

APPROACHING THE ANCIENT WORLD

# THE USES OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY



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# The Uses of Greek Mythology

*The Uses of Greek Mythology* offers an overview of Greek mythology – what it is like, where it comes from, and where it fits in Greek history and landscape. Ken Dowden outlines the uses Greeks made of myth and the uses to which myth can be put in recovering the richness of their culture.

This book begins by considering the nature of Greek myth and goes on to show the diversity of the ways the Greeks used myth. ‘Greek mythology’ forms a virtually closed system, and Dowden considers how it was formed and who its creators were. Special emphasis is given to the way the Greeks themselves viewed their mythology and the way they did not quite distinguish it from history. The investigation sheds light on many aspects of Greek history and culture: prehistory, including the supposed Trojan War; ethnic identity and the rival claims of cities; the importance of cult-sites; the language and practices of initiation; the meaning of gods, heroes, monsters and legendary kings; the rejection of matriarchy and the establishment of the boundaries of sexual behaviour.

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# Contents

Preface	vii
Abbreviations	viii
<b>Part I Attitudes to myth</b>	
1 Myth and mythology	2
2 How myths work: the theories	16
3 Greeks on myth	28
<b>Part II Myth and the past</b>	
4 Myth and prehistory	41
5 Myth and identity	53
<b>Part III Myth and religion</b>	
6 Arrival at the cult-site	68
7 Myth and initiation ritual	73
<b>Part IV The world of myth</b>	
8 The world of myth	86
9 Mythic society	107
Conclusion: what Greek myth is	120
Notes	122
Topic bibliography	127
General bibliography	134
Index of ancient authors	138
Index of modern authors	144

Index of peoples, characters and places	147
Index of topics and themes	160

# Preface

I make no apologies for this book: it has been enjoyable to write, I think it will be interesting to read, and it is rather different from previous books on the subject. There are plenty of books to retell Greek mythology: a Greek, Apollodoros, wrote a useful one himself and I have put references to his account into this book wherever possible. The business of this book is not the telling of myths, though naturally some, particularly the more obscure, are outlined: I have envisaged readers who can turn to their own handbooks (see the Topic bibliography) and who want to know more about Greek myth. Equally, though I consider methodology and theory more important than some previous English writers, I have tried not to act as a salesman for a particular brand of ideas. Or at least not too much.

I have tried to write a book which will give a sense of what Greek myth is like, where it comes from and where it fits in Greek history and landscape. But I have paid particular attention to the various uses which Greeks made of myth (and which moderns think they made, consciously and unconsciously), above all the use of myth in place of early history – where it performed much better at defining the basis of the present order than a real history would have done. The result, I hope, is that we gain a better idea of how we ourselves may use Greek myth to uncover areas of Greek history, culture and experience.

A glance at the contents page will show my attempt to redefine the subject so that we can say practical, interesting and admittedly ‘speculative’ things about it. But the book cannot possibly deliver a complete account: such a project would be beyond the scope of any single volume and maybe any single author (certainly the present one). Nevertheless, I have tried to make it more than just a random sample (‘Aspects of...’) and to stimulate a larger sense of what mythology does. I hope that even those with quite different priorities will not feel that what they consider important has been totally overlooked. At the same time, I have tried to keep close to the actual myths and the localities to which these traditions belonged, whilst retaining some sensitivity to issues of ambience and cultural significance.

Mythology is a complex and interwoven subject and, though I have imposed a degree of organisation on this book, it will become apparent to the reader that each topic in mythology presupposes a knowledge of every other topic and that organisation at times is little more than sleight of hand. Here I hope the indexes will be found more than usually useful – because more than usually necessary.

I had originally intended to include some illustrations of myth in Greek art but felt that after the appearance of Carpenter’s (1991) beautifully illustrated and easily accessible volume, I had ample justification to devote more space to words instead.

Greek mythology is most naturally, though not exclusively, studied by classicists, whose sense of international community is strong. For those who will venture beyond the English language into continental Europe, there are some outstanding works of scholarship to explore. I have not hesitated to include these in the bibliography. The rest is up to the reader.

The University of Birmingham  
Spring 1992

# Abbreviations

## Ancient authors

Ap Apollodoros (*Ep.* = the *Epitome*, or abridgement); see pp. 8–9.

P Pausanias; see p. 17.

## Works of reference

CAH3 *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd edn, Cambridge, 1970– date.

FGH F. Jacoby (ed.), *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*; see p. 173.

KIP *Der Kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike*, Munich, 1975.

OCD *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Oxford, 1970.

Other abbreviations follow the usual classical practice, as found in tables of abbreviations in J. Marouzeau, *Année Philologique* (for periodical titles), the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* and H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th edn:

AC *Antiquité classique*

CQ *Classical Quarterly*

CW *Classical World*

HR *History of Religions*

JHS *Journal of Hellenic Studies*

LCM *Liverpool Classical Monthly*

PCPhS *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*

REG *Revue des études grecques*

SSR *Studi storico-religiosi*

ZPE *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

Part I  
Attitudes to myth

# Chapter 1

## Myth and mythology

### 1.1 WHAT IS MYTH?

It says here: ‘Peppino is a myth in the world of Italian song’. He looks real enough to me. Perhaps they meant a ‘legend’.

