

The Invention of Mythic Truth in Antiquity

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Introduction

It is commonly understood that the Greek term *mythos* means something entirely different from modern definitions of 'myth'. Liddell and Scott tells the most authoritative version of the story: in Homer the term is a rather generic word for speech, and by the classical period it comes to mean something like a tall tale, usually a false and absurd one. Plato in the *Gorgias* opposes a *mythos* to a *logos* (a rational account) and to speaking truthfully: "Listen, then, as they say, to a beautiful story, which you will consider a myth, I think, but which I consider an actual account (*logon*); for the things which I am about to tell, I will tell as the truth" (Plat. *Gorg.* 523a). Aristotle later coins it to mean the plot of a tragedy, and there the story seems to end. Though I have of course streamlined a bit, there are no other major developments. The ancient traditions of mythography do very little to challenge this narrative, since they display mostly antiquarian interest, where the concern for any truth-value is bracketed.

We see nothing like the consequential intellectual movements in recent centuries that have attended to the idea of 'myth' (or *mythe*, *Mythos*, or *mito*). As Fritz Graf has shown in his *Greek Mythology*, the great German philologist and scholar Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812) re-coined the term for the modern world¹. He meant to dignify the kind of tale his predecessors had known by the Latin term *fabula*, which, as Graf has pointed out, carried a sense of absurdity and even a hint of derision. The Greek term was pulled back into modern Europe as part of a salvage operation. No longer are we Latin Churchmen looking down our noses at ancient fables, we are now scientific observers inspired by the Greeks' love of wisdom. It is very much a piece of Heyne's effort to persuade his contemporaries that these ancient stories were not simply indecorous fanciful tales told by primitive

1 Graf (1996) 9–12.

people. There was something to them. Heyne's rhetorical levering helped open up an entirely new realm to a set of scholars from Herder, to Max Müller, to Harrison, to Jung, to Lévi-Strauss, and beyond, for whom myth was resolutely not frivolous or absurd, and was in fact a kind of well-spring of deep truth about what it means to be human. This is quite a turnaround. Graf has charted a robust set of modern thoughts around the notion of what I am here calling 'mythic truth' – that is, the idea that myths are certain ancient stories, re-told by poets, painters, sculptors, and parents to their children, that contain nuggets of deep insight on the world and the human place in it².

Considering the common narrative of the Greek term *mythos*, it seems ironic that an ancient word that itself carries a hint of derision, as Plato has already shown, should have been re-awakened in order to *undo* a sense of derision. Of course, the aura of Greek, just since it is Greek, conveys a legitimizing *gravitas* (one could compare what modern psychoanalysts were able to do with *psyché*). But I will here be proposing that Heyne's reviving of the Greek term is not so ironic as we might suspect. There are ancient Greek precursors to the idea that a *mythos* is a story defined by a unique claim to a deeper truth. To appreciate this, one needs to take a closer look at certain less well-known evidence that reveals the ancient notion of myth to be more multiform than we have fully appreciated up until now. While many surely saw *mythoi* as tall tales (as Plato almost always did, Thucydides too³), other ancient authors claim, in a way analogous to Heyne and his successors, that myths contain a certain kind of profound knowledge.

Myth, fable, and poetry – some initial delimitations

Most, though not all, of this story is contained within the various traditions of ancient allegorism⁴. The idea that the poems of Homer, Hesiod, Orpheus, and few others are full of extractable wisdom is a commonplace in allegorical commentaries from the likes of the Derveni commentator, Metrodorus of Lampsacus, Stoics like Chrysippus and Cornutus, rhetorical scholars like Heraclitus the Allegorist and the author of the *Life of Homer*, and the Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity like Porphyry and Proclus. Within this heterogeneous corpus we find a subtle distinction at the outset, one that makes salient an important limitation of the idea here being scrutinized.

2 Graf (1996) 35 f.

3 See, e.g., Thuc. 1.21.

4 On allegory in general, see David Konstan's very lucid "Introduction" in Russell/Konstan (2005) xi–xxx; Lambertson (1986); Struck (2004) 149–151, where some of the ideas in this paper were tentatively explored.

