Greek mythology

Greek mythology, body of stories concerning the gods, heroes, and rituals of the ancient Greeks and Classical antiquity. That the myths contained a considerable element of fiction was recognized by the more critical Greeks, such as the philosopher Plato in the 5th–4th century bce. In general, however, in the popular piety of the Greeks, the myths were viewed as true accounts. Greek mythology has subsequently had extensive influence on the arts and literature of Western civilization, which fell heir to much of Greek culture.

Although people of all countries, eras, and stages of civilization have developed myths that explain the existence and workings of natural phenomena, recount the deeds of gods or heroes, or seek to justify social or political institutions, the myths of the Greeks have remained unrivaled in the Western world as sources of imaginative and appealing ideas. Poets and artists from ancient times to the present have derived inspiration from Greek mythology and have discovered contemporary significance and relevance in Classical mythological themes.

Sources of myths: literary and archaeological

The Homeric poems: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

The 5th-century-bce Greek historian Herodotus remarked that Homer and Hesiod gave to the Olympian gods their familiar characteristics. Few today would accept this literally. In the first book of the *Iliad*, the son of Zeus and Leto (Apollo, line 9) is as instantly identifiable to the Greek reader by his patronymic as are the sons of Atreus (Agamemnon and Menelaus, line 16). In both cases, the audience is expected to have knowledge of the myths that preceded their literary rendering. Little is known to suggest that the Greeks treated Homer, or any other source of Greek myths, as mere entertainment, whereas there are prominent Greeks from Pindar to the later Stoa for whom myths, and those from Homer in particular, are so serious as to warrant bowdlerization or allegorization.

The works of Hesiod: *Theogony* and *Works and Days*

The fullest and most important source of myths about the origin of the gods is the *Theogony* of Hesiod (c. 700 bce). The elaborate genealogies mentioned above are accompanied by folktales and etiological myths. The *Works and Days* shares some of these in the context of a farmer's calendar and an extensive harangue on the subject of justice addressed to Hesiod's possibly fictitious brother Perses. The orthodox view treats the two poems as quite different in theme and treats the *Works and Days* as a theodicy (a natural theology). It is possible, however, to treat the two poems as a diptych, each part dependent on the other. The *Theogony* declares the identities and alliances of the gods, while the *Works and Days* gives advice on the best way to succeed in a dangerous world, and Hesiod urges that the most reliable—though by no means certain—way is to be just.

Other literary works

Fragmentary post-Homeric epics of varying date and authorship filled the gaps in the accounts of the Trojan War recorded in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; the so-called Homeric Hymns (shorter surviving poems) are the source of several important religious myths. Many of the lyric poets preserved various myths, but the odes of Pindar of Thebes (flourished 6th–5th century bce) are particularly rich in myth and legend. The works of the three tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, all of the 5th century bce—are remarkable for the variety of the traditions they preserve.

In Hellenistic times (323–30 bce) Callimachus, a 3rd-century-bce poet and scholar in Alexandria, recorded many obscure myths; his contemporary, the mythographer Euhemerus, suggested that the gods were originally human, a view known as Euhemerism. Apollonius of Rhodes, another scholar of the 3rd century bce, preserved the fullest account of the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece.

In the period of the Roman Empire, the *Geography* of Strabo (1st century bce), the *Library* of the pseudo-Apollodorus (attributed to a 2nd-century-ce scholar), the antiquarian writings of the Greek biographer Plutarch, and the works of Pausanias, a 2nd-century-ce historian, as well as the *Latin Genealogies* of Hyginus, a 2nd-century-ce mythographer, have provided valuable sources in Latin of later Greek mythology.

