

# Greek Mythology: 3500 BC to AD 2014

*Where do Greek myths come from? How, and when, are they created? What is the point of them? And why haven't they passed away like the Ancient Greeks themselves? Are there modern 'mythologies' in the same sense as Greek mythology?*

## 1. Past and future

The future is unknowable. So Greek Mythology, like the plots of all detective stories, like all increases in our knowledge, belongs to the past. There is no information, except about what has already happened.

But some information about the past helps us manage the future - that is what many historians have thought, and it is what scientists think. Such historians hold that the study of people and societies in the past is as good a guide as you are going to get to how people and societies will behave in the future. And scientists by their experiments determine the circumstances in which certain results will occur and, on that basis, try to deduce a framework of rules that distils all those experiments into predictions about the future. But even the solidest rules will change, given a change in the basis of knowledge: so Newtonian physics gives way to Einstein's relativity, and quantum mechanics baffles us all.

Where does Greek Mythology belong in all this? It is quite like history: it talks about events that are supposed to have happened, but we all know that they did not really happen. Otherwise, they would not be mythology at all. So, take the case of the Trojan War. There was indeed a place that we call Troy (they called it Wilion); and there may have been battles or wars there. But the Trojan War that we know is a conglomeration of stories about characters: it isn't actually chronicling events leading up to the 12th of Thargelion (roughly, May) of a year around 1240 BC - when Hellenikos said it fell (naming the date was a virtuoso stunt). People get fascinated with trying to discover traces of the Trojan War at the archaeological site of Troy, but it's like looking for the Holy Grail. It's a conceptual mistake.

So, Greek Mythology is temptingly like history, but it isn't really history - it's deeper than that. And because it's deeper than that, because it goes into human nature, and people in society, dying young, slaughtering your family, committing terrible mistakes, it really is scraping away at the fundamentals of our psychology. It becomes much more like a clinical experiment and enshrines the results, namely the body of stories, to be our companions today, tomorrow and forever.

## 2. Back to 3500 BC

How far back does Greek mythology go? When were its 'experiments' first conducted, and on whom?

The obvious answer is that it goes back to Greek times. But when were they? [PPT 4] The Greece we study, historical Greece, emerges from the Dark Age in around the 8th century BC. The first date in Greek history is 776 BC, the date of the first Olympic Games, supposedly, and they happen every four years after that. The first Greek literature, at least that survives, the poems of Hesiod and Homer, are hard to date, but probably are around 690 BC, give or take 40 years. *Already at this time, and in these poems, Greek Mythology is fully fledged.*<sup>1</sup> Yes, there may be adjustments later and the odd story pegged onto the tradition, but the principal traditions are there from the beginning. Greek Mythology is something *inherited* by the historical Greeks, rather than *created* by them.

That means we must look further back. This is where the action hots up. Greek Myths have a time and a place. Their *time* is the time before recorded history. It ends with the Trojan War and with the returns from that war. Chronologically, it therefore maps on to the Late Bronze Age, the 'Mycenaean' civilisation centred on great sites recovered by archaeology, probably not much later than 1100 and not earlier than about 1550. It is what we call 'Late Helladic'. It can be shown to reflect the geography of these Mycenaean states, a world of palaces and kings, excluding those later invaders, the Dorian and other NW Greeks that created the historical Greece we know - the Greece of classical Sparta and Corinth (a town missing from the mythology altogether). It is very like the role of Arthurian mythology in the British Isles, which encapsulates a lost age, the age maybe of Celtic Britain before the arrival of the English.

So a very great amount of Greek mythology goes back to a lost age, but was it original even then? Did they wake up on day and invent Greek Mythology? Because that's the odd thing about myth - it has no author, it is handed down, it has always existed. Was there really a time when stories of this type did not circulate? Do they not represent something incalculably older?