Several of the allegorical commentators give us well-developed ideas of *poetic* truth, while fewer of them help us get at the question of what I am calling *mythic* truth. It is not uncommon that an allegorical commentator explicitly venerates the poet as the inspired font of wisdom. Heraclitus the allegorist, the Derveni Commentator, and Proclus, for example, leave behind such a view⁵. Here the poet is understood to have been gifted with profound insight. This is a kind of 'truth' that belongs to the poetic craft, and we could trace a history of this idea in antiquity. It would contain a place for these allegorists, reckon with the very different forms of insight that Aristarchus thought great poets were capable of mustering, and consider Aristotle's observation in the *Poetics* that poetry is weightier and more philosophical than history because it deals with what could happen or might happen, rather than the narrower terrain of what did happen (Aristot. *poet.* 1451b). We would need to survey all the ways in which the ancients imagined their poets to use the poetic craft to convey insights. But in antiquity, as in the modern period, several readers drew distinctions between ancient authoritative tales, whose authorship is not clear, and famous poets' iterations of them. I will be particularly interested in these attestations of a split between the two, since they make clear that there was an understanding in antiquity that the *mythoi* themselves contain truths, irrespective of the poets' intentional reconstructions of them. This is a more apposite precursor to the modern study of myth, which sees it as distinct from the study of poetry. Figures from Heyne to Lévi-Strauss de-coupled the truths myths contain from any particular poet's intention. This separates out the guiding hand of a single artist, and leaves behind something that specifically belongs to myth itself.

A final limitation, attendant upon the first: many in antiquity expected Aesopic fables to have a kind of tidy truth built into them⁶. This took the form of a generalizable gnomic sentiment that would have some direct and pragmatic application in the context in which the fable was told. Within the rhetorical tradition, these kinds of tales are known by many names, including *ainoi* and *ainigmoi* – they sometimes also travel under the name of *mythoi*⁷. There is surely a kind of truth in the tale, but again the source of the truth does not rest precisely in a mythic frame, but rather in the intention of Aesop. Further, the narrowness of the message in Aesopic truths sets them apart from the modern developments for which I am tracing antecedents. They tend to give local insight into how to navigate one's life rather than a global overview of the cosmos and the human place in it.

5 See Russell/Konstan (2005) 3; Derveni Papyrus, cols. 7, 12 (Laks/Most); for Proclus see Struck (2004) 234–252.

6 See, recently, Kurke (2003); Lefkowitz (2009).

7 See Theon Rhetor, *Progymnasmata* 3 (Spengel).

Mythic truth in Plato and Aristotle

Plato famously warns against looking to the ancient myths for knowledge (Plat. *rep.* 3; 10). This is often taken, rightly, as a gauge for how much authority myths had for his contemporaries. His general warnings don't prevent him from, on occasion, appealing to myth when he finds something in it that supports a general point he is making, always leaving hints that he isn't entirely serious⁸. He also produces his own myths, presumably with the idea that they will replace deficient myths then in circulation. The story of Er, which closes the *Republic*, for example, shows us a myth conveying eschatological information on the fate of souls, which he sets up in competition with Homer's *nekyia* (Plat. *rep.* 614b).

Even more interesting, he also leaves behind more general statements about myths and where they come from – adding up to a myth about myth, if you will. In the *Statesman*, as he articulates the myth of the divine shepherd, he explicitly includes discussion of its premises, giving us a fascinating commentary on myth in general that runs alongside his telling of the myth itself. The dialogue spends some effort building up a portrait of the ideal political leader, and then Plato's main discussant, the Stranger, suggests that the picture they have developed, while fit for an ideal world, may not be possible to attain in the messy world such as it is. To illustrate his argument, the Stranger digs through the ancient myths. Plato has him forward the caveat that such a path of discussion is a kind of childish entertainment (παιδιάν), nevertheless he feels it necessary to make reference to a “great myth” (δεῖ μεγάλου μύθου προσχρήσασθαι), because it conveys a message congruent to the one that he is developing (Plat. *polit.* 268d). He collects pieces of several different famous myths: he looks at the myth of the sun rising in the West as part of the struggle between Atreus and Thyestes; he mentions the reign of Kronos, understood as a kind of Edenic existence; and various stories of autochthonous birth. He claims that all of these are vestiges from a massive cosmological event of long ago. They tell of a time when the world turned on its axis in the other direction from the way it does now. This is why we have handed down to us a myth of the sun rising in the West. And since at these times, time passed in the other direction as well, human lives began in the earth and arced their way through old age to middle age and to infancy, ending in birth. And since there were no families (the earth was everyone's mother) neither were there any clans or nations, and so no need for conflict. And further, at that time the whole world itself was directly guided in this opposite direction by a divine shepherd who tended to all the needs of humans. Eventually the divine shepherd drops the

