

GREEK & ROMAN STUDIES 209

8. *The Four (or Five) 'Ages'*

Assigned Reading: Chapter I.4, "The Four or Five Ages",
in Mark Morford et al., *Classical Mythology* (11th ed.), pp. 87-91



(above) Aetas Aurea ('The Golden Age'). Johann Wilhelm Baur, 1703.
Engraving for an 18th-cent. edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

"At the very first, the immortals [athanatoi] who have their homes on Olympus
made a golden race [genos chryseon] of mortal humans [anthrōpoi]."
Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109f.
(Greek, 8th cent. B.C.; cf. Morford, p. 87)

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"Then first was sown the golden age [aurea aetas], which nurtured
justice [rectum] and faithfulness [fides] spontaneously,
without need of law [lex] or avenger [vindex]."
Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.89ff.
(Roman, 1st cent. A.D.; not in Morford)

Ages or Races?

Hesiod's *Works and Days* contains a brief, highly schematized account of the various periods (five in all) into which the history of anthrōpoi (humans) may be divided. Your textbook misleadingly calls these 'ages', adding the subheadings, 'Age of Gold', 'Age of Silver', etc., to accompany its selections from that poem (*Works and Days*, lines 106-201; cf. Morford et al., pp. 87-91). While a later Roman poet did indeed speak of 'ages' (aetates; see Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, above), our Greek author refers to 'races' (Gk. genea). It is an important distinction. Hesiod could have adopted (but did not) the concept of a simple 'devolution' of human history through descending ages—their deteriorating values indicated by reference to successively baser metals. Such a motif is known in other ancient traditions (cf. the biblical parallels noted on the next page), and, of course, it is the pattern that Ovid followed. For Hesiod, though, each race is, as it were, a separate species. We who belong to the present Iron Race (genos sidērion) are unrelated to all humans who came before us, including the extra Race of Heroes that Hesiod has inserted between the Bronze and the Iron. This schema was abandoned by later authors, perhaps in deference to the many royal and aristocratic houses who fancied a direct descent from such heroes as Heracles, Perseus, Theseus, etc. Ovid omits separate mention of a Race of Heroes and adds, instead, an Age that followed the great Flood. I have called this the 'Stone Age' because it was from the stones which

Deucalon and Pyrrha, survivors of the Flood, threw behind their backs that our present generation (according to Ovid) sprang.

Hesiod's <i>Works and Days</i> (Greek)	Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i> (Roman)
Golden Race (W&D 109-126)	Golden Age (Metam. 1.89-112)
Silver Race (W&D 127-139)	Silver Age (Metam. 1.113-124)
Bronze Race (W&D 125ff.)	Bronze Age (Metam. 1.125ff.)
Race of Heroes (W&D 157-173)	
Race of Iron (W&D 174-201)	Iron Age (Metam. 1.127-150)
	'Stone' Age (Metam. 1.400-415)

(left) A Comparison of Hesiod's & Ovid's accounts of the Races and Ages of humans (respectively). Hesiod inserted a Race of Heroes between Bronze and Iron (our present age); Ovid adds an Age (in which we currently live) that originated from the stones thrown by Deucalion and Pyrrha following the Flood.

By way of ancient parallel, the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 2 and 3) famously opens in paradise with a Garden of Eden that closely resembles the setting inhabited by Hesiod's golden race. When Adam sins, he is expelled from the Garden (later tradition characterized this as his—our—'fall' from primordial purity) into the world of suffering and death that we recognize as our own. Unlike Hesiod, however, the Bible does not distinguish Adam's race from our own: we are his and Eve's biological and spiritual descendants.



(left) *Adam and Eve in the Garden*. Albrecht Dürer, 1504.
Engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
(right) Nebuchadnezzar's Dream: the composite statue.
Illustration of Ars moriendi (15th cent.), BM ms. 0089
(f. 012), Marseille.

A more exact parallel with Hesiod's description occurs in the biblical Book of Daniel, where the prophet interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream of an enormous statue composed of four metals: a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay (Daniel 2:31-45; see illustration on previous page). These, said Daniel, represent various kingdoms, including Nebuchadnezzar's own (the head of gold=Babylon) and four others that will succeed (not precede) his.