These are not just theoretical questions - we actually can provide the answers - because of our knowledge of Indian mythology. [PPT 6] The oldest Indian texts are written in Sanskrit, the Latin of India, and amongst them is the *Mbh*, a titanic epic, several times longer than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together. We know it was in its current form, more or less, by AD 532. A shorter version but still very

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<sup>1</sup> As observed by Heyne 1783, xxxnn

like what we have can be traced at least to the 1st century AD (there is a list of contents from Turkmenistan).<sup>2</sup> But it must go much further back because its geography (as with Homer) points to a date nearer to 1000 BC. At a guess, there was a sort of Indian Homer ('Vyāsa') at much the same time as Homer himself.

*The action* centres on a set of five brothers, the Pāṇḍavas, incarnations of immortal gods, and their wife (yes, wife, singular) Draupadī. This family, righteous and destined to rule, has its position usurped by their relatives, the 100 Dhārtarāṣṭras (or Kauravas), incarnations of demons. Pandu, the father of the Pāṇḍavas, is now dead, but Dhṛtarāṣṭra, his blind half-brother is still alive, if rather feeble in body and indeed in will.

The situation is very like that in Homer's *Iliad*: blind, decrepit Dhritarashtra is Priam; his son Duryodhana who does the fighting for the side that is in the wrong is Hektor. The battle that is fought between Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas is, like the Trojan War, the last battle, the final battle of the heroic age. With both battles, mythology effectively comes to an end. The gods themselves are concerned at the load that the earth is bearing: too many people, and the suggestion that the Trojan War was designed to reduce the excessive population on earth is found in the Cypria,<sup>3</sup> one of the Cyclic epics that are such good evidence for the poetry that existed in Homer's time. Countless scenes recall Greek epic mythology in one way or another. Most strikingly, to win their wife, the heroes must return in disguise, in rags, and then participate in an unusual contest with the bow - a bow that none of Draupadī's suitors can string. The whole passage shrieks Odysseus and Penelope.

There is no reason to believe that Homer was known to the Indian creators of the *Mbh*, nor that the *Mbh* was known to Homer. There is not evidence, either, of this type of epic across the Middle East - where Greece got so much of its culture from. Rather, both Greek epic and Indian epic represent a mythological tradition which both had inherited generation by generation from their predecessors, all the way back to when Greeks and Indians, or rather those that became Greeks and Indians spoke a common language.

We call that language 'Indo-European' and since 1790 have found traces of its existence in the remarkable similarities between the languages that evidently descended from it. It is not a coincidence that the word for three is *tres* in Latin, *trayah* in Sanskrit, *drei* in German and so on. You can tell that from the fact that the word is quite different in unrelated languages: *három* in Hungarian, *šalāš* in Babylonian, *shalosh* in Hebrew (the latter two being related, of course!). The usual opinion, though there are misguided others, is that this language was

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<sup>2</sup> Schlingloff

<sup>3</sup> In  $\Sigma$  *Iliad* 1.5 (F1 West).

spoken up to around 3500 BC over an extensive area north of the Black Sea. Gradually areas of this linguistic group split off and migrated and became the various Indo-European peoples we know today.

If you can trace back the language, it is not unreasonable that you should be able to trace back what they spoke in that language. These were people of the Late Neolithic age, with waggons and agriculture and houses and kinship systems, who ploughed and sowed and had powerful fathers of extended families. They had some sorts of fortifications and they had burial mounds. They also had epic - a traditional mythology sung by bards. And we can tell something about its character from the comparison of Homer with Indian epic. Of course there were mighty heroes fighting great battles; of course there was a tale of glory which would reinforce the values of the male warrior community on whose prowess the whole of this agricultural society depended in an unstable world. But there was more than that and we can detect it.