Archaeological discoveries

The discovery of the Mycenaean civilization by Heinrich Schliemann, a 19th-century German amateur archaeologist, and the discovery of the Minoan civilization in Crete (from which the Mycenaean ultimately derived) by Sir Arthur Evans, a 20th-century English archaeologist, are essential to the 21st-century understanding of the development of myth and ritual in the Greek world. Such discoveries illuminated aspects of Minoan culture from about 2200 to 1450 bce and Mycenaean culture from about 1600 to 1200 bce; those eras were followed by a Dark Age that lasted until about 800 bce. Unfortunately, the evidence about myth and ritual at Mycenaean and Minoan sites is entirely monumental, because the Linear B script (an ancient form of Greek found in both Crete and Greece) was mainly used to record inventories.

Geometric designs on pottery of the 8th century bce depict scenes from the Trojan cycle, as well as the adventures of Heracles. The extreme formality of the style, however, renders much of the identification difficult, and there is no inscriptional evidence accompanying the designs to assist scholars in identification and interpretation. In the succeeding Archaic (c. 750–c. 500 bce), Classical (c. 480–323 bce), and Hellenistic periods, Homeric and various other mythological scenes appear to supplement the existing literary evidence.

Forms of myth in Greek culture

To distinguish between myth, legend, and folktale can be useful, provided it is remembered that the Greeks themselves did not do so.

Religious myths

the gods on OlympusThe gods on Olympus: Athena, Zeus, Dionysus, Hera, and Aphrodite. Detail of a painting on a Greek cup; in the National Archaeological Museum, Tarquinia, Italy.(more)

Greek religious myths are concerned with gods or heroes in their more serious aspects or are connected with ritual. They include cosmogonical tales of the genesis of the gods and the world out

of Chaos, the successions of divine rulers, and the internecine struggles that culminated in the supremacy of Zeus, the ruling god of Olympus (the mountain that was considered the home of the gods). They also include the long tale of Zeus's amours with goddesses and mortal women, which usually resulted in the births of younger deities and heroes. The goddess Athena's unique status is implicit in the story of her motherless birth (she sprang full-grown from Zeus's forehead); and the myths of Apollo explain that god's sacral associations, describe his remarkable victories over monsters and giants, and stress his jealousy and the dangers inherent in immortal alliances.

Myths of Dionysus, on the other hand, demonstrate the hostility aroused by a novel faith. Some myths are closely associated with rituals, such as the account of the drowning of the infant Zeus's cries by the Curetes, attendants of Zeus, clashing their weapons, or Hera's annual restoration of her virginity by bathing in the spring Canathus. Some myths about heroes and heroines also have a religious basis. The tale of creation and moral decline forms part of the myth of the Four Ages (*see below* Myths of the ages of the world). The subsequent destruction of humanity by flood and regeneration of humans from stones is partly based on folktale.

Legends

Myths were viewed as embodying divine or timeless truths, whereas legends (or sagas) were quasi-historical. Hence, famous events in epics, such as the Trojan War, were generally regarded as having really happened, and heroes and heroines were believed to have actually lived. Earlier sagas, such as the voyage of the Argonauts, were accepted in a similar fashion. Most Greek legends were embellished with folktales and fiction, but some certainly contain a historical substratum. Such are the tales of more than one sack of Troy, which are supported by archaeological evidence, and the labours of Heracles, which might suggest Mycenaean feudalism. Again, the legend of the Minotaur (a being part human, part bull) could have arisen from exaggerated accounts of bull leaping in ancient Crete.

In another class of legends, heinous offenses—such as attempting to rape a goddess, deceiving the gods grossly by inculpating them in crime, or assuming their prerogatives—were punished by everlasting torture in the underworld. The consequences of social crimes, such as murder or incest, were also described in legend (e.g., the story of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother). Legends were also sometimes employed to justify existing political systems or to bolster territorial claims.

Folktales

Folktales, consisting of popular recurring themes and told for amusement, inevitably found their way into Greek myth. Such is the theme of lost persons—whether husband, wife, or child (e.g., Odysseus, Helen of Troy, or Paris of Troy)—found or recovered after long and exciting adventures. Journeys to the land of the dead were made by Orpheus (a hero who went to Hades to restore his dead wife, Eurydice, to the realm of the living), Heracles, Odysseus, and Theseus (the slayer of the Minotaur). The victory of the little man by means of cunning against impossible odds, the exploits of the superman (e.g., Heracles), or the long-delayed victory over enemies are still as popular with modern writers as they were with the Greeks.