(Terry Wogan, commentator on the 1991 Eurovision Song Contest)

#### **A lie?**

If it’s a myth, it’s untrue. That is what we mean today – or part of what we mean. But a myth is also enticing: it lures not just a stray, mistaken individual, but whole groups and societies into believing it. Perhaps superior courage or skill was the key to the defeat of the Luftwaffe by the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain. Or is that just the myth of Britain’s ‘most glorious hour’? Was it in fact more about intelligence derived from the breaking of enemy codes (the ‘Ultra’ intelligence – Cave Brown 1976:36–38). If so, the ‘myth’ brought great satisfaction to the (undeniably courageous) participants in the battle, to a nation on the brink of defeat, and to the post-war nation adjusting to a reduced position in the world. Few would welcome the rejection of this myth, if myth it is.

This is the paradox of myths. They are not factually exact: they are false, not wholly true, or not true in that form. But they have a power which transcends their inaccuracy, even depends on it. I do not think this is just a fact about modern use of the word ‘myth’. It lies at the heart of all myths and in particular of ancient myths: myths are believed, but not in the same way that history is. Those who, let us say, ‘subscribe to’ a myth may well express their acceptance of it by asserting its ‘truth’. Certainly they will not wish to call it ‘false’. A Christian who denies that the virgin birth actually happened will not say that it is ‘false’, but rather that it has some valuable meaning, that it has its own ‘truth’. As we follow myth in Greek history, we should be sensitive to the variable meaning of ‘truth’. Language is an approximate tool.

### A Greek word

‘Myth’ goes back to the Greek word *mythos*. Like any other word, its meaning has shifted over the centuries. Back in the days of Homer, at the beginning of Greek literature (c. 725 BC), a *mythos* was not necessarily false. Here is a servant replying to Hektor’s question about the whereabouts of his wife Andromache: ‘To him then the trusty stewardess spoke her *mythos* in return: “Hektor, since you really tell me to *mytheisthai* the truth” ’ (Homer, *Iliad* 6.381–2). The woman proceeds to give an account, as asked – this is her *mythos*, a worked out string of ideas expressed in sentences. I suppose it amounts to a ‘speech’ here. So, in *Iliad* 9, when the delegation has tried to recall Achilles to the battle and he has given devastating expression to his rejection of the request, the three envoys sit silent, ‘in wonderment at his *mythos*’ (9.431). Only after some time does aged Phoinix reply, referring to Achilles’ father’s instructions that he, Phoinix, should teach Achilles to be effective in war and in assembly, ‘to be a speaker of *mythoi* and a doer of deeds’ (9.443). These are the twin competences of the Homeric hero: to kill efficiently and to persuade through impressive *mythoi*.

The earliest Greek literature had been in verse. Prose only arrived in the mid-6th century BC and was part of the deeper penetration of writing into what was still very much an oral culture. *Logos*, the noun corresponding to the verb *legein* (‘I speak’), was the word chosen to describe prose. It covered both the verbal expression (‘speech’) and the enhanced possibilities inherent in committing prose to writing (‘rational account’, ‘discourse’). Early writers frequently refer to their book as a *logos*, including our first historian: ‘I must tell [*legein*] what people tell, but I am not at all obliged to believe it – and this principle can be taken as applying to my whole *logos*’. (Herodotos, 7.152.3). Indeed, Thucydides refers to all early historians as *logographoi* (‘*logos*-writers’, 1.21), a term which has passed into modern handbooks on these ‘logographers’.

This development of the word *logos* to cover extended utterances, pushed back the frontiers of the *mythos*. Though fifth-century tragedians, in their archaic way, might preserve something of its original application, by now *mythos* was usually applied to fiction – the sort of material associated with the early verse writers. The predominant contrast is no longer between *mythoi* and battle-action, but between *mythoi* and *logoi*, a word now close to the heart of the new enlightenment. Thucydides, implicitly distinguishing himself from his predecessor Herodotos, asserts the scientific value of his work at the cost of lessening its entertainment value: it does not appeal to *mythodes* (‘the *mythos*-quality’). A *mythos* may have retained its sense of a developed utterance, a whole narrative, but it has become a mere ‘story’, a ‘tale’ (Burkert 1985:312 with 466 n.4).

This was the crucial development in the history of the word. Since then, it has changed less: it has always been able to apply to the inherited stock of Greek traditional stories (‘Greek myths’). This view of *mythos* is, for instance, passed on in the mid-80s BC by a Latin rhetorical author: ‘*fabula* [“story”, Latin for *mythos*] is defined as including matters which are neither true nor probable, for instance those handed down in the tragedies’ (Anon. (‘Cicero’), *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.13). Changes in its meaning since antiquity

have only reflected our changes in attitude to that stock of stories – and all stories which are told and enjoyed in spite of the fact that they are ‘false’.