The warriors of epic are troubled people. Every student of Homer knows there is a sort of heroic code that we need to know about so that we can measure heroes against it. But Achilles is so enveloped in problems that he seems to exceed the ability of the code to confine him. Homer has wonderfully elaborated Achilles' rage and fury, but I do not think he has entirely invented it. If he in the end must reflect on the position of his own father, Peleus, and develop some sympathy for Priam, that is surprisingly close to the acceptance by Yudhiṣṭhira, the leading Pāṇḍava, of a duty towards Dhṛtarāṣṭra. And the five Pāṇḍavas are tormented in their different ways by their *dharma*, their role in life and sense of what is right for them, in effect their heroic code. To win, they must breach that *dharma* and though Kṛṣṇa, the only god on stage, encourages them to do so, it is an agony. And Achilles is not alone in his conflict with the code. Another Cyclic epic, the *Thebaid*,<sup>4</sup> told of how Diomedes' father Tydeus, this time at Thebes in another gruesome and conflicted part of the mythology, was about to receive the prize for his merits: Athene was descending from heaven bearing the nectar that would make him immortal. But at that moment the fury seized him and he began eating the brains of his fallen enemy. Disgusted, Athene returned, mission not accomplished. Long ago, Georges Dumézil unfolded the story of the warrior in several Indo-European traditions and showed how each of them committed some terrible error. Dumézil is not popular amongst many modern writers, but much that he uncovered is revealing: why is it that Herakles must slay his own children? why is it that Herakles must treacherously kill his guest-friend Iphitos? The whole Indo-European tradition seems to point to the torment of the hero or at least the conflicts and failures that heroes must endure.

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<sup>4</sup> F9 West.

The Trojan War, what is its last chapter? Do the Greeks settle there? Not in the story. Do they return happily enriched, having punished the Trojans for their wickedness? Certainly the Trojans are punished, but the story of the return of the heroes from Troy is abject. The fleet is assailed by a huge storm; Locrian Ajax is struck down for his rape of the priestess Cassandra; and Agamemnon, who brings that same Cassandra back to his home, is murdered by his wife. Menelaos is driven to Egypt; Odysseus barely gets home; Idomeneus ends up sacrificing his own daughter as the result of a foolish vow. No triumphalism here. (And for comparison: Kṛṣṇa and his people will be wiped out by civil war and, for good measure, a tsunami.)

So, Greek mythology goes back and back to Indo-European times and maybe back before that. It deals in values, in heroism, in traditions of great achievements, but it also, and powerfully, deals, from the beginning, in crisis, duty, failure, and disaster; in individuals failing, families failing, and in the whole of human society failing. It is powerful and it makes you think. That's why it keeps surviving; it's also why it reaches its classic expression in Greek tragedy, which accurately reflects its character and purpose: *Greek mythology is by its nature tragic*. It must go back before Indo-European times, but my suspicion is that the settled conditions necessary for agriculture are necessary for the sort of mythology we detect. The mythology of hunter-gatherers would look different.

### 3. Futures: onward into Europe

Moving forward now, profound changes occur in the ownership of Greek mythology. Mythology had originally been locally owned - so that if a myth happened at Thebes, that was because Thebans originally told it. So there's already been some movement when the story of Oedipus, King of Thebes, forms part of the Cyclic *Thebaid* told to Greek audiences everywhere, and reaches its definitive expression in the tragedy of Sophocles, the *Oedipus the King*, an Athenian. Even there, however, his amazing final play, the *Oedipus at Kolonos*, does depend to an extent on Athenian legend.

But once we reach the Hellenistic age (323-31 BC), local connections become a matter of learned knowledge rather than of ownership. [PPT 13] The explosion of learning in the last centuries BC, with great libraries (esp. at Alexandria), was a bit like a digital revolution. We owe our subject to this period, the concept of universities too, and indeed the whole idea of education in the sense we now know it. This is the first stage in stopping what might have seemed inevitable: Greek mythology is about local societies that have long since perished and ties into Greek paganism, which was destroyed by the rise of Christianity. So why hasn't mythology itself disappeared?

The answer seems to be that it was reclassified: it had become of interest wherever there were Greeks and had become part of what the educated person should know about their culture. It was heritage and identity - and subscribing to this Greek culture made you an educated Roman too. It was fundamental to the arts - to pictorial art and to poetry and prose. You could not understand culture if you did not know your Greek mythology. So Christianity, whatever its theological difficulties with Greek myth and its randy gods, could sweep aside neither classical learning nor its mythology; indeed in the period between the end of the Roman Empire in the West and the arrival of the Renaissance in 15th century Italy, it was monks in monasteries that preserved ancient texts and culture by copying their manuscripts time and again.