8 For a recent treatment and summary of the background, see Morgan (2000).

tiller and the world, left to its own devices, spins the other way (in its current direction) like a recalcitrant child. While both Plato's and the Stranger's investment in this story about myth remains unclear, it lays out a fascinating scenario for where mythic truths come from. Plato summarizes the idea (Plat. *polit.* 269b–c):

All these stories then come from the same experience, and in addition to these a thousand others still more wonderful than them, but on account of the magnitude of time some of them have vanished, others have been related in separate pieces with each of the parts scattered from each other. But the experience which is the cause of all these no one has told, and just now it ought to be; for the tale will be suited to an exposition on the nature of the king⁹.

Ταῦτα τοίνυν ἔστι μὲν σύμπαντα ἐκ ταύτου πάθους, καὶ πρὸς τούτοις ἕτερα μυρία καὶ τούτων ἔτι θαυμαστότερα, διὰ δὲ χρόνου πλήθος τὰ μὲν αὐτῶν ἀπέσβηκε, τὰ δὲ διεσπαρμένα εἴρηται χωρὶς ἕκαστα ἀπ' ἀλλήλων. ὁ δ' ἔστιν πᾶσι τούτοις αἴτιον τὸ πάθος οὐδεὶς εἴρηκεν, νῦν δὲ δὴ λεκτέον· εἰς γὰρ τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως ἀπόδειξιν πρέπει ῥηθέν.

A very similar proposal is placed in the mouth of Solon's Egyptian interlocutor in the *Timaeus*. There we also hear of succeeding generations, wiped out by periodic cataclysm, and the suggestion that the oldest tales are garbled fragmentary records from formative events of very long ago. The Phaethon tale preserves a 'truth' in the form of a 'myth' about the shifting of the heavenly bodies that orbit the earth, and a destruction of the things on the earth by a great fire that recurs at intervals (τοῦτο μύθου μὲν σχῆμα ἔχον λέγεται, τὸ δὲ ἀληθές ἐστι τῶν περὶ γῆν κατ' οὐρανὸν ἰόντων παραλλάξις καὶ διὰ μακρῶν χρόνων γιγνομένη τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς πυρὶ πολλῶ φθορά. *Tim.* 22c–d). Because the Egyptians are safe from these destructions by fire (owing to their low altitude and the Nile), and because they are safe from deluges from the sea, they keep actual records of what happened, whereas everyone else, including the Greeks, have their records wiped out (and even the knowledge of how to keep records) and so they have only incomplete memories to work from, that are “hardly different from childish myths” (παιδῶν βραχὺ τι διαφέρει μύθων. Plat. *Tim.* 23b).

In both the *Statesman* and the *Timaeus*, then, we have myths not only about great leaders and Atlantis, but also what we could call a myth about myth itself. He speaks of an early time, almost unimaginably long ago, when ancient men witnessed monumental and formative events, and over successive epochs of history, remnants of the human race survive to tell the tale. But due to the massive time elapsed, punctuated by calamities of various kinds, and incomplete technologies to record, the legends are mixed up and survive only in fragments. Of course, given Plato's low opinion of

9 All translations my own.

the epistemological power of myth, one should be cautious about claiming that he actually endorses his story of the origins of myth. But he may be capturing a general sense of his time, and in any case, Plato's version is the first attestation of several recurrent ideas in the story of 'mythic truth' in antiquity.