The successful countering of the machinations of cruel sires and stepmothers, the rescue of princesses from monsters, and temporary forgetfulness at a crucial moment are also familiar themes

in Greek myth. Recognition by tokens, such as peculiarities of dress or Odysseus's scar, is another common folktale motif. The babes-in-the-woods theme of the exposure of children and their subsequent recovery is also found in Greek myth. The Greeks, however, also knew of the exposure of children as a common practice.

Types of myths in Greek culture

Myths of origin

Myths of origin represent an attempt to render the universe comprehensible in human terms. Greek creation myths (cosmogonies) and views of the universe (cosmologies) were more systematic and specific than those of other ancient peoples. Yet their very artistry serves as an impediment to interpretation, since the Greeks embellished the myths with folktale and fiction told for its own sake. Thus, though the aim of Hesiod's *Theogony* is to describe the ascendancy of Zeus (and, incidentally, the rise of the other gods), the inclusion of such familiar themes as the hostility between the generations, the enigma of woman (Pandora), the exploits of the friendly trickster (Prometheus), and the struggles against powerful beings or monsters like the Titans (and, in later tradition, the Giants) enhances the interest of an epic account.

According to Hesiod, four primary divine beings first came into existence: the Gap (Chaos), Earth (Gaea), the Abyss (Tartarus), and Love (Eros). The creative process began with the forcible separation of Gaea from her doting consort Heaven (Uranus) in order to allow her progeny to be born. The means of separation employed, the cutting off of Uranus's genitals by his son Cronus, bears a certain resemblance to a similar story recorded in Babylonian epic. The crudity is relieved, however, in characteristic Greek fashion, by the friendly collaboration of Uranus and Gaea, after their divorce, on a plan to save Zeus from the same Cronus, his cannibalistic sire.

According to Greek cosmological concepts, the Earth was viewed as a flat disk afloat on the river of Ocean. The Sun (Helios) traversed the heavens like a charioteer and sailed around the Earth in a golden bowl at night. Natural fissures were popularly regarded as entrances to the subterranean house of Hades—i.e., the home of the dead.

Myths of the ages of the world

From a very early period, Greek myths seem to have been open to criticism and alteration on grounds of morality or of misrepresentation of known facts. In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod makes use of a scheme of Four Ages (or Races): Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron. "Race" is the more accurate translation, but "Golden Age" has become so established in English that both terms should be mentioned. These races or ages are separate creations of the gods, the Golden Age belonging to the reign of Cronus and the subsequent races being the creation of Zeus. Those of the Golden Age never grew old, were free from toil, and passed their time in jollity and feasting. When they died, they became guardian spirits on Earth.

Why the Golden Age came to an end Hesiod failed to explain, but it was succeeded by the Silver Age. After an inordinately prolonged childhood, the men of the Silver Age began to act presumptuously and neglected the gods. Consequently, Zeus hid them in the Earth, where they became spirits among the dead.

Zeus next created the men of the Bronze Age, men of violence who perished by mutual destruction. At this point the poet intercalates the Age (or Race) of Heroes. He thereby destroys the symmetry of the myth, in the interests of history: what is now known as the Minoan-Mycenaean period was generally believed in antiquity to have been a good time to live. (This subjection of myth to history is not universal in Greece, but it is found in writers such as Hesiod, Xenophanes, Pindar, Aeschylus, and Plato.) Of these heroes the more-favoured (who were related to the gods) reverted to a kind of restored Golden Age existence under the rule of Cronus (forced into honourable exile by his son Zeus) in the Isles of the Blessed.

The final age, the antithesis of the Golden Age, was the Iron Age, during which the poet himself had the misfortune to live. But even that was not the worst, for he believed that a time would come when infants would be born old and there would be no recourse left against the universal moral decline. The presence of evil was explained by Pandora's rash action in opening the fatal jar.