All the same, the knowledge of mythology had become much less detailed in that period. *Our* debt is to the painters and sculptors of the Renaissance.

The situation at this dawn of the modern age is intriguing. Painters were long occupied in decorating religious buildings with frescoes, mosaics, sculptures, and indeed paintings that served their religious purpose. Virgin and child, pious saints, scenes from Old and New Testaments: these came to life and haunted the imagination.

But the quest of the Renaissance was to find art and value in thing beyond the Church and with that change, mythology could return to art at the same time that artists discovered more and more about ancient Roman decorative arts. One of the first was Sandro Botticelli, who around 1480 created a number of paintings which in recent centuries have gained renewed fame. *Venus in her conch shell* or the painting known as *Primavera*, 'Spring', bring pagan gods back to life and do so in a way that hints at deeper philosophies long lost. These paintings were designed to adorn the houses of a powerful person who lived the cultural life, Cosimo de' Medici, and as Vasari says, these were 'executed with exquisite grace'.<sup>5</sup> He also did illustrations of scenes from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* - something which gains in importance when you realise that Boccaccio wrote a very influential new account of the mythology, his *Genealogie*, back in 1360. Art lagged a century behind the written word.

This was a new beginning for Greek mythology in European culture. Long gone the times when myth belonged to little Greek villages and not very huge Greek city-states. Long gone the connection to a pagan religion and a pagan ritual. But in the European imagination the mythology took off as a way of focusing thought and inspiring gorgeous works of art in a dimension other than that of Christian belief and spirituality. But let us not exaggerate either: the same artists who earned some money with their educated mythological paintings, on other

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<sup>5</sup> tr. G. Bull (Harmondsworth 1965), 225.

occasions, and generally more occasions, earned money from the major global corporation, the Church. So beside Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, we should remember the *Ecstasy of St Teresa*. And beside Claude Lorrain's *Aeneas at Carthage*, we should ferret through our bibles to find the story of Hagar.

So there we have it: decoration with a cultural tag and sometimes the power to provoke thought. And while magnificent artworks were created - for instance Giulio Romano's *Battle of the Gods and the Giants* in the Palazzo del Te (1534) at Vergil's birthplace, Mantua - on another track mythology was increasingly to provide the themes for musical plays that we now know as opera. Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, 'favola in musica', was one of the first, in 1607, premiered in Mantua. It is possibly in opera that mythology has been most dominant - there's something about the intensity of emotion in opera, the rehearsal of crises that may happen, very unfortunately, to individuals but that matter on a cosmic scale. This is not very far from the agenda of Greek tragedy, itself a *favola in musica* (we tend to forget the musical dimension, the intensity of the sung laments in which plays climax), and the mythology has lost none of its power - on one condition: that people know the myth already and know its place in mythology. You don't rely on the programme note: it speaks direct to you.

#### 4. Inventing mythology

One of the oddest things about Greek myth is that the term 'myth', in our modern sense (in Greek it only means a 'story'), was not invented until a German, Heyne, began to talk of *mythus* as opposed to fables, in 1783.<sup>6</sup> In a sense that is when Greek mythology began, or rather it is when the *methodical study* of Greek mythology began. Until then it had largely been taken for granted - these were authorised stories of cultural importance; occasionally, indeed quite often, people suppose they must have some ulterior meaning, some deep truth. But now it was a phenomenon, ready for scientific treatment and a whole new era of impact on modern life. One scholar, Otfried Müller, even wrote an introduction to what he called a 'scientific mythology', recognising for instance how very much locations matter in Greek myths - or *mythi* as he was still calling them.

I do not want to issue a litany of theories of myth at this stage, but equally we do need to recognise the ferment of ideas about myth and the energy behind the quest to 'understand' myth. Everyone is agreed that myth is not 'straight': there is something about it that eludes us.