### ‘Myth’, ‘history’ and other terms

History is what myth isn’t. What history tells is true or else it would not be history, only failed history. What myth tells is in some way false or else it would be history. Yet within mythology there are gradations of credibility. To take an example: there is a myth that Athene was born from Zeus’ head. It is wholly false: Zeus never existed, neither did Athene, and no one has ever been born from anyone else’s head. On the other hand, many believe that history underlies the myth of Agamemnon’s expedition against Troy (though see chapter 4.3). On that view the ‘Trojan War’ is partly historical, if not in the form we have it (if Homer’s *Iliad* were literally true, it would be an historical record and not a version of myth). To many writers it is important if there is an historical dimension, and they like to reflect this in their choice of terminology, distinguishing between various types of traditional story: saga and legend, on the one hand, and myth and folk-tale on the other. Broadly, these terms have the following implications:

**Saga**, is applied to myths supposed to have a basis in history. So, for instance, Rose (1928:13) thought that ‘The Homeric account of the Trojan War is one of the best possible examples.’ ‘Saga’ is an Icelandic term and was originally applied to supposedly true histories of families/clans or of kings. Perhaps it is best restricted to myths which tell the history of a family.

**Legend**: originally traditional stories about saints that were ‘worth reading’ (Latin: *legenda*). As stories about saints rarely have much historical value, the term is applied to any myth with only a kernel of truth or historicity.

**Folk-tale**: this term was invented during the early nineteenth century (like ‘folklore’ and ‘folk-song’), to serve as a translation of the German word *Märchen*. This was when scholars such as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1785–1863, 1786–1859) imagined, and persuaded their readers, that they were collecting traditional tales which ordinary folk used as a sort of moralising entertainment. Some think their motifs derive from long lost myths (as the Brothers Grimm did).<sup>1</sup> Others think that all nations have always had folk-tales for their entertainment. In any case, European literary sources have been found for some of these supposedly oral tales.

In content the tales of the Brothers Grimm are not always easy to distinguish from what people class in other societies as myths. Maybe they tend to contain types rather than individuals. Bettelheim (1976:39–41) accounts for this psychoanalytically by distinguishing the roles of myth and folk-tale: folk-tales are about everyman, ‘facilitating projections and identifications’ and resolving anxieties, whereas myths ‘offer excellent images for the development of the superego’. You may believe this if you like, but folk-tales can be just as vague about locations. Perhaps, too, there is some delight in the magical and rather an obsession with princely courts – as one might expect from that period in German history. But in any case the unthinking application of the term ‘folk-tale’ to the oral traditions of other nations has obscured the difference (if there is one) between myth and folk-tale and trivialised those

traditions. Merely to register a tradition as folk-tale too easily evades their specific social and historical context and leaves only their motifs to be classified. We will be looking at analysis of heromyths by motif in chapter 8.3.

**Fairy story** is often used as a variant for ‘folk-tale’, but is rather useless for Greek culture (low on fairies). Interestingly, however, when used in a derogatory sense, it captures something of the contempt which Greek thinkers could occasionally feel for ‘myth’.

**Myth** is often reserved for tales which do not fall into the above categories, which perhaps have a clear involvement of gods or a clear religious or philosophical purpose.<sup>2</sup>

I have tried to be less discriminatory. It seems to me that attempts to distinguish between these terms have failed and that it is best simply to allow all Greek non-historical narratives to be ‘myths’. Otherwise we will suffer from terminological difficulties of our own invention and prejudge the nature of each of these narratives, with its own identity and its own history. However, I should mention that there is a school of thought which recognises a regular pattern of ‘degeneration’ of myth:

stage 1: the myth is associated with religious ritual and that is its function;

stage 2: the myth has become ‘history’;

stage 3: the ‘history’ has turned into folklore;

stage 4: the folklore is turned to literary purposes.<sup>3</sup>

There are some problems of detail in the application of this scheme to Greek mythology: it is not clear (and most scholars will refuse to believe) that all myths began as partners for ritual. In classical Greece, as we shall see, the myth has indeed largely turned to history, but it also has something of the entertainment value of folklore about it and most certainly the literary artists are busy with it. Nevertheless, the reader may find this a useful pattern to hold against the shifting role of Greek mythology from prehistoric to Roman and modern times.

## 1.2 GREEK MYTHOLOGY

### **Greek Mythology, a total system**

It is one thing to decide what will count as Greek myths, another to know what ‘Greek Mythology’ is. ‘It is a matter above all of written material, of texts’ (Brelich 1977:6). There is no doubt that we access Greek Mythology above all through texts and that even in ancient times texts, read or performed, were instrumental in forming the Greeks’ own sense of mythology. But texts were not the only medium for mythology (unless you have a very broad definition of ‘text’).<sup>4</sup> Myths may be told orally, without reproducing a particular author’s account – it is simply ‘how the story goes’. Art too displayed myths and in both senses offered a view of them. We think of the surviving remnants of sculpture and vase-painting, but of course there were wall-paintings too—now lost but for their reflection in the humbler art of vase-painting. All of these are media through which Greek Mythology was presented and, by being presented, reinterpreted.

