus.

• any kind of reference to the gods or to someone related to them • genealogy establishing descent from the gods.

the human mind, led by its own nature, is to perceive it as truthful.

scene of many myths, other aspects, of which cosmogony and theogony are only the most evident examples, might remain for ever out of reach. From this profane point of view then, the remainder are tales of unknown origin, which cannot be verified and yet have a claim to truth. This view derives from an existential choice which, as Mircea Eliade has described, makes the non-mythical, irreligious or profane man assume a tragic existence which does not lack greatness,

is in the realm of religion, magic and superstition, and disbelief belongs to the profane view, which is alien to the myths. The myths provide the material and the images upon which the children of the myths such as art, religion, philosophy or science, independently found and develop their own activities. That is why the mythical mind is likely to regard the complete detachment of a child from the mythical source and its claim to have found truth in its own field of activity, not just in details but in regard to the whole, as a form of arrogance (hybris) arising from the complacency which derives from success, a condition which is known to be temporary.

This classification seldom meets chemically pure stories, which must often be seen as consisting of elements from two or even all three categories, and it has also met the difficulty that "one man's myth is another man's legend, or saga or folk tale." (G. S. Kirk. The Nature of the Greek Myths). Despite its difficulties this subdivision of the myths has yielded interesting and instructive results in many respects and, for example, a collection of folk tale themes has been compiled in the six volumes by Stith Thompson (1885-1976) entitled Motif-index of Folk-literature.

them, as entity, the conflicts described in the tales. The artistic and psychological consequences of this feature, which is generally absent in pure fiction, are curiously not diminished if its causes are unveiled, for example by proving that it is the result of interpolations, errors or late additions. The myths seem to present in this respect a case in which art and meaning appear beyond intention.

What may the myths themselves be assumed to say in this respect? The Homeric answer was, as we have seen above, that men had no knowledge, only hearsay. Yet tradition established the self as the highest object of study, since the counsel of Apollo at Delphi was "know yourself". However enigmatic, these two words made

internal learning accessible to man reestablishing proportion with respect to external learning, which is, in spite of all its difficulties, the most common and the easiest

Appendix Eight short definitions of myth "Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past." (William Bascom, The Forms of Folklore (quoted by J. Fontenrose)) "By myths I understand mistaken explanations of phenomena, whether of human life or of external nature." (James G. Frazer, 'Introduction' to the Library of

definition of myth' in *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies*) "We may then define myth proper as the result of the working of naïve imagination upon the facts of experience." (H. J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Mythology) "Myth proper may be defined as a prescientific and imaginative attempt to explain some phenomenon, real or supposed, which exites the curiosity of the myth-maker, or perhaps more accurately as an effort to reach a feeling of satisfaction in place of uneasy bewilderment concerning such phenomena." (H. J. Rose, in The Oxford Classical Dictionary)

one way or another one 'lives' the myth, gripped by the sacred, exalting power of the events one is rememorializing and reactualizing." (Mircea Eliade, 'Toward a

Selected bibliography WALTER BURKERT, Greek Religion (Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1977. English edition: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1985).

KARL KERÉNYI, The Religion of the Greeks and Romans (Thames & Hudson 1962, Swedish edition: Natur och Kultur, Stockholm 1962).

JOSEPH FONTENROSE, The Ritual Theory of Myth (University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1966).

vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like." (Robert Graves, The Greek Myths)

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH, On the Art of Reading (Cambridge University Press 1925). H. J. ROSE, A Handbook of Greek Mythology (Routledge, London and New York 1991).

JEAN-PIERRE VERNANT, "Greek Mythology", in Yves Bonnefoy's Greek and Egyptian Mythologies (The University of Chicago Press 1991).

**Abbreviations**