Most attempts to understand myth were imaginative and therefore wrong. Creuzer thought it was a leftover of the wisdom of oriental priests, whose

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<sup>6</sup> Bremmer in Dowden & Livingstone, 532-3.

symbolic meanings could be recovered from it even now. Max Mueller thought, the oriental wisdom of the Sanskrit *Rig-Veda* could point us to the true meanings of myth, to its romantic depictions of the sun in its majesty as it rose and as it set, as it rose destroying the dew maiden, Daphne, and as it set, embodied by the dying Herakles in flames on Mt Oita with a robe not poisoned but of the deepest purple. In rivalry to Max Mueller, early anthropologists realised it was closer to people classed as primitive who had been discovered in the remotest reaches of the British Empire.

Influentially, even today, Freud thought he had uncovered the wellsprings of human behaviour and its crises through psychoanalysis, the science of the human mind and how it represented its deep and obscure problems through mysterious dreams and stories, including Greek mythology. He invented the 'Oedipus complex', the theory that boys in childhood really envy their fathers' claim on their mothers' affections and secretly wish to kill their fathers and marry their mothers. 'Oedipus complex' was not just a fancy cultural name for this alleged phenomenon: Freud actually thought that the Oedipus myth genuinely embodied this complex. And there are so many more theories as the 20th century progresses - ritualists and structuralists and post-structuralists and comparativists - that we need to stand back and recognise that Greek mythology continues to exercise a hold on our times and cultures.

Not just on the theorists, not just on élite culture, not simply on the trivia of popular culture - the films and tv series (*Herakles: the legendary journeys* but maybe not *Xena: warrior princess*) and the abomination that is *Troy* - but on all my students and everyone I talk to. There is almost nobody that knows *nothing* about Greek myth. You can always ask about it on a quiz programme.

What, however, is interesting is that there are signs our mythic language is changing. Myth came in during the Renaissance to provide an alternative language and landscape to that provided by the Bible and Christian tradition. They weren't the only two options even then. The landscape of modern fiction was important (like Botticelli's depiction of scenes from Boccaccio) and the landscape of the city, with its notable people and notable battles, also dominated the imagination. Today, we live in a world buzzing with images more than ever before, and their power stands in a curious relation to rational thought: it may transcend rational thought, it may help us feel and sense, or it may delude us.

It is at this point that I invite you to draw up your own list, but mine looks something like this:

- The myth of youth (pop culture)
- The myth of sport (heroic victories of the past, flawed heroes of the present)



- The myths of consumption (eg, physical transformation through purchase of shampoo)
- The myth of Progress (that we will all be immortal and addicted to peace by tomorrow)

These are not just myths because they are false, but because they have the power to make people subscribe to them. When Roland Barthes wrote his pieces on modern mythologies in the 1950s (the Citroën DS car that was like a spaceship, a glimpse of the future), he was immediately head-hunted by advertisers. Is this mythology? I think it is, but myths that tell a story are easier to identify and are readily found in our modern substitutes for Homer and for reading - TV and film:

- The Western, or Crime thriller (outsider hero defies society and resolves the problems it cannot)
- Soap opera (lives held up as examples of behaviour, good and bad)
- The saga of the Family (*Sleepless in Seattle, Lost in Space &c*)
- The period drama (= modern 'tragedy?')

There is doubtless much more to add - perhaps *all* reporting of politics, and *all* narratives constructed by politicians. Go and add your own examples.

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It is astonishing that amidst such powerful forces, room remains for Greek mythology. It has an escapism, a sci-fi otherworldliness. But more important, it still has raw strength and still sums up ideas snappily and forcefully. My students may be self-selecting, but it is remarkable how many were driven into the study of the classical world by mythology and by its representation in drama.

These stories, set in a remote time (as they always had been), in another world (as they always had been), somehow speak to us and do not just rehearse private concerns of alien cultures. How people achieve, at what cost, how they relate to others, to friends, to family, what sense they have that there is a point in things, that events lead somewhere, maybe not always to a better world. That is the sort of field that is exploited by the myths and that is why psychoanalysts feel it has something to say to them and why it rewards the structuralists who look at the polarised crises that individuals and societies meet. The moment you start thinking, Greek mythology becomes good to think with. Logical argument cannot deliver everything. Another language is needed and it might as well be one with a good cultural ancestry: *Greek myth does you good.*