When we turn to Aristotle, we find a nearly identical picture in his *Metaphysics*, book Lambda. This is a powerful and consequential tract, in which he looks at the primary sources of motion in the cosmos. He here proposes the idea of a multiplicity of unmoved movers to account for the motions of the heavenly bodies, with the prime mover, which is behind the motion of the sphere of fixed stars, being the primary unmoved mover. At Aristot. *metaph.* 1072b this prime mover is identified with god, and after he articulates the choir of unmoved movers below it, he says the following (Aristot. *metaph.* 1074b1–15):

It has been handed down by ancient men from very early times, and left behind to posterity in the form of a myth, that these heavenly bodies are gods and that the divine surrounds the whole of nature. The rest of it has been added, up to the present time, with an eye to the persuasion of the masses and expedience in relation to the laws and general advantage. They say that these gods have a human form and are similar to certain other animals, and the other things that follow from and are attendant upon these statements. If, from these statements, someone should separate out and accept only the first, that they supposed the primary substances to be gods, we would consider it an inspired statement, and might think that, while each of the arts and sciences likely has been recovered many times to the degree possible and then perished again, these are the teachings of those arts and sciences preserved like remnants up to the present day. And so to this extent alone an ancestral lore from the earliest men is visible to us.

Παραδέδοται δὲ παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ παμπαιῶν ἐν μύθῳ σχήματι καταλειμμένα τοῖς ὑστερον ὅτι θεοὶ τὲ εἰσιν οὗτοι καὶ περιέχει τὸ θεῖον τὴν ὅλην φύσιν. τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ μυθικῶς ἤδη προσήκτα πρὸς τὴν πειθῶ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρῆσιν· ἀνθρωποειδεῖς τε γὰρ τούτους καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὁμοίους τισὶ λέγουσι, καὶ τούτοις ἕτερα ἀκόλουθα καὶ παραπλήσια τοῖς εἰρημένοις, ὧν εἴ τις χωρίσας αὐτὸ λάβῃ μόνον τὸ πρῶτον, ὅτι θεοὺς ὦντο τὰς πρώτας οὐσίας εἶναι, θείως ἂν εἰρήσθαι νομίσειεν, καὶ κατὰ τὸ εἶκος πολλάκις εὐρημένης εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἐκάστης καὶ τέχνης καὶ φιλοσοφίας καὶ πάλιν φθειρομένων καὶ ταύτας τὰς δόξας ἐκείνων οἶον λείψανα περισεσῶσθαι μέχρι τοῦ νῦν. ἡ μὲν οὖν παῖτριος δόξα καὶ ἡ παρὰ τῶν πρώτων ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἡμῖν φανερά μόνον.

Once again Aristotle's investment in the idea is not whole-hearted, since the prospect is considered conditionally, and he does not take up the notion with vigor in any of the rest of the corpus. However, he seems to think a scenario very similar to the one Plato set out is possible. Here again, we have observations from extremely ancient peoples that have survived in garbled form through successive cataclysms. Aristotle's statement contains some subtle but unmistakable differences and additions as well.

Here the insight preserved in the myth is not attributed to these ancients witnessing some formative event. Instead, they just, preternaturally, seem to have understood something that to our (Aristotle's) contemporary science likely proves to be true. The scenario credits them with an uncanny insight. Again, we needn't hold Aristotle entirely to this, especially considering that he says the direct opposite of these ancient folk at Aristot. *pol.* 2, 1269a4–8. More likely they just made a lucky guess. But as was the case with Plato, he is probably referencing a more widely held idea that these ancient men did in fact have some special apprehension of the way of things. One might even point to a degree of poignancy in the notion of an 'ancestral lore' that is just barely visible to us. Second, the changes in the myth over time, while due partly to fragmentation caused by epochal convulsions, is also due to social and political imperatives. The stories are distorted to serve the purposes of manipulating the masses of people to follow laws and engage in good behavior. Aristotle reveals here an understanding that myths serve a social purpose, and they have the power to instill social values, something Plato had already realized.

