CLAS 104 Course Notes

Classical Mythology

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Table of Contents

[1 What is Mythology? 1](#_Toc61537223)

[1.1 Introduction 1](#_Toc61537224)

[1.1.1 Three Categories of Myths 1](#_Toc61537225)

[1.2 Interpretative Theories 1](#_Toc61537226)

[2 The History Behind Classical Mythology 2](#_Toc61537227)

[2.1 Neolithic Period 2](#_Toc61537228)

[2.2 Early and Middle Bronze Ages 2](#_Toc61537229)

[2.3 Late Bronze Age (Mycenaean) 2](#_Toc61537230)

[2.4 Dark Age, c. 1150-900 B.C.E. and Period of Revival c. 900-750 B.C.E. 3](#_Toc61537231)

[2.5 Archaic Period, c. 750-500 B.C.E. 3](#_Toc61537232)

[2.6 Classical Period, c. 500-323 B.C.E. 3](#_Toc61537233)

[2.7 Hellenistic Period, c. 323-30 B.C.E. 3](#_Toc61537234)

[2.8 Foundation of Rome and Roman Republic, c. 753-27 B.C.E. 3](#_Toc61537235)

[2.9 Early and High Roman Empire, 27 B.C.E. - 200 C.E. 4](#_Toc61537236)

# What is Mythology?

## Introduction

* Mythology is derived from the Greek word “mythos”, dating as far back as Homer in the 8th century B.C.E, meaning “word”, “speech”, “tale”, or “story”
* One important misconception about mythology is that it is a genre of stories which are entirely false
* Mythology can, despite having many elements which we do not consider to be truth, reveal and explore certain absolute truths of human nature and existence
* Example: Cupid striking someone with an arrow to fall in love, we don’t take this action as the literal truth, but rather the suffering and joys of love every human experiences
* Therefore, myth can be defined broadly as a story that may or may not have historical reality, and can consider and explore universal truths about humanity

### Three Categories of Myths

* **Myth Proper:** Stories which deal primarily with the gods, and the relationship between humans and gods (for example, The Homeric Hymns)
* **Saga/Legend:** Stories which have more of a connection to history (for example, the Theban saga, in which Thebes, a real Greek city, is at the centre)
* **Folktale:** Tales of fantastical adventure of particular heroes (for example, the adventures of Heracles or Hercules)
* These divisions are not absolute, for example, Homer’s poem in Iliad contain elements from both myth proper and saga/legend

## Interpretative Theories

* There is no one correct interpretation of a myth, can have different meaning for different people, they don’t provide particular answers but rather provoke questions
* Mythology has been interpreted as etiological stories, that is, from the Greek word “aitia” which means “cause”, implying it explains the causes or origins of certain things
* Mythology can also be allegorical or symbolic, meaning that what one encounters in mythology is representative of aspects of human nature and other universal truths
* Psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and others, studies the connection between mythology and the deepest of human wants and desires
* Connected the Oedipus Complex with Classical mythology
* One of the major criticisms of Freud and Jung is their approach is too generalized and doesn’t account for differences in the myths of distinct cultures around the world
* Of importance for the development of theories which admitted a connection between myth and society, was the work of the Polish anthropologist Bronislav Malinoski
* French scholar Claude Levi-Strauss is most famous for his structuralist approach to myths, where social interactions represent a structure which appears as binary opposites
* Walter Burkert, a famous contemporary scholar of Greek religion, sees the structuralist approach to myths as useful, but only if they are grounded in culture
* This approach recognizes universal truths, accepts structuralism and psychology, but at the same time, grounds such approaches in historical and religious context of a society

# The History Behind Classical Mythology

## Neolithic Period

* People first entered Greece over 40,000 years ago
* 6500 B.C.E., agriculture rose in Greece in this period, also known as the late Stone Age

## Early and Middle Bronze Ages

* The innovation of bronze, by adding tin to copper, allowed for a great development in Greece between c. 3000 and 1600 B.C.E.
* In the Middle Bronze age, the arrival of the first Greek speakers occurred in Greece
* Earlier languages were non-Indo-European “Aegean” languages, but the Greek language eventually replaced them

## Late Bronze Age (Mycenaean)

* In 1899, Arthur Evans discovered the site of Knossos, in Crete, a large palace of what was a powerful and influential society known as the Minoans
* In c. 1600-1400, the Mycenaean kingdoms first started to build large palaces and flourished in Greece until c. 1150 B.C.E.
* Many aspects of the myth of the Trojan war derive from Mycenaean civilization
* The Trojan war is now thought by many to be based on an actual conflict in the cite of Troy in the Troad

## Dark Age, c. 1150-900 B.C.E. and Period of Revival c. 900-750 B.C.E.

* Mastery of iron was achieved and innovations in potting that allowed for new designs
* Extremely important during this period was the development of the alphabet

## Archaic Period, c. 750-500 B.C.E.

* A period where particular versions of myths first came to be recorded
* Examples such as the poems of Hesiod, Homer, and the so-called Homeric Hymns
* Colonization, expansion, and innovation characterize this period in Greece

## Classical Period, c. 500-323 B.C.E.

* Dominated by Athenian perspective which held enormous power in the Mediterranean
* Myth was retold and adapted in many forms, including in dramatic performance
* Examples such as the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and Aristophanes

## Hellenistic Period, c. 323-30 B.C.E.

* Began at the death of Alexander the Great and ended at the death of Cleopatra
* The period is dominated politically by kingdoms, most prominently the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt
* Greek scholarship and the study of its literacy past began in earnest

## Foundation of Rome and Roman Republic, c. 753-27 B.C.E.

* The first Roman literature which we possess is from the 2nd century B.C.E.
* But it is in the late Republic, the 1st century B.C.E., that Roman literature reach what is often called its golden age
* Roman literature and art of this and later periods often draw extensively upon Greek versions of myth and compositional techniques, but Roman versions are not slavish

## Early and High Roman Empire, 27 B.C.E. - 200 C.E.

* The end of the Republican period through the reign of Augustus (14-27 C.E.) was a thriving time for Roman literature (often called Augustan literature)
* It was during this period that the poets Vergil (early 30’s B.C.E. to c. 19 B.C.E) and Ovid (20’s B.C.E. to 17 C.E.) rose to fame, both important to Greco-Roman mythology
* Following the Augustan Age, Roman literature continued to thrive, but also changed as it innovated upon earlier models of both Greek and Roman literature