

GREEK MYTHOLOGY

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview The ancient Hellenes were fertile in their imaginations of the doings of the gods, and of the meanings of those doings. Where these deified beings came from, who acquired the role of prophets, historians, porn stars, fearless heroes is not to be lightly guessed. Was it from the archaic cultures of the Balkans, to the north, some vast stock of Aryan tale that imported itself from North India, or the native ingenuity of the Dorian invaders, who made the Greek peninsula theirs before 1000 B. C. E.? The profusions of story, emerging from these cauldrons of human energy, who would of course be the unparalleled civilization-creators of the fifth century B.C.E., amount to a daring carnival of provocations, half-philosophies, half theologies, and on all sides sallies of pure imaginative spirit. We can make a few openings into this yeasting whole.

The Greeks view of their own mythology Through literature and pictorial art, sculpture and painting especially, the ancient Hellenes lived their mythology. It was the vital creed testified to, from the family hearth on, by private worship of the gods of the family and the clan, as well as by public worship—think of the vast Panathenaic processions depicted on the Parthenon frieze, and representing Attic public life at its most solemn and celebratory. On occasions of birth, naming, ancestral remembrance, the Athenian citizen was immersed in the tales of family, city, and polis-gods, as well as in the tales of the heroes that preceded him, in his or her own family. It is perhaps understandable that these same Greeks were deeper into living and imagining their own myth-stories, than they were into codifying them or reflecting on them. (Brilliant creative writers, the Greeks were seldom active as literary critics.) *The Library of the pseudo-Apollodorus*, a compendium of ancient Greek myths, survives (in very corrupted form) from the first or second centuries A.D., while for educated Greeks, throughout antiquity, Homer's two epics were the Bible of myth, along with the *Theogony* of Hesiod, which aspired not only to record the genealogy of the gods but to provide for them a theology, which would, say, explain the reasons for the inter-generational conflict of the gods.

The Primacy of Homer. It cannot be too forcefully said, that Homer was the storehouse of Greek myth for later generations, as well for the Romans—through Vergil the Romans learned their Greek myths—and in fact for Western Culture, which throughout the Middle Ages and into our time has looked to Homer for the true gold of the mythical imagination. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Homer sets forth a great banquet of the mythical material dominant in his time—the last centuries of the second millennium B.C.E.—and in fact much of the material of Greek tragedy can be found in Homer's accounts of the Trojan War and the return of Odysseus. At the same time, the pictorial material adorning Attic red and black figure vases much enriches our sense of the cross over of mythical awareness from one art to another.

Vase paintings as popular art form The Greek lyric poets, Herodotus the historian, the early Milesian philosophers, all sprinkle their work with references to the early myths central to Homer, for whom life and myth were intertwined. It might be said, though, that vase painting, which was so prominently represented in ancient Athens—over 100,000 painted vases recorded in the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*—was the most widely visible field of ancient Greek artistic expression. Vases were painted for purely artistic domestic consumption, for ceremonial presentations or cults, or to decorate newly constructed official buildings. In many instances the decoration—whether Attic red-figure, black-figured, a combination, or more exotic design patterns—featured well known scenes from Greek mythology.

Vase paintings and the representation of mythology It is significant that tales of the hero Heracles—who cleaned the Augean stables, slew the Nemean Lion, who died by the poison of the centaur Nessus, in a horrifying tale of misunderstandings—were far the most popularly demanded vase themes, for private or public consumption. (These heroic/tragic tales went to the heart of a culture captivated by melodramatically passionate deaths, survivals, even operatic gestures.) Similar cyclical theme hits were widely found as ornaments of daily life in ancient Athens: among the most popular were, say, temple metopes displaying sequentially Heracles at work on accomplishing the twelve labors imposed on him, as expiation of his guilt in slaying his wife and children. (One could track the series of expiations around the

walls of the temple, like the Stations of the Cross, for devout Christians, around the vault of the Cathedral.) Other popular themes, for which specific painters would win consistent acclaim, were the return of Odysseus to Penelope, the fatal wounding of Patroclus, and the loving care provided him by Achilles, or the chase of Hector around the Walls of Troy.

Myth and the visual Rehearsing this gallery of popular themes, one realizes anew how essential visual entertainment—as well as aural, in an often pre-writing culture—was to the sustaining of the fabric of culture. Whether the output of myth was in Greece of a significantly ‘religious’ quality, or no, lies in the interpreter. There were undoubtedly cultic religious practices, in a long epic to Orpheus, already in the fifth century B.C.E., which promised believers something far more like salvation than like entertainment. Yet as an aesthetic people, the Greeks were at all times inclined, at least, to set a high bar on form and beauty, as they assessed the most valued pathways to the higher sense of human value.

Readings

Burn, Lucille, *Greek Myths*, Austin, 1990.

Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen, *The Nature of Greek Myth*, Harmondsworth, 1974.

Discussion questions

Is it possible to separate ancient Greek religion from ancient Greek myth? Do the ancient Greeks ever present the religious impulse as separate from the mythical impulse?

What role did the hero play in Greek mythology and religion? Was the hero conceived of as a savior? Or simply as an exemplary culture figure?

Did the citizens of the Athenian polis have an official ‘religion,’ presided over by ‘priests,’ and directed along the lines of approved texts? If so, was myth part of the material of that religion?