Furthermore, Aristotle's way of making this observation also places an illuminating frame around the relative value of the kinds of information myths are thought to convey. Ideas about the shape of the cosmos and the nature of the divine are most prominent, and the mythic elements that arise to accommodate a given social imperative are seen to be distortions that need to be weeded out to reach the real truth of the myth. There is a useful contrast here to certain modern ideas. Some more recent thinkers on myth value most highly the information that myths convey about the societies that tell them. Already in the 19th century K. O. Müller noticed that the shape of an ancient tale reflects the political and social values of the society that tells it, and this was a core idea behind different forms of functionalism in the 20th century. But it does not even occur to Aristotle that such information might be particularly useful. Such accretions can only be seen to get in the way of the real truths behind the myths, which are understood to be connected to large questions about cosmology and theology. There is, in fact, general agreement in antiquity on what is the wheat and what is the chaff.

Stoicism and beyond

From these early attestations in the philosophers, who are dealing directly with grand issues of cosmology, the general idea that myths are the distilled observations of ancient wise men becomes rather widely diffuse. For example, it occurs to the erudite, but hardly systematic, travel writer Pausanias. In his discussion of legends around Poseidon, Zeus, and Kronos, he tells us (Paus. 8.8.3):

When I started out, I used to see in these tales of the Greeks a higher degree of simple-mindedness in their authors, but on getting as far as Arcadia I started to hold this sort of view of them: In ancient times those among the Greeks who were considered wise spoke their sayings not straight out but in enigmas, and so the legends about Kronos I conjectured to be a certain sort of Greek wisdom.

Τούτοις Ἑλλήνων ἐγὼ τοῖς λόγοις ἀρχόμενος μὲν τῆς συγγραφῆς εὐθίας ἔνεμον πλέον, ἐς δὲ τὰ Ἀρκάδων προεληλυθὼς πρόνοιαν περὶ αὐτῶν τοιάνδε ἐλάμβανον· Ἑλλήνων τοὺς νομιζομένους σοφοὺς δι' αἰνιγμάτων πάσαι καὶ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ εὐθέως λέγειν τοὺς λόγους, καὶ τὰ εἰρημένα οὖν ἐς τὸν Κρόνον σοφίαν εἶναι τινα εἰκαζόν Ἑλλήνων.

It is noteworthy that Pausanias mentions this idea as coming to him as part of his approach to Arcadia. This is a region already associated, through Greek pastoral poetry and the Roman bucolic imagination, with an older order, and a time when fewer complexities of civilization separated people from their gods. He also sees in the myths a particular kind of speech, an enigmatic form, that is the vehicle by which myths convey their truths to us. We will see this idea of mythic language expressed elsewhere. Quite a bit has intervened between Aristotle and Pausanias, of course, and the most consequential developments are to be found in Stoicism.

Cicero's *De natura deorum* is a particularly rich source for the idea that myths contain profound hidden truths. This work, which stages a debate between different philosophical schools, particularly associates the Stoics with this view. As he investigates the nature of the gods, Cicero's Stoic spokesman Balbus draws from many sources of information. He looks at abstract arguments about the perfection of the shape of sphere and of the heavenly bodies, he argues from created nature and how it behaves providentially, from cultic practices, and from etymological investigations of the names of the gods themselves. Another potent source of insight for him is the ancient myths, which he calls *fabulae*. The *fabulae* reveal that the ancients had insights with an uncanny resemblance to the real truth of things (such as contemporary Stoic physics has discovered it) (Cic. *nat. deor.* 2.63–72). His reading of the succession myth behind Hesiod's *Theogony* provides a good example. Balbus sees the myth as a code for the deep structure of the cosmos. That Ouranos is castrated is an indication that the highest principle, the fiery divine aether, produces all things on its own and without need for union with anything else. Kronos is associated with *chronos* (time) and his swallowing of his children is an allegory for the idea that time devours all ages. When Zeus binds Kronos, the myth indicates that time cannot be unlimited, but must unfold according to delimited cycles.

Though he nowhere lays out an explicit theory for where these truths come from, he gives some hints. He examines where our ideas of the gods come from and after a short consideration of Euhemerism he then suggests that scientific insight is another source behind the myths (Cic. *nat. deor.* 2.63):

Also, from another line of thinking, indeed a powerful science, a large number of gods springs, gods who are clothed in human guise and have supplied an abundance of myths to the poets, but have crammed human life with every kind of superstition.