In fact Greek Mythology is a shared fund of motifs and ideas ordered into a shared repertoire of stories. These stories link with, compare and contrast with, and are understood in the light of, other stories in the system. Greek Mythology is an ‘intertext’, because it is constituted by all the representations of myths ever experienced by its audience and because every new representation gains its sense from how it is positioned in relation to this totality of previous presentations. In this book I will use the term Greek Mythology, with capital letters, to denote this (evolving) total system.

Today handbooks play a special part in communicating Greek Mythology. It is their job, sometimes alphabetically, more often chronologically, to lay out before us a tapestry of Greek myths. At the beginning: the origin of the gods (and the world). At the end: the aftermath of the Trojan War. We need collections of stories to help us know them. The Greeks, however, were brought up on their mythology and it is only relatively late that we find a collected Greek Mythology. The first surviving collection, and the best, dates from the first century AD. It is by an ‘**Apollodoros**’ (so the manuscripts claim, perhaps thinking wrongly of the scholar Apollodoros of Athens), and is headed *The Library*, to mark its comprehensiveness. The end is missing, but we also possess an abridgement, the *Epitome*, which is complete. Apollodoros is of great importance to us, and as he is the most useful single source for Greek Mythology I have included where possible in my text references to his tellings of stories I am discussing. He does not actually tell all Greek myths—there were so many in every Greek hamlet—or include all details, but he does give some account of most of the myths that had come to matter beyond local city-state boundaries. It is his interpretation of what counts that has above all shaped our present, relatively frozen, idea of Greek Mythology.

Presently I will sketch the contents of Greek Mythology as in Apollodoros. But first we should look at how this system of myths came to be formed.

### Formation: archaic texts

As we shall see (chapter 4.1), the Greeks had always had myths. But in order to form a national Greek Mythology, local stories must cluster with the stories of other localities. This is what provides the characteristic geographical range in Greek Mythology. This clustering could only occur in a time of good communications and shared culture, when the entertainers of the age, epic poets, found an audience in any major Greek centre. This was possible during the Mycenaean Age and it clearly became possible once again as prosperity was restored during the Dark Age. So what we find when the darkness recedes is that the manufacture and maintenance of national mythology is in the hands of poets—and two types in particular, epic poets and genealogical poets.

In epic we think immediately of **Homer’s** *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but the slow narrative pace, unusual originality and wilful silences of these texts make them less important from our point of view than other more routine and more action-packed epics, now lost—though a detailed summary of their plots survives. These works of Homer’s successors (mainly seventh century) enshrined the stories of epics composed by his contemporaries and predecessors. Their authors are referred to as the **Cyclic poets**, because the epics in their final form, together with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, made up an omnibus edition or ‘epic cycle’, telling the complete story of the Trojan War with its preliminaries and aftermath. By contrast, the *Iliad* itself covers a mere fortnight. Other epic poets, however, were

telling the tales of Thebes—particularly the tale of the ‘Seven against Thebes’ (chapter 4.3)—of the voyage of the first ship, Argo, with its complement of Argonauts and of many other parts of the mythology. So these epic poets can be viewed as transmitting various cycles of myth often associated with heroes, military campaigns and other adventures. We have no good information on how these individual cycles came to be put together, but they are clearly ready, in place, and in general circulation by the end of the Dark Age.

I should mention at this point a problem in approach to our limited evidence. One pattern of scholarly thought upholds what may be viewed as high standards in the acceptability of evidence: thus no myth can be proved to have existed until the date of our first evidence for it. In itself this sort of proposition seems obvious enough, but it perhaps makes too little allowance for the large gaps in our evidence for mythology. A story which first appears in Apollodoros (first century AD) or Pausanias (second century AD) or even Nonnos (fifth century AD) need not on that account be a late invention. We should not overlook the obvious corollary that no myth can be proved *not* to have existed before a certain date simply because that is when it is first attested. Associated with this difficulty is the difficulty in establishing the degree of inventiveness of authors at certain periods. It used regularly to be supposed that the Cyclic poets had improvised freely around Homer, but increasingly it is being recognised that the problem may often lie in the character of Homer, who is a deliberately omissive and selective author. Equally, it is hard to be confident about the extent to which tragedians modified individual myths.

The other strand which emerges from the Dark Age is genealogy. The most important work, of which many fragments survive and more have been recovered this century, was one ascribed to the Boiotian poet **Hesiod**, though it was probably set down in its final form in Athens in the sixth century BC (West 1985:164–71). This was the *Catalogue of Women*, also known as the *Ehoiai* (‘Or-likes’) because the transitions to new subjects were made by that formula and stuck out like a sore thumb:

Pindar got the story from an *Or-like* of Hesiod, which begins thus:  
 ‘Or like her who dwelt in Phthia, with the beauty of the

[Graces,

By the water of Peneios, fair Kyrene.’

(Hesiod, fr. 215: Scholiast on Pindar, *Pyth.* 9.6)

This work was of major importance, as it used mythic women to draw together the genealogies and mythologies of most of Greece.

