



Brief history of the Greek myths

From the beginnings to the end of the Middle Ages

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Don Quijote: "... y debiendo ser los historiadores puntuales, verdaderos y no nada apasionados, y que ni el interés ni el miedo, el rencor ni la afición no les hagan torcer del camino de la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir." (Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, primera parte, capítulo 9).

Don Quixote: "... an historian ought to be exact, sincere, and impartial; free from passion, and not to be biased either by interest, fear, resentment, or affection, to deviate from truth, which is the mother of history, the preserver and eternizer of great actions, the professed enemy of oblivion, the witness of things passed, and the director of future times." (Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part I, Chapter IX).

"For historians should, in my opinion, be granted charity in errors that come of ignorance, since they are human beings and since the truth of ages past is hard to discover, but historians who deliberately do not give the exact facts should properly be open to censure, whenever in flattering one man or another or in attacking others from hatred too bitterly, they stray from the truth." (Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 13.90.7).

"... although it be my business to set down that which is told me, to believe it is none at all of my business." (Herodotus, *History* 7.152).

The Greek myths, in their unknown beginnings, are believed to have been acquired and transmitted by oral tradition. The cause that originated the Greek myths is story-telling. If there have been other causes for telling those particular tales different from what derives from mere story-telling, any conclusive evidence of it is lost in the eyes of modern scholarship or considered as too partial or only verifiable in a few cases.

Oral tradition may be said to be always a part of the cultural life of any community. One important feature of oral tradition is that it is not fixed, as are literary works, a circumstance that favors variations concerning both style and content. Oral tradition must be distinguished from mere oral communication, but as non-fixed or partially fixed forms of communication appear in the technological era, as most recently the Internet, the relation between both has to be reexamined by those who are qualified.

The myths are generally believed, at least since the studies of the Swedish scholar Martin Nilsson (1874-1967), to have been acquired during the Mycenaean age being transmitted by poets and minstrels in a monarchic and probably militaristic society in which local kings were vassals of an overlord. Nilsson's assumption in the early 1930s that the Mycenaean Greeks was later confirmed when the architect Michael Ventris deciphered the Linear B tablets in 1952 a few years before his death. Linear B is a script developed from the Minoan Linear A (still undeciphered), used by the Mycenaean between ca. 1500 BC and 1100 BC, a period which is also known as Late Helladic.

Important mythical tales are located in places like

Mycenae, *Tiryns*, *Pylos* or *Thebes*, and it has been remarked that these were also Mycenaean centers as archaeological excavations have shown. Following mythical chronology it may be said that the Greek historical legends extend from ca. 1900 BC to ca. 1000 BC (the Roman extension of the myths overlaps the Greek and may be said to cover the period from ca. 1200 BC to 550 BC). From mythical chronology nothing conclusive emerges, but its comparison with historical dates is never out of place. Here are a few examples: 1900 BC, the earliest date in the Greek legends, is the date in which archaeology has dated the building of the first Cretan palaces, belonging to Minoan civilization. The destructions of Thera and of Minoan and Cycladic sites (1500-1450 BC) correspond in mythical chronology to the myth of the **Flood** in the age of **Deucalion**. The fall of Cnossos in 1400 BC and the expansion of Mycenaean power coincides with the myths of the foundation of *Mycenae* by Perseus and of *Thebes* by *Cadmus*, and with a certain migration or invasion from the Peloponnesus to **Crete** recorded by the traveller Pausanias, which in mythical chronology corresponds to ca. 1400 BC.

The end of Mycenaean civilization is illustrated by the destruction of the Mycenaean citadels in the decades around 1200 BC. These are also the times of the destruction of **Troy** and the collapse of the Hittite empire.

After the destruction of Mycenaean civilization, the iron age caught Greece in a period of decay known as sub-Mycenaean or Proto-geometric, which lasted from ca. 1100 BC until the beginning of the Geometric period little before 800 BC. During the Geometric period the Olympian games were instituted, according to tradition in 776 BC. By this time the Greek alphabet had been possibly in use for approximately 200 years, having been derived from Phoenician sources.

Around 700 BC, the myths enter the literate era with the works of Homer and Hesiod, flourishing for a few centuries after them through the works of poets like Pindar (518-438 BC) and dramatists like Aeschylus (525-456 BC), Sophocles (495-406 BC) and Euripides (485-406 BC), and later through Roman poets as Ovid (43 BC-AD 17) and Virgil (70-19 BC). By the end of the Roman times, from the 4th century to the 6th century AD, literary works were still being created, as those by Quintus Smyrnaeus, Nonnus, Tryphiodorus or Colluthus.