Alia quoque ex ratione et quidem physica magna fluxit multitudo deorum qui induti specie humana fabulas poetis suppeditaverunt, hominum autem vitam superstitione omni refererunt.

This passage treats myth as a theological expression produced by some unknown earlier group of people. They are presumably ancient (though we have no fulsome discussion of successive eons of time interrupted by cataclysm) and further must have had a science that was well ahead of their time. They make myths out of their special knowledge and provide them to poets, who then embellish the divinities into anthropomorphic forms. In this passage Balbus makes a distinction between the myths on the one hand and what poets do with them on another (though he will nuance this distinction later, as we will see). This is similar to Aristotle's discussion of an early time when the ancients encode wisdom in their tales, followed by a later time of embellishment. In Aristotle's evidence, the embellishment happens for political expedience. Cicero here has Balbus attribute the deviations from the early true forms specifically to the poets and presumably to their urge to tell an entertaining tale. We also see a distinct mark of disdain in his saying the poetic fabrications have provoked all kinds of superstitions. He makes a finer point of this derision later on in the dialogue (Cic. *nat. deor.* 2.70 f.):

And so, don't you see how a scientific sense has been pulled from the good and useful study of physics, as it has been discovered, over to fabricated and fictitious gods? And this gave birth to false opinions and confused errors and superstitions that are nearly old wives' tales. For we know the appearance of the gods and their ages, dress, and accoutrements, and moreover their lineages, marriages, and familial relations, and all of it is transferred into an image of human weakness. For they are shown even with troubled souls: we observe the desires, sorrows, and rage of the gods. And truly, as the myths relate, they are not free from wars and battles. And not only as in Homer when there are two opposing armies and particular gods protect one of them from the other side, but even, as in the case of the Titans and Giants, the gods fight their own wars. These things are discussed and believed in by the silliest people and they are full of emptiness and extreme insignificance. Nevertheless, while the myths are despised and rejected, the divine extends through the nature of each thing, through earth it is Ceres, through the sea it is Neptune, and so on for the rest, and what sort of natures they have is able to be understood, so too tradition has called them that name.

Videtisne igitur ut a physicis rebus bene atque utiliter inventis tracta ratio sit ad commenticios et fictos deos. Quae res genuit falsas opiniones erroresque turbulentos et superstitiones paene aniles. Et formae enim nobis deorum et aetates et vestitus ornatusque noti sunt, genera praeterea coniugia cognationes, omniaque traducta ad similitudinem inbecillitatis humanae. nam et perturbatis animis inducuntur: accepimus enim deorum cupiditates aegritudines iracundias; nec vero, ut fabulae ferunt, bellis proelisque caruerunt, nec solum ut apud Homerum cum duo exercitus contrarios

alii dei ex alia parte defenderent, sed etiam ut cum Titanis ut cum Gigantibus sua propria bella gesserunt. haec et dicuntur et creduntur stultissime et plena sunt futtilitatis summaeque levitatis. Sed tamen is fabulis spreto ac repudiatis deus pertinens per naturam cuiusque rei, per terras Ceres per maria Neptunus alii per alia, poterunt intellegi qui qualesque sint quoque eos nomine consuetudo nuncupaverit.

This very rich passage builds on the first one from Balbus and clarifies a few things. The idea of ‘myth’ here is more tightly bound to what the poets do and so is also caught up in the derision that seemed to be mainly directed toward the poetic fabrications of the earlier passage. Certain *fabulae* are to be despised and rejected. What truth there is in the mythical material seems mainly to dwell at the level of individual deities’ characters and their associations with particular parts of the cosmos. The narratives are embellishments, again presumably for entertainment value, and are to be rejected in their literal form. But as the reading of the succession myth from Ouranos to Kronos to Zeus has shown, one can read back through these myths, undoing the salacious flights of fancy, and one will arrive at the true insight that was the initial spark for the tale. There remains a kind of scientific observation at the core of the myths, then. In the end, myths are enlightening, insofar as they are accretions on core scientific observations. So, while there is no reverence for myth in Balbus’ account, there is an idea that they are precipitated by, and built around true observations about the structure of the cosmos. Attentive reading of them will allow one to recover scientific insight.