The dreariness for modern audiences of ‘catalogue poetry’, which lists names and of which we see a reflection in Homer’s *Catalogue of Ships* (*Iliad* 2.484–877), and genealogical poetry, which organises names and family trees, is exceeded only by its fascination in its living context. Genealogy must have mattered to the well-born in the Dark Age: it stated their place in the world and linked their famous ancestors to the famous ancestors of others. This has the effect of systematising not only family trees but also the internationally famous mythic adventures of the past. But it goes deeper than this too. The concern of mythgenealogists is to map a world and its people. To write a genealogy is to make a series of links between names enshrining peoples and places, assigning each their position. Using the model of family relationships, something

immediate, accessible and powerful to close-knit pre-industrial society, statements are made about affiliation (closer or more distant) and seniority. Thus genealogy, though limited by facts of history of which its audience is securely aware and by traditions which the audience generally accepts, is by nature ideological.

This was not something whose interest and effect died out with the Dark Age or Archaic period. It continued to matter to Arcadians whether they could endorse a genealogy by the poet Asios (sixth century BC?) and whether a Pausanias could be persuaded to accept it (p. 72 below). And it mattered to a Pausanias what the answers were, for otherwise the map was deficient and *terra incognita* was left:

I was especially keen to find out what children were born to Polykaon by Messene. So I read through the *Or-likes* and the *Naupaktia* epic and, in addition, all the genealogical works of Kinaithon and Asios. However, on this subject they had written nothing.

(Pausanias 4.2.1)

The achievement of epic and genealogical poetry has been to create cycles of stories clustered around particular heroes or events, to establish the family relationships between the heroes of different stories well enough to arrange the stories in sequence, and as a result to develop a sense of mythical chronology. There is even a saga aspect: we can follow the fates of some families in successive generations. Thus Greek Mythology now unfolds like the history it can never be: it is a para-history, a proto-history, a phase in the development of the world and of man. And the ‘Theogonies’ (‘births of gods’) written by Hesiod and other authors plug the gap that could all so easily have existed at the beginning of the world.

### **Myth and art before 500 BC**

We are not able to identify with any certainty scenes from myth on Mycenaean vases. And after the end of Mycenaean civilisation, pottery decoration became increasingly a matter of mere patterns—hence the description of this period as the ‘Geometric’ Age. It is only in the mid-seventh century that scenes from myths appear on vases—the ‘Archaic’ Age has begun. So, for instance, an Attic vase of around 660 BC shows Herakles’ defeat of the centaur Nesos (Ap 2.7.6). This vase was intended to be used, as so many of these were, to mark a grave. Another of this painter’s works showed Herakles releasing Prometheus. To about the same time belongs a vase from Eleusis depicting Odysseus blinding the Cyclops Polyphemos and Perseus dashing away from two Gorgons—in hot pursuit after his murder of their sister Medousa. Artists of the Archaic period thought Gorgons specially striking.

The last example shows something important about how artistic depictions work. Perseus is not only shown killing Medousa the Gorgon, but also with the Gorgon’s head, being chased by other Gorgons—bringing home his slaughter rather better than the mere scene of beheading. Because art cannot narrate, but only offer still photographs, it must choose ‘telling’ moments. Wrestling with the Nemean Lion, though often uncomfortably like a tango, displays Herakles’ imminent lion-skin on its original owner. Up on the east pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia (c. 460 BC), we are at the line up for the

chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos, a moment pregnant with all that will ensue, a frozen scene of deceptive stillness—as the Seer must know. Likewise, when Exekias paints Achilles and Ajax playing draughts, it is not just a jolly idea, but contrasts with the fury of the battlefield and, in particular, looks forward to those other scenes that relate the two heroes: Ajax's recovery of Achilles' dead body from the battlefield and his devastating loss of the contest with Odysseus for the arms of Achilles, leading to his suicide.

It is beyond the scope of this book to give a detailed history of myth in art, so let us make quick progress. By 600 BC Corinthian pottery was displaying an enthusiasm for decorative features imported from the Near East and is therefore described as 'Orientalising'. This increases the range of mythic creatures without necessarily increasing the range of myths: amongst exotic animals we find rather a lot of sphinxes and griffins. This decorative use of mythic creatures shows the greatest distance from our notion of myth as narrative – only the Oedipus story involves a sphinx and only the weird epic of Aristeas of Prokonnesos (chapter 8.2) involves griffins.

Also around 600 BC, the black-figure technique of vase-painting was being developed, a technique which was practised above all at Athens until around 500 BC. The distribution of mythical subjects in this period has been conveniently summarised by Boardman (1974: ch. 13; ch. 11 for monsters). Overall, Herakles is consolidating his hold on the artistic imagination in this period. His feats are more popular than those of any other hero and even than scenes from the Trojan Cycle. These latter scenes are less often from the *Iliad* than we may expect: other parts of the Trojan story, told in the Epic Cycle, were more action-packed, telling for instance how Achilles ambushed the boy Troilos – a son of Priam who would have guaranteed Troy's survival had he himself lived to the age of 20 (i.e. to the age of the warrior, p. 111 below), but Achilles outran his horse (hence Achilles' epithet, 'swift-footed') and slew him.