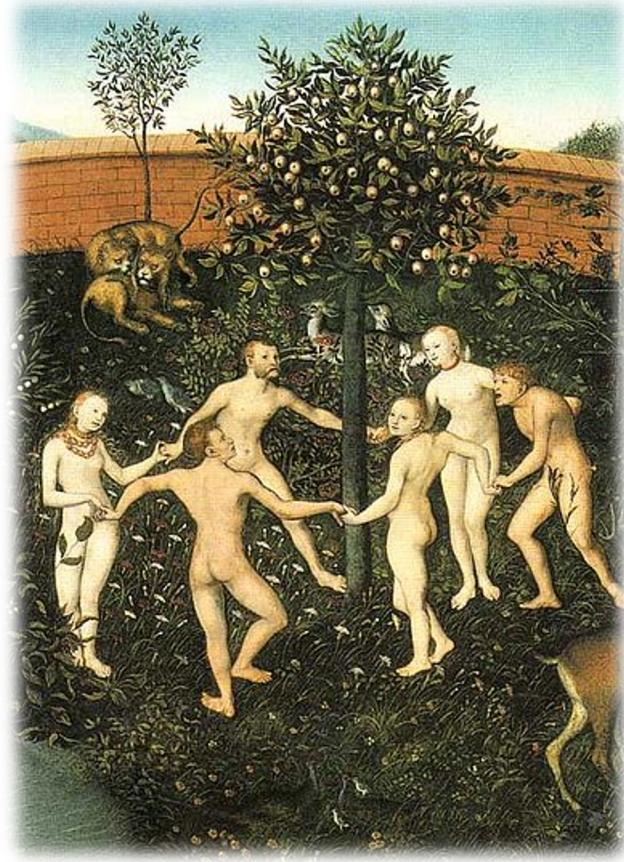
Hesiod's Golden Race

1. "If you like, I shall offer a fine and skillful summary of another tale [*heteros logos*] and you ponder it in your heart: how gods and mortal humans [*thnētoi anthrōpoi*] came into being from the same origin [*homothen*]. At the very first, the immortals who have their homes on Olympus made a golden race of mortal humans. They existed at the time when Cronus was king in heaven, and they lived as gods with carefree hearts completely without toil or trouble . . . And all good things were theirs; the fertile land of its own accord bore fruit ungrudgingly in abundance." Hesiod,

Works and Days 106ff. (Morford, p. 87)

(right) "The Golden Age" (detail).
Lucas Cranach the Elder. Oil on panel, c. 1530.

Alte Pinakothek, Munich. While the biblical account of paradise ends unhappily (Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden), Hesiod's version attributes to the first golden race a natural, peaceful death, followed by a role for them in the afterlife as holy, protective spirits dwelling upon the earth (daimones hagnoi epichthonioi).



Notice how Hesiod segues into this part of his poem, by proposing "another tale" of the origins of humanity (different from the story of Pandora that immediately precedes it). He does not even attempt to synchronize these diverse narratives. In calling us *thnētoi* (Gk. 'mortals', i.e., subject to thanatos, 'death'), he employs one of his and Homer's most frequent epithets for humans. By contrast, the gods are most often called *athanatoi*, 'deathless' or 'immortal'. Therein lies the principal distinction between them and us: we are bound to die; they never will. Even the 'demigods' of the Heroic Race died (usually quite gruesomely), for in this respect their 'half-humanity' trumped their 'half-divinity'. True, many a hero is elevated to full divine status afterwards, but they must all undergo death first. In Hesiod's narrative, every race eventually perishes, whether peacefully (golden) or through violence (all the others).

A word about Hesiod's curious statement, "gods and mortal humans came into being from the same origin" (line 108). He cannot mean that we have the same source, for gods are born of other gods, and we are certainly not. Perhaps he means that the golden race came into being concurrently with the Titans (see #1 below), while the silver and subsequent races are contemporary with the reign of the Olympians.