Elsewhere in Greek and Roman literature, the belief in successive periods or races is found with the belief that by some means, when the worst is reached, the system gradually (Plato, *Politikos*) or quickly (Virgil, *Fourth Eclogue*) returns to the Golden Age. Hesiod may have known this version; he wishes to have been born either earlier or later. There is also a myth of progress, associated with Prometheus, god of craftsmen, but the progress is limited, for the 19th-century concept of eternal advancement is absent from Greek thought.

Myths of the gods

Myths about the gods described their births, victories over monsters or rivals, love affairs, special powers, or connections with a cultic site or ritual. As these powers tended to be wide, the myths of many gods were correspondingly complex. Thus, the Homeric Hymns to Demeter, a goddess of agriculture, and to the Delian and Pythian Apollo describe how these deities came to be associated with sites at Eleusis, Delos, and Delphi, respectively. Similarly, myths about Athena, the patroness of Athens, tend to emphasize the goddess's love of war and her affection for heroes and the city of Athens, and those concerning Hermes (the messenger of the gods), Aphrodite (goddess of love), or Dionysus describe Hermes' proclivities as a god of thieves, Aphrodite's lovemaking, and Dionysus's association with wine, frenzy, miracles, and even ritual death. Poseidon (god of the sea) was unusually atavistic in that his union with Earth, and his equine adventures appear to hark back to his pre-marine status as a horse or earthquake god.

Many myths are treated as trivial and lighthearted, but this judgment rests on the suppressed premise that any divine behaviour that seems inappropriate for a major religion must have seemed absurd and fictitious to the Greeks. Homer barely mentions the judgment of Paris, but he knew the far from trivial consequences for Troy of the favour of Aphrodite and the bitter enmity of Hera and Athena, which the "judgment of Paris" was composed to explain.

As time went on, an accretion of minor myths continued to supplement the older and more authentic ones. Thus, the loves of Apollo, virtually ignored by Homer and Hesiod, explained why the bay (or laurel) became Apollo's sacred tree and how he came to father Asclepius, a healing god. Similarly, the presence of the cuckoo on Hera's sceptre at Hermione or the invention of the panpipe were explained by fables. Such etiological myths proliferated during the Hellenistic era, though in the earlier periods genuine examples are harder to detect.

Of folk deities, the nymphs (nature goddesses) personified nature or the life in water or trees and were said to punish unfaithful lovers. Water nymphs (Naiads) were reputed to drown those with whom they fell in love, such as Hylas, a companion of Heracles. Even the gentle Muses (goddesses of the arts and sciences) blinded their human rivals, such as the bard Thamyris. Satyrs (youthful folk deities with bestial features) and sileni (old and drunken folk deities) were the nymphs' male counterparts. Like sea deities, sileni possessed secret knowledge that they would reveal only under duress. Charon, the grisly ferryman of the dead, was also a popular figure of folktale.

Myths of heroes

Hero myths included elements from tradition, folktale, and fiction. The saga of the Argonauts, for example, is highly complex and includes elements from folktale and fiction. Episodes in the Trojan cycle, such as the departure of the Greek fleet from Aulis or Theseus's Cretan expedition and death on Scyros, may belong to traditions dating from the Minoan-Mycenaean world. On the other hand, events described in the *Iliad* probably owe far more to Homer's creative ability than to genuine tradition. Even heroes like Achilles, Hector, or Diomedes are largely fictional, though doubtlessly based on legendary prototypes. The *Odyssey* is the prime example of the wholesale importation of folktales into epic. All the best-known Greek hero myths, such as the labours of Heracles and the adventures of Perseus, Cadmus, Pelops, or Oedipus, depend more for their interest on folktales than on legend.