The sculptures that decorated the pediments and metopes of archaic Greek temples share the early interest in Gorgons and constant interest in Herakles. In addition, the battle of the gods and Giants, the 'Gigantomachy', catches just the right monumental tone (as we shall see in chapter 9.2).

### Formation: the Classical Age

500 BC is a watershed. In written texts, the change-over from verse to prose (beginning amongst thinkers in the sixth century) reaches accounts of myth, and we find ourselves in a new world of para-historians giving a *logos* of the mythic period. We call them 'mythographers', and the major names are **Akousilaos** in Argos (c. 500–490 BC) and **Pherekydes** in Athens (c. 460–450 BC). But their work continued with **Herodotos** of Herakleia (c. 400 BC). We will take a look at these writers in chapter 3.

Simultaneously the age of monsters and omnipresent Herakles is over in the decorative arts. In Athens, where so much of our evidence comes from, there was a limited transfer of interest from Herakles (promoted, art historians claim, by the Peisistratids) to Theseus as a symbol of the new democracy of 509 BC. This may be especially true of public, monumental sculpture, where Herakles' appearances are no longer a matter of propagandist routine. Even at the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, the

metopes of Herakles' labours furnish the subject for the metopes for reasons of local tradition—this son of Zeus founded the Olympic Games. The sequence

*Table 1.1* Themes in architectural sculpture to 500 BC

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location: building</i>	<i>Theme</i>
Late	Olympia	Plaque: mother and baby griffin
7th cent.	Syracuse	Plaque: Medousa and Chrysaor
600–580	Corcyra: Temple of Artemis	Pediment: Medousa, birth of Chrysaor, Gigantomachy, Neoptolemos kills Priam?
575–550	Paestum: Temple of Hera	Metope: Herakles steals Apollo's tripod, and other stories
560	Selinous: Temple Y	Metope: Europa and the Bull
560	Delphi: Treasury of Sikyonians	Metopes: scenes from voyage of Argo, hunt of the Calydonian Boar, Europa and the Bull
560–550	Athens: Temple	Pediment: Herakles, Iolaos and Hydra Pediment: Herakles fights Triton
550	Athens: Temple	Pediment: Herakles fights Triton (again), monster(s) with three human tops and snake bottoms
550–525	Athens: Temple of Athene Polias	Pediment: Gigantomachy
540	Selinous: Temple C	Metope: Herakles and Kerkopes
540–520	Assos, nr Troy: Temple of Athena	Metopes: centaur, sphinxes, Europa and the Bull, Herakles steals Apollo's tripod Frieze: Herakles and Tritons, Herakles and Centaurs
525	Delphi: Treasury of Siphnians	Frieze: Gigantomachy, including Herakles? E Pediment: Herakles steals Apollo's tripod and other stories
520–510	Delphi: Temple of Apollo	Pediment: Gigantomachy
510	Eretria: Temple of Apollo	Pediment: Theseus and Amazonomachy
510–500	Delphi: Treasury of Megarians	Pediment: Gigantomachy
500–490	Delphi: Treasury of Athenians	Metopes: deeds of Theseus, Amazonomachy, deeds of Herakles
500–480	Aigina: Temple of Aphaia	W Pediment: Trojan War E Pediment: Herakles' Trojan War

of labours of Herakles on metopes of the Hephaistieion at Athens (maybe designed earlier than the Parthenon), seen by Boardman as old-fashioned (1989:170), may be needed to add importance by association to the sequence of deeds of Athenian Theseus. But on the Parthenon there would be no interest in Herakles.<sup>5</sup> The reduced importance of Herakles in (Athenian) red-figure pottery may again be associated with the ending of the world in which his ideology had been important, but in a broader sense—Theseus is not overwhelmingly common either. There is a wider, almost more ‘democratic’, spread of interest across mythological and divine themes on vases—the extent that it serves no purpose to put together the sort of list I present above for the Archaic period.

The fifth century was, however, a golden age of myth (Boardman 1975:223). The work of the old poets found new expression in the mythographers. A broader band of myths was now depicted on vases and presumably on the mural paintings that they often imitated. The great temples—for instance, those of Aphaia on Aigina (completed after the Persian Wars), of Zeus at Olympia and the Parthenon—were lavishly decorated with scenes from myth. And mythology, as understood in the light of the mythographers, was almost the exclusive source of plots for the **tragedians** in Athens (the big three, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, successively dominating the stage from 484 to 406 BC). The practicalities of theatre and the increasing social awareness of tragedians naturally affected their selection and projection of mythology. They focus on the human crises that prevail in the Greek Mythology that has reached us. Of course there had been others who added to the intertext of Greek Mythology: one may think, for instance, of the lyric poet Stesichoros (c. 550 BC) or the post-archaic 14-book epic on Herakles by Herodotos’ uncle, Panyassis or the suggestive hints of Pindar in his lyric poems (written 498–438 BC). But overwhelmingly the tragedians, the mythographers and the early poets of epic and genealogy were the suppliers of myth to later generations and art, ancient and modern, has accepted their definition of Greek Mythology.