The Role of Cronus

One element in Hesiod's version of the Golden Race at variance with statements he makes elsewhere is his designation of **Cronus** as the reigning god during that period. Is this the same tyrannical Titan who swallowed his children as they came from Rhea's womb? The violent enemy of order finally defeated by Zeus? “[T]here is a seemingly irreconcilable breach”, says Robert Mondi, “between the Cronus of the succession myth and the Cronus of the golden age. The utopian Cronus represents a more deeply ingrained ideology that was more widely and popularly diffused among the Greeks for a long period of time.” (“Greek and Near Eastern Mythology”, in Approaches to Greek Myth, ed. Lowell Edmunds [1990], pp. 141-198) What Mondi means is that Hesiod's Succession Myth account, borrowed from Babylonian and other near Eastern sources, is a one-off in the corpus of Greek mythology, while the identification of Cronus (Roman Saturn) with ‘paradise lost’ is much more common throughout Greek and Roman literature.

(left) Saturn. Engraving by Hendrick Goltzius, 1592, from an original fresco by Polydoro da Caravaggio. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The Subsequent Races

I shall leave you to read Hesiod's lines on the subsequent races carefully. Ask yourselves in what specific ways each race differs from the one that preceded it. What are the general downward trends? How does the Race of Heroes both break that pattern and conform to it? Many of Hesiod's details are repeated by Ovid in his parallel treatment in the Metamorphoses. For that reason, I have attached reproductions of some sixteenth-century engravings that were intended to illustrate early printed editions of Ovid's poem. See if you can draw the appropriate connections between the visual version and the textual one(s).

Illustrations on Next Page:

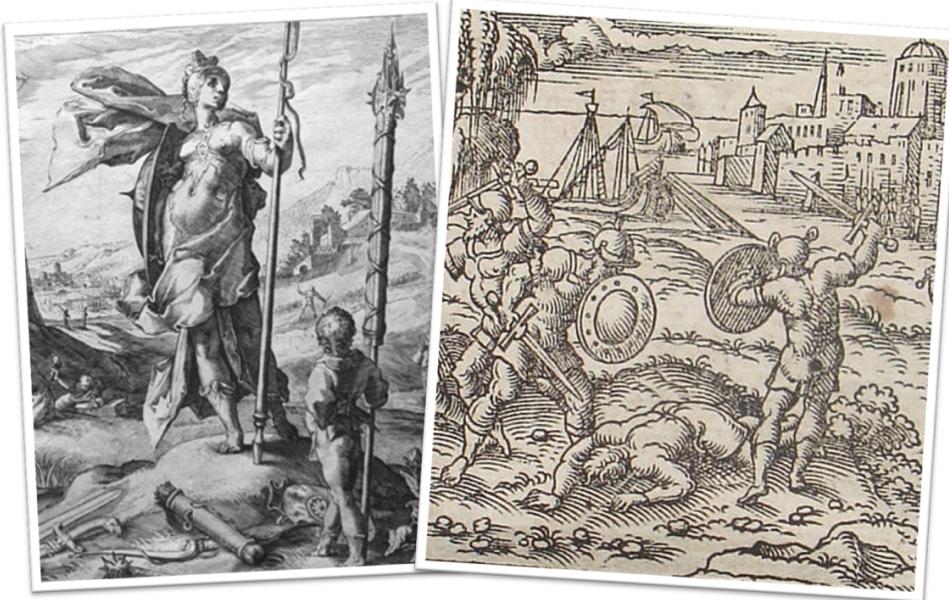
Fig. 1: The Age of Silver. It is no longer Saturn but Jupiter (Zeus) who reigns from above (see his eagle). Here, the introduction of agriculture is the prevalent theme: the earth no longer gives of itself freely and without toil. The inscription, abbreviated from Ovid's poem, reads: “Afterwards, under Jupiter, a worse race arose; each man fenced the fields with his own property line; in place of a radiant golden race there sprang a silver one, and the earth suffered wounds from the sturdy plough.” Engraving by Hendrik Goltzius, to accompany Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book I (1589 edition). Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Fig. 2: The Age of Bronze (warfare). Engraving by Hendrik Goltzius, 1589.

Fig. 3: The Iron Age (toil, old age, internecine strife). Engraving by Virgil Solis, 1581.



(above) Fig. 1; (below left) Fig. 2; (below right) Fig. 3



The Race of Heroes

Hesiod's *Race of Heroes*, which interrupts his schematization based on precious and base metals, is the most authentically Greek portion of this whole section of the *Works and Days*. The two heroic cycles that he alludes to, namely, the Theban and Trojan Sagas, will occupy much of our attention in Part 2 of this course.