Certain heroes—Heracles, the Dioscuri (the twins Castor and Pollux), Amphiaraus (one of the Argonauts), and Hyacinthus (a youth whom Apollo loved and accidentally killed)—may be regarded as partly legend and partly religious myth. Thus, whereas Heracles, a man of Tiryns, may originally have been a historical character, the myth of his demise on Oeta and subsequent elevation to full divinity is closely linked with a cult. In time, Heracles' popularity was responsible for connecting his story with the Argonauts, an earlier attack on Troy, and with Theban myth. Similarly, the exploits of the Dioscuri are those of typical heroes: fighting, carrying off women, and cattle rustling. After their death they passed six months alternately beneath the Earth and in the world above, which suggests that their worship, like that of Persephone (the daughter of Zeus and Demeter), was connected with fertility or seasonal change.

Myths of seasonal renewal

Certain myths, in which goddesses or heroes were temporarily incarcerated in the underworld, were allegories of seasonal renewal. Perhaps the best-known myth of this type is the one that tells how Hades (Latin Pluto), the god of the underworld, carried Persephone off to be his consort, causing her mother, Demeter, the goddess of grain, to allow the earth to grow barren out of her grief. Because of her mother's grief, Zeus permitted Persephone to spend four months of the year in the house of Hades and eight in the light of day. In less benign climates, she was said to spend six months of the year in each. Some scholars hold that Persephone's time belowground represents the summer months, when Greek fields are parched and bare, but the *Hymn to Demeter*, the earliest source for the myth, states explicitly that Persephone returns when the spring flowers are flourishing (line 401). Myths of seasonal renewal, in which the deity dies and returns to life at particular times of the year, are plentiful. An important Greek example is the Cretan Zeus, mentioned above.

Myths involving animal transformations

Many Greek myths involve animal transformations, though there is no proof that theriolatry (animal worship) was ever practiced by the Greeks. Gods sometimes assumed the form of beasts in order to deceive goddesses or women. Zeus, for example, assumed the form of a bull when he carried off Europa, a Phoenician princess, and he appeared in the guise of a swan in order to attract Leda, wife of a king of Sparta. Poseidon took the shape of a stallion to beget the wonder horses Arion and Pegasus.

These myths do not suggest theriolatry. No worship is offered to the deity concerned. The animals serve other purposes in the narratives. Bulls were the most powerful animals known to the Greeks and may have been worshipped in the remote past. But, for the Greeks, in even the earliest sources there is no indication that Zeus or Poseidon were once bulls or horses or that Hera was ever "ox-eyed" other than metaphorically or that "gray-eyed" Athena was ever "owl-faced."

Other types

Other types of myth exemplified the belief that the gods sometimes appeared on Earth disguised as men and women and rewarded any help or hospitality offered them. Baucis, an old Phrygian woman, and Philemon, her husband, for example, were saved from a flood by offering hospitality to Zeus and Hermes, both of whom were in human form.

The punishment of mortals' presumption in claiming to be the gods' superiors, whether in musical skill or even the number of their children, is described in several myths. The gods' jealousy of mortals' musical talents appears in the beating and flaying of the *aulos*-playing satyr, Marsyas, by Athena and Apollo, as well as in the attaching of ass's ears to King Midas for failing to appreciate the superiority of Apollo's music to that of the god Pan. Jealousy was the motive for the slaying of Niobe's many children, because Niobe flaunted her fecundity to the goddess Leto, who had only two offspring. Similar to such stories are the moral tales about the fate of Icarus, who flew too high on homemade wings, or the myth about Phaethon, the son of Helios, who failed to perform a task too great for him (controlling the horses of the chariot of the Sun).

Transformation into a flower or tree—whether to escape a god's embrace (as with Daphne, a nymph transformed into a laurel tree), as the result of an accident (as with Hyacinthus, a friend of Apollo, who was changed into a flower), or because of pride (as with the beautiful youth Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection and was changed into a flower)—was a familiar theme in Greek myth.

Also popular were myths of fairylands, such as the Garden of the Hesperides (in the far west) or the land of the Hyperboreans (in the far north), or encounters with unusual creatures, such as the Centaurs, or distinctive societies, such as the Amazons.