### Formation: Hellenistic and Roman Ages

We can briefly mention the tendencies of the Hellenistic Age (323 BC to Roman times). It was notably a learned age. Even in poetry, Callimachus (writing c. 275–240 BC) showed a path for new writing which depended heavily on reference books full of fresh, local mythical colour which had not previously found a place in Greek Mythology. And this was the material that the prose-writers of local histories, now sadly lost, uncovered and recorded. New methods of sorting the mythology too could produce interesting aesthetic results, whether in Boio’s *Ornithogonia* (presumably a ‘theogony’ of birds), Nicander’s *Metamorphoses* (changes in shape) or the *Catasterisms* (becoming stars and constellations) of Eratosthenes—all three lost. Perhaps, too, these principles of selection led to a proliferation of the material to suit them: so, if you are confronted by several variants of a given myth, you will suspect the one in which the hero(ine) turns into a star of being a Hellenistic development. It is not necessarily so: way back (600 BC?), ‘Hesiod’ had written an *Astronomia*.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, metamorphosis and catasterism are particularly prevalent in the Hellenistic version of Greek Mythology—together with pastoral themes and tales of unhappy or forbidden love. Some idea of the pathetic development of Hellenistic myths is given by the second century AD prose collection of stories from Hellenistic poets, the *Metamorphoses* of **Antoninus Liberalis**.

This more sentimental mythology had little influence on Apollodoros, and would probably have had little influence on us were it not for the alluring epic of **Ovid**, the *Metamorphoses*. This 15-book ‘epic’ presents a mythology of its own from the creation to his own day. Ovid is much more interested in ethos than in local detail, making his work a difficult and often not very useful source for the study of Greek myth, religion and society, despite its aesthetic and imaginary triumphs. But his account has been hugely popular from Roman antiquity, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, down to modern times. It has been the European artists’ first port of call for mythological subjects in painting and sculpture and it has been many people’s first introduction to the whole subject of Greek mythology.

We no longer have the work of the Hellenistic prose-writers—not just local historians, but also people like Dionysios Skytobrachion, who in the second century BC wrote books on Amazons and on the Trojan saga. But this was the work which led to important sources who do survive and who transmit local mythical information which is particularly valuable to a realistic study of Greek mythology. One surviving source is the geography of **Strabo** (writing around 20–7 BC). Even more important for us is **Pausanias** (writing around AD 160–80), whose *Periegesis of Greece* is a lavish guided tour to Greece’s landscape, towns, monuments and traditions. Apollodoros’ information, however, is a canonisation of the work of earlier writers of the Archaic and Classical Ages. The nadir of the mythographical tradition is reached with the mindless work, or summary of a work, of Julius **Hyginus**, the *Fabulae* (or *Genealogiae*—of perhaps the second century AD), which consists of a sequence of genealogies, of stories about particular individuals and finally a *Guinness Book of Records* conclusion: lists of the first people to build temples for the gods (225), people nourished on the milk of animals (252), record-holders for piety (254), for friendship (257), famous inventors (274) and so on. Hyginus largely got his information from a Greek source—though he did not understand Greek too well.

To deal in mythology is to put yourself in touch with ancient classical tradition. Fulgentius, in the fifth century AD, outlined its myths and their (suspiciously Neoplatonic!) meanings, notably in his *Mythologiae*. The ancient world was by now passing away and Fulgentius belongs with people like Servius who wrote the most influential commentary on Vergil, Proclus who wrote with massive erudition on Plato as the Christian world closed in, and with Boethius who a century later preserved Greek learning (for instance on music) for the Latin Middle Ages. Presently the mythology would be laid to rest during the dark era of the church, only to spring back into life in the writing and art of the Renaissance. Boccaccio in his *Genealogie* would take up where Fulgentius had left off 900 years before, renewing the west’s subscription to antiquity.

### Contents of Greek Mythology

Nine-tenths of Greek myths are of a quite different type [from the cosmogonical-philosophical]. They play in the particular landscapes of Greece and tell of the earliest men who lived there, of the descent and the adventures of local heroes and suchlike.

(Müller 1825:72)

So Greek Mythology, as frozen in Apollodoros, is a construct and above all a literary construct—a body of privileged and arranged Greek myths, known widely wherever Greek culture ranged, and constantly alluded to in the work of poets and artists. Meanwhile, myths continued to live more locally and miscellaneously. Not only would locals point out the very place where famous myths had occurred: there were also the myriad also-rans of Greek mythology—those that never made it to the national corpus, though ambitious locals might try to tie them in. Such, for instance, was a tale of Poimandros, the founder of Tanagra, who had been besieged for not wishing to take part in the Trojan War, and such was a tale of Embaros (chapter 7.1) at Mounichia on the outskirts of Athens, who gained a priesthood for his family by (only nominally) sacrificing his daughter.