Finally, we turn to the work of a Roman Stoic, Cornutus, whose *Compendium of Greek Theology* is among the richest allegorical tracts to survive from antiquity. He develops Stoic ideas of the traditional pantheon as a collection of expressions of underlying cosmological truths. This tract also puts on display an approach to the ancient tales that we saw attested in Plato and Aristotle, but Cornutus has developed it further. His closing statement, which outlines his overall stance toward the myths, is a good place to begin (75.18–76.5):

And so, my child, you may now be able in this way to take the rest of the things handed down to us in mythical form, ostensibly about the gods, and refer them to the elementary models that have been pointed out, having been convinced that the men of antiquity were no common men, but that they were both competent to understand the nature of the cosmos and were inclined to make philosophical statements about it through symbols and enigmas¹⁰.

Οὕτω δ’ ἂν ἤδη καὶ τᾶλλα τῶν μυθικῶς παραδεδοσθαι περὶ θεῶν δοκούντων ἀναγαγεῖν ἐπὶ τὰ παραδειγμένα στοιχεῖα, ὧ παῖ, δύναιο, πεισθεῖς ὅτι οὐχ οἱ τυχόντες ἐγένοντο οἱ παλαιοί, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνιέναι τὴν τοῦ κόσμου φύσιν ἱκανοὶ καὶ πρὸς τὸ διὰ συμβόλων καὶ ἀνιγμάτων φιλοσοφῆσαι περὶ αὐτῆς εὐεπίφοροι.

¹⁰ Citations are to the still standard edition by Lang (1881).

So, the ancients had extraordinary powers of insight, and they had a particular mode of expressing these insights – an oblique, enigmatic code, akin to the one Pausanias understands. That there is an earlier age of greatness from which the current period has slipped is in some tension with a Stoic emphasis on the idea that the world is getting better and knowledge is expanding¹¹. Their physics includes the notion of an advancing cosmic fire, coextensive with the divine itself, that over great cycles of time consumes the world. This advance is a kind of revealing of the cosmos, and so one would associate earlier times with a lesser degree of this ‘revealing’. In any case, it is clear in Cornutus that in the earlier time there were extraordinary men who saw into the deep structure of the cosmos so penetratingly that their insights matched the most advanced scientific observations of his day.

Like Plato and Aristotle, Cornutus also hands on the idea that the myths arrive to us in broken form. He looks at the famous scene at the opening of *Iliad* book 15, where Zeus berates Hera by reminding her of how he once punished her by hanging her from the heavens with a golden chain and attaching anvils to her feet. He unravels this enigma by reading it as an allegory for the air (Hera) stretching down from the upper regions of the aether (Zeus) down to the heavier, denser regions of earth and sea (the two anvils). He claims here that, “The poet seems to be handing down this fragment of an ancient myth” (ἔοικε γὰρ ὁ ποιητῆς μυθοῦ παλαιοῦ παραφέρειν τοῦτο ἀπόσπασμα. 26.17). The term ‘fragment’ suggests an idea of some whole story that gets broken up and is then passed on. What the poets are working with, then, is something like the situation imagined by Plato in the *Statesman*. The poet works with nuggets of an ancient tradition, and reconfigures them to meet the needs of his own tale. But Cornutus, more like Balbus, has a particular sense of how these whole stories get broken up. In his view, the poets play the crucial role in the fragmentation (27.19–28.2):

One must not conflate the myths or transfer the names from one to another; nor ought the myths be considered irrational if something has been plastered onto the traditional genealogies by people who do not understand the message they indicate enigmatically, but treat them as if they were mere poetic fabrications.

Δεῖ δὲ μὴ συγχεῖν τοὺς μύθους μηδ’ ἐξ ἑτέρου τὰ ὀνόματα ἐφ’ ἕτερον μεταφέρειν μηδ’ εἴ τι προσεπλάσθη ταῖς παραδεδομέναις κατ’ αὐτοῦς γενεαλογίαις ὑπὸ τῶν μὴ συνιέντων ἃ ἀνίττονται, κερημένων δ’ αὐτοῖς ὡς καὶ τοῖς πλάσμασιν, ἀλόγως τίθεσθαι.