2. “But when the earth covered over [the Bronze Race] too, again Zeus, the son of Cronus, made still another, the fourth on the nourishing earth, valiant in war and more just, a godlike race [*theion genos*] of heroic men, who are called demigods [*hēmitheoi*], and who preceded our own race on the vast earth. Evil war and dread battle destroyed some of them under seven-gated Thebes in the land of Cadmus as they battled for the flocks of Oedipus; the end of death closed about others after they had been led in ships over the great depths of the sea to Troy for the sake of Helen of the beautiful hair.”

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 156ff. (Morford, p. 90)

*This heroic race lasted only a few generations, dying out before we lesser mortals appeared on the scene. Their somewhat awkward placement in the poem's otherwise neat scheme of descending metals (no metal is assigned to the race of Heroes) is probably owing to Hesiod's own innovation. He took a traditional myth, common to other ancient cultures, and adapted it to his Greek context, in which the famous heroes were believed to have been bloody and bellicose but also much grander than us, and to have lived just before the invention of iron (introduced into the Greek world c. 1100 B.C. *) made our own race bloodier still.*

**You will notice that the mythological evaluation of bronze and iron is precisely the opposite of modern archaeological usage: when we speak of the Bronze and Iron Ages, we observe not a decline but a technological advance from one to the other.*

The Islands of the Blessed

One of the more memorable details of Hesiod's description of the Race of Heroes is the reward they are granted when they die:

3. "Some [heroes] father Zeus, the son of Cronus, sent to dwell at the ends of the earth where he has them live their lives; these happy heroes inhabit the Islands of the Blessed with carefree hearts by the deep swirling stream of Ocean. For them the fruitful earth bears honey-sweet fruit that ripens three times a year. Far from the immortals, Cronus rules as king over them; for the father of gods and men released him from his bonds. Honour and glory attend these last in equal measure." *Ibid.* 169-173 (Morford, p. 90)

*(right) The Isles of the Blessed? (or Elysium in the Underworld?). Attic relief from 5th cent. B.C.
National Archaeological Museum, Athens.*

Some later commentators identified these Isles of the Blest with the Garden of the Hesperides, located somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. Hesiod is less interested in geographic precision than in poetic symmetry: the heroes' reward in the afterlife is clearly a return to the conditions of

the Golden Race. Even the problematic mentioning of Cronus' name serves as an echo of that earlier time (and gives Hesiod the chance to reconcile his stories as best he can: Cronus is allowed to rule over the Isles of the Blest because Zeus has given him a reprieve!).

What Comes Next?

Hesiod inserts himself into his poem at line 174, lamenting that he, like his readers, must endure the conditions of this present iron race. If only he had been born before . . . or later!

4. "Oh, would that I were not a man of the fifth generation but either had died before or had been born later. Now indeed the race is of iron." *Ibid.* 174f. (Morford, p. 90)

What do these lines suggest to you? Is Hesiod, perhaps, not the complete pessimist we thought he was? Is it possible that, in whatever age succeeds this one, things could get better? I detect the hope, not that he himself will live to see it, but that the world may one day improve. Maybe this is the residue of a cyclical view of history. Is a new Golden Age around the corner? (Ovid thought so! Did Hesiod?)



Meanwhile, this present world is doomed (see #5 below). The only two things keeping us from destroying ourselves are aidōs ('shame', which prevents some people from performing wicked deeds) and nemesis ('retribution', which punishes those who do). These twin prohibitions, personified as goddesses, will one day wrap themselves in their white robes and desert us for Olympus. Hesiod's account is a striking, terrifying look at the state of the world, a just indictment of human injustice, and . . . the least flattering portrait of Zeus' government that we could imagine.

5. “Justice [*dikē*] will be might and shame [*aidōs*] will not exist. The evil person will harm the better, speaking against him unjustly and he will swear an oath besides. Envy [*zēlos*], shrill and ugly and with evil delight, will attend all human beings in their woe. Then *Aidos* and *Nemesis* both will forsake them and go, their beautiful forms shrouded in white, from the wide earth to Olympus among the company of the gods. For mortals sorry griefs will be left and there will be no defence against evil.”

Ibid. 192-201 (Morford, p. 90)