What, then, does Greek Mythology contain? Frazer divided the work of Apollodoros into 16 sections,<sup>7</sup> which I abbreviate as follows:

- 1 Beginnings.  
Birth of Titans and monsters from Sky and Earth. Births of the gods ('Theogony'). Offspring of the gods. The gods defeat various enemies—Giants, Python, Typhon, Orion. Persephone seized by Pluto.
- 2 Family of Deukalion.  
Creation of man, and the Flood. Beginnings of the Greek tribes. Various tales, based mainly in northern Greece: Meleager and the Calydonian Boar, the prophet Melampous, the voyage of the Argonauts.
- 3 Family of Inachus.  
The Argolid: Io turned into a cow, the daughters of Danaos murder their Egyptian husbands, Bellerophon and Pegasus, Perseus and the Gorgon, Perseus and Andromeda, the Labours of Herakles, the return of the Heraklids.
- 4—Family of Agenor.
- 5 Crete: Zeus as bull carries off Europa; King Minos, the birth of the Minotaur. Thebes: founded by Kadmos; Aktaion killed by his dogs; arrival of Dionysos; Niobe turned to stone; Oedipus; the failed expedition of the Seven against Thebes; the success of their 'descendants' (the *Epigonoi*).
- 6 Family of Pelasgos.  
Arcadia: Zeus kills Lykaon and his sons for impiety; Kallisto turned into a bear, gives birth to Arkas the first Arcadian; the trials of Auge, priestess at Tegea; the virgin Atalante defeated in running thanks to a golden apple.
- 7 Family of Atlas.  
Arcadia: Hermes' early feats.  
Thessaly: death of Apollo's son Asklepios; Apollo herdsman for a year.  
Sparta: Helen up to marriage with Menelaos; Kastor and Polydeukes.  
Troy: foundation and famous names before the Trojan War.
- 8 Family of Asopos.  
Salamis: Telamon and his son Aias.  
Thessaly: Peleus and the centaur Chiron, marriage to Thetis, early history of Achilles—and Patroklos.
- 9—Athens.
- 10 Kings before Theseus, such as earth-born Kekrops and Erichthonios. The tribute to

the Minotaur. Theseus: his feats, marriage to an Amazon, descent to hell; his son Hippolytus dies from an overdose of chastity. Lapiths and Centaurs.

11 Family of Pelops.

Pelops wins chariot-race by deceit—and the Peloponnese. The polluted actions of Atreus and Thyestes. Agamemnon marries Clytemnestra and Menelaos Helen.

12 The Trojan War up to the start of Homer's *Iliad*.

Judgment of Paris, theft of Helen, mustering of the Greek forces, including Odysseus (pretending madness) and Achilles (hiding among the girls at Skyros). Fleet gathers at Aulis. Sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Preliminary tales around Troy, e.g. Achilles' slaughter of Priam's son Troilos.

13 Homer's *Iliad*.

Achilles withdraws from the fighting. Achilles comes back, kills Hektor. Priam recovers Hektor's body. It's only a matter of time now.

14 The Trojan War after Homer.

Death of Achilles. The contest of Aias and Odysseus for his armour. Death of Paris. Theft of the *Palladion* (statue of Pallas Athene). The trick of the Wooden Horse. Sack of Troy. Ajax rapes Cassandra.

15 The 'Returns' (*Nostoi*) of the heroes from Troy.

Storm, death of Ajax. Various catastrophes, in particular the murder of Agamemnon. Orestes' revenge and madness.

16 The *Odyssey* and its sequels.

Adventures and return of Odysseus. Slaughter of his wife's 'suits'. Stories about Telegonos, a son of Odysseus who kills him, marries Penelope and is packed off to the Isles of the Blest by Circe. Meanwhile Penelope has born Pan to Hermes.

What immediately emerges is the crucial role of the Trojan War in Greek mythology—is this in which mythic 'history' culminates—and the crucial role of the greatest Greek author, Homer, amidst this ultimate heroic event. This is the citadel from which he dominates Greek culture. Sections 13 and 16 are designed to accommodate him. Sections 12–16 are needed for Trojan and related material. Sections 7, 8 and 11 are designed to lead into the Trojan material. Sections 9–10 are intrusions to accommodate Athens—because our Greek cultural tradition has been transmitted via Athens.

By contrast, the beginnings, dealing with creation, origins of things and gods (section 1), are very slight by the standards of the mythologies of other nations. The message is clear: Greek Mythology is fundamentally about men and women, it is a 'historical' mythology. For the most part it is not the participation of gods, talking animals or magic that makes Greek myth mythical; rather, it is the participation of men and women who lived in *illo tempore* ('yon times'),<sup>8</sup> the times before recorded history began and beyond reliable oral tradition, in the para-history or protohistory. They may be referred to as 'heroes', because if their 'graves' are known they will be receiving worship—hero-cult. In Homer, they are even aware that they are heroes and, especially in the nostalgic *Odyssey*, are approvingly addressed as 'Hero'—unlike men of our day.<sup>9</sup> Of course these are not just any men and women of the remote past: as Aristotle pronounced (*Problems* 922b), 'Only the leaders of the ancients were heroes—the people were just men.'

In between the section on gods and origins and the sections on the Trojan War come myths which are sorted genealogically, by descent from famous heroes, but which in fact

largely represent the traditions of the different areas of Greece—because so many heroes are designed to project places. This reinforces the lesson that myths are presented mostly as local prehistory, rather than as stories about enduring human concerns (however much they may in fact have to tell about such concerns). They fit tightly into local culture and require a historian's attention.