Cornutus frames his discussion as a contrast between mere poetic fabrications (πλάσματα) and truth-bearing ancient myths. He sees the mythic tales as something other than the kinds of creations a poet might make. They convey deep truths about the cosmos, where as poetic tales are made up,

¹¹ See a discussion in Most (1989).

presumably to please an audience. At another point in his treatise, which is addressed to his son, Cornutus more explicitly blames the poets for mishandling the truths the myths contain. He expresses disagreements with Hesiod (31.12–18):

Well then, you might at some time have a more perfect interpretation than Hesiod's genealogy. For I think that although he has transmitted certain things from the ancients, other things he has added from his own imagination of a more mythical nature, and in this way a great deal of ancient theology has been corrupted. But for now let us examine the things that have been preserved for the most part.

Ἀλλὰ τῆς μὲν Ἡσιόδου <γενεαλογίας> τελειότερα ποτ' ἂν ἐξήγησῃς σοι γένοιτο, τὰ μὲν τινα, ὡς οἶμαι, παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαιότερων αὐτοῦ παρεληφθότος, τὰ δὲ μυθικώτερον ἀφ' αὐτοῦ προσθέντος, ᾧ τρόπῳ καὶ πλεῖστα τῆς παλαιᾶς θεολογίας διεφθάρη· νῦν δὲ τὰ βεβημένα παρὰ τοῖς πλείστοις ἐπισκεπτέον.

Here Cornutus recapitulates a disdain we saw from Cicero's Balbus (and Aristotle, for that matter) for misguided accretions onto core truths. Cornutus continues to suggest that the poet makes up these additions for the sake of entertainment. In his view the poet is a potentially careless figure, who may or may not fully comprehend the potent messages in the materials with which he or she works. We should also note the use of the comparative adjectival form 'more mythical' in a way that is meant to disparage poetic accretions. This should caution against the idea that there is a full split between the idea of truth-bearing myth on the one hand and false poetic accretion on the other.

Conclusion

The idea of 'myth' in antiquity, in both Greek *mythos* and Latin *fabula*, carries significantly more weight than is suggested by a history that privileges the line from Homer to Plato. In Homer, there is not really a word for 'myth' yet, since the term will only emerge after some self-conscious reflection on Homeric discourse and its subject matter, versus other discourses. Instead we have *mythos* corresponding to speech or story tout court. Plato didn't place much stock in the ancient tales, since he, like Thucydides, was working hard to establish a claim to truth for another kind of discourse, and so 'tale' became 'tall tale'. But the evidence here suggests another set of ideas, activated mostly within the allegorical tradition, that sees myths as potentially containing profound insights. Raising the profile of this thinking on 'myth' helps us see more clearly the polemical nature of the idea of myth as especially meaning false tale. These polemics, of course, were quite successful, since later Stoic thinkers, as we have seen, built in answers to them. They speak of falsity now inhering mainly in poetic accretions and flights of fancy – whereas some core insight, at the center of the myth, is allowed to remain deeply true.

It is noteworthy that in each of the different ideas examined here, we see an implicit or explicit valorizing of some period of very remote antiquity. The 'faraway' provides an origin from where some secure insight might come. In these texts, as in many modern notions, the idea of mythic truth draws on a primitivist scheme, in which ancient peoples had some uncanny special insight. We also see consequential differences in thinking between ancients and moderns that are made more salient from comparison. While several modern schemes see the myths as a way into contingent, historical truths, of culture and social or political organization, the ancients showed almost no interest in this. The kinds of truths that myths are thought to contain are more exclusively related to very big questions, about the shape of the cosmos and the human place in it. In both ancient and modern ideas, though, one sees what we might call a preservationist instinct. The maintaining of mythic truth answers to a rather strong need to locate some source of wisdom that is more than the here and now – a present time and current location that offer us only tantalizing glimpses of the order of things. Maybe there is some other time or place when people knew better.

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