The poet was, particularly in the first years of the literate era, the highest authority, but already in classical times his position had changed:

"I do not believe that the gods indulge in unholy unions; and as for putting bonds on hands, I have never thought that worthy of belief, nor will I now be so persuaded, nor again that one god is naturally lord and master of another. For the deity, if he be really such, has no wants; these are miserable tales of the poets." (Heracltes to Theseus. Euripides, *Heracles* 1340).

In addition to the poets the myths were also told, collected or commented by historians and compilers like Herodotus (484-430 BC), Diodorus Siculus (80 BC - 20 BC), or Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60 BC - AD 7), by the geographer Strabo (64 BC -AD 25), the traveller Pausanias (fl. ca. AD 150), the philosopher Plato (427-347 BC), a number of scholiasts, and also by philologists and mythographers, at least since the times of Theagenes of Rhegium (fl. c. 525 BC) or Metrodorus of Lampsacus (5th century BC). The typical mythographers may be exemplified with the names of Apollodorus (fl. ca. AD 100) and Hyginus (fl. ca. AD 200), but many other names could be mentioned as contributing to the myths in various forms, as some works of Plutarch (AD 45-120), the collection of Antoninus Liberalis (fl. ca. AD 100), or a certain story by Lucius Apuleius (fl. ca. AD 160).

The work of mythographers, as we shall soon see, continued during the Middle Ages, but about two hundred years before the collapse of Rome the myths went through the historical accident of being banished. The persecution against the myths that were associated with the Olympian religion may be traced back at least to the activities of the Roman citizen St. Paul, who in Ephesus promoted or was involved in the notorious ritual of the burning of the books (*Acts* 19:19). In spite of recurrent periods of retaliation from the part of the Roman authorities (the same Paul was put to death), starting with the Emperor Nero and the burning of the bodies in AD 64, the new religion grew stronger in the course of the following two centuries, and by the time Constantine, called the Great (AD 285-337) was proclaimed emperor, the conflict was ended through the Edict of Milan in AD 313 and the new faith advanced ever since. The restoration of the Olympian religion attempted in AD 361-3 by Emperor Julian, called the Apostate, who proclaimed toleration for all religions while calling the Christians Galilaeans, did not survive the emperor himself, who was mortally wounded at the age of 31 in the course of an unlucky military campaign against the Persians. He was succeeded by Jovian, a Christian who took part in the same military adventure and was proclaimed emperor by the army. Jovian's reign was short but his successors were also Christians.

Yet the persecution was never complete, for the Church, not having a literary tradition of its own, adopted those of the Greek and Roman worlds. So persecution was soon limited to refutation, directed to avert the dangers of polytheism, or even worse dangers, since the Olympian gods were depicted not always as fantasies or dead gods, but as real living demons.

The survival of the myths during the Middle Ages in the East is probably best illustrated by the works of the Byzantine mythographers Johannes Tzetzes and Eustathius (both lived in the 12th century AD). Tzetzes is known for, among many other works, his commentaries on Homer, his reviews of Greek literature, his scholia and allegorical interpretations. Eustathius, who is regarded as a saint by the Orthodox Church, wrote, besides commentaries on Pindar and Homer, many notes on mythology and other subjects, being considered as a representative of the allegorical interpretation of the myths as well. The allegorical theories, which assume that the myths conceal deeper meanings, are among the most ancient and influential. The allegorist sees the myth as disguising physical, historical or philosophical meanings, and regards these as the real *raison d'être* of the myth. An important allegorist in the late 5th century BC was Metrodorus of Lampsacus (not the epicurean, who comes later), who, after studying Homer, allegorised both gods and humans and is reported to have said that *Agamemnon* was the Aether, *Achilles* the sun, *Helen* the earth, *Paris* the air, *Hector* the moon, *Demeter* the liver, *Dionysus* the spleen, and *Apollo* the bile. Fabius Planciades Fulgentius (ca. AD 467-532), known as the Mythographer, is considered to have been particularly influential during the Middle Ages, when his *Mitologiarum libri tres* was widely read. According to Ruiz de Elvira, modern psychoanalysis and structuralism do not differ essentially from Fulgentius' allegorism.

In the west, however, the decadence of education followed the barbarian irruption, and by the 7th century AD, the cultural tradition had collapsed. But neither cultural tradition nor the worshipping of the Olympian gods ever disappeared completely, as it has been recorded in the France of the 12th century, specially in Orléans and Chartres, where the classics were extensively studied, pagan festivals were still held, and reliefs depicting mythological motives were added to the cathedral at Chartres, a by no means exceptional circumstance, for there are multiple examples of the use of mythological motives in Christian temples, and even monks are known to have daily washed their faces in a charming fountain decorated with the faces of approximately twenty personages belonging to the Olympian pantheon. These anecdotes suggest that dogma cannot but soften with time and probably the reason why oblivion is regarded not just as the only true forgiveness but also as the only true revenge lies in the observation that the enemy is sometimes effectively kept alive when fought against.

In addition, during the Middle Ages, the myths survived through the studies motivated by the theories of interpretation. One of them, euhemerism, which had already seen the light in antiquity, was now used as a proof against the myths and the Olympian religion, for those who originally were men had been turned into gods by the ignorance and idolatry of the pagans, as that theory proved. So the representatives of the Church, on one side could say that the gods were demons, thereby confirming their existence in a certain dimension, and on the other side they could argue, supported by euhemerism, that the Olympian gods had originally been men, thereby confirming their existence in history. This is an example of what may be called a helpful enemy, and these misdirected efforts were carried out, for example, by Isidore, bishop of Seville and today a saint, who lived around AD 600 and wrote an extensive work called *Origins*. Euhemerism derives its name from Euhemerus (fl. 300 BC), who is known for his tour de force of turning gods into men, so that *Uranus*, *Cronos* and *Zeus* became kings of a remote past. Euhemerus became highly appreciated in the Christian ecclesiastical milieu for having stripped the gods of their divine nature, and for that extraordinary prowess he was counted among those "*who lived sensible lives and discerned more acutely*" (Clement of Alexandria, ca. AD 150-211, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2.20P). Euhemerus claimed to have found the history of the gods written in a golden column in the island of Panchaea in the Indian Ocean.

Now that thanks to Euhemerus and his Christian followers the gods became men, extensive genealogies were elaborated paralleling those of the pagans with those of the people of God, and in these the mythical personages found a respectable abode, for they were acknowledged as, for example, precursors of arts and crafts. This is one reason why students continued through the Middle Ages to be burdened with mythology. And as monarchies are highly dependent on genealogy, the temporal powers of those times discovered their family links with ancient heroes or invented new ones, thereby improving the quality of their lineage. Also Scandinavian mythology was made dependent on the Greek by Snorre Sturlasson (AD 1179-1241) who, in retrieving the Scandinavian tales in his *Edda Songs*, transforms the otherwise unknown grandson of King *Priamus* of *Troy*, whom he called *Tror* into the god *Tor*. Similarly in a Victorian time chart from 1890 the god *Odin* is described as the first to have settled Scandinavia in 70 BC. Euhemerism was adapted and diffused by Ennius (239-169 BC) and by Lactantius (AD 240-320), a Christian apologist.

Theories of interpretation seem to have always interested the Church as instruments of refutation and just as euhemerism was appreciated for the possibility it offered for depriving the Olympian gods of their divinity, allegorism was held in esteem for its capacity to enrich Christian morality. The symbols and allegories contained in the myths interested, among others, John of Salisbury (ca. AD 1110-1180), English bishop of Chartres, philosopher and theologian, who firmly believed that there were hidden teachings of high moral value in the myths. By the 14th century this process led to the rehabilitation of the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso as a man versed in ethics and even theology, and the Christians started to read his *Metamorphoses* as the devil reads the Bible, that is, finding in Ovid's poetry the truths that confirmed their moral values.

Also astrology, which after the death of Alexander the Great was introduced from Mesopotamia and Egypt into the Greek world and later reached a golden period in imperial Rome, contributed to the preservation of the myths during the Middle Ages, when the influence of the stars became more firmly related to the course of history, the planets to the gods, and the gods to symbols of moral virtue. Despite the popularity that astrology reached in later times, the idea of the divinity of celestial bodies as opposed to the idea of stones wandering in the sky was far from unfamiliar in classical Greece:

"The situation has been entirely reversed since the days when thinkers thought of the stars as without souls. Yet even then they were object of admiration, and the conviction which is now actually held was suspected by those who embarked on exactness: that in no way could the stars as soulless things keep so precisely to marvellous calculations, if they did not possess intelligence. Some even then were bold enough to venture this very proposition and they say that it was reason that had ordained everything in the sky. But these very men were deceived about the nature of the soul, namely that it is older than the bodies; they imagined it as younger and thus so to speak ruined everything, and most of all themselves." (Plato. *Laws* 967b *et seq.*).

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the study of the myths detached themselves from theology, and mythological compilations were published like the *Liber* of Albricus and the massive work written by the author of *Decamerone*, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75), entitled *Genealogia Deorum*, published in 1473, reprinted several times, and relatively soon (1581) translated into Italian, less than thirty years after the first release of the Library of Apollodorus (which had been used by the Byzantines) in Greek and Latin in 1555. In 1548 appeared as well the compilation called *De Deis Gentium Varia et Multiplex Historia*, written by Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, which also contributed to the autonomy of the myths both in relation to theology and interpretation. These written works together with those that were created by the visual arts and crafts, transformed 16th century Italy into a landscape populated by the gods and heroes of Greece and Rome: Renaissance was the word.

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