
lecture 1 - what is myth

ancient myth

- ancient does not mean primitive - not lacking in analytical faculties
- plato reject mythology

what is myth

- are tales that society tells itself - ways society wants to think about itself
- colonial product of the 19th century - never referred to their mythic traditions
- invented for pastime for dark nights - attempt to explain natural phenomena to convince community that they belonged together and promote values
- invented to teach people about relation with divine
- Fritz Graf, Lionel Edmunds 1990
 - Myth was the Other of Religion, Reason, or Civilisation
 - does not mean they could not cope with these things and had to simplify them, we now see mythology as a meta language - more pleasant way of talking about serious matters
- were depicted on every public building, on temples, graves and venerated places throughout ancient cities - every part of the landscape, stones trees etc carries mythological significance

greek vs roman myth

- greek was huge influenced on romans from early age
- romans adopted and adapted greek myths to make their own literature and art
- need greek myth to decipher roman - but romans were not just copyists
 - even though names were greek, think in different ways to greeks
 - they twisted the myths to suit their own societies
 - romans saw themselves as heirs of greek mythology
- foundation myth as to how rome came about
 - an invention story came out and was more popular - silly story
 - facilitated romans in attacking greeks, justified romans believing they were better than greeks
 - romans believed they were created for the downfall of greece due to the burning of troy
- greeks were not unique - in close contact with eastern neighbours

eastern vs western groups

- greek myth shaped from eastern contact
- not regard greek myth as product of superlative society that almost stood alone among other peoples of the eastern Mediterranean
- walter burkert - greek civilisation must be understood as complex institution - absorb traditions from interactions with social and religious entities
- eg. Hercules slaying monster comparable to Ninurta (assyria) slaying bird

mythic versions

- many versions of myths - all correct
- fashionable to create rare mythic versions - people who knew rarest were admired
- prototypes exist but myth is valid only at particular time and place by the community whose tradition it had taken shape
- have symbolic values, represent world through symbols that make sense to particular community
- cycle - myths all related to a central topic (eg cycles such as theban cycle or trojan cycle - everything that has to do with story of troy)
- for ancient audiences comparison of versions was second nature.

transition of myths

- oral by professional groups of singers
- began to appear in writing only about 750BCE
- adam parry - experiment in yugoslavia - signers as young as 5 were able to recite thousands of verses - travel from village to village and would be invited by communities that celebrated important occasion
- some episodes were more popular and some singers would make more dramatic to please - add little twists themselves - consistency was not important

myths as cosmology and cosmogony

- difference
 - both start with cosmos - world
 - logos = talk and discussion - discussion about world in general
 - gone = creation - discussion about creation about world
 - cosmology identified with theogony (creation of gods) - greek myth explored how gods came into being and arrangement between them
 - primitive conception of beginnings of life - need to be pro-hero to communicate principles of civilisation
 - early stage - even though deities are imagined in natural terms (eg. zeus rains and weather), they are attributed human qualities such as anger or envy (eg. sky envious, earth manipulative)
 - after Hesiod, cosmogonical and cosmological speculation followed two separate paths
 - myth (religious) poetry (eleusis, orphism = other main theology in ancient greece, compliments hesiodic theology) - engage in this for better afterlife
 - philosophical reflection (presocratics)

myth and religion

- elesus = goddess demeter and her daughter persephone tried to explain seasons cycle but prepare humans for death
- persephone abducted by hades and made his bride - demeter tried to regain posession, after pleasing with zeus and causing drought, zeus takes pity on humans and on demeter and restored daughter to mother but for only half of the year - explains seasons
- this religion became popular in 5th century - major festival took place at eleusis. - ritual enactment of mythological adventures
- associated with dionysus, god of ecstasies, and orpheus
- orpheus, mythologic poet/prophet, came from thrace (associated with barbarians), spoke of cosmic egg and fertilisation by zeus-serpent. Orphism is a corpus of religious ideas expressed in orphic poetry
- orpheus worshipped alongside demeter at eleusis - talks about mysteries of life after death (dionysis also worshipped there)

myth and ritual/cult/magic

- religion involves cult and ritual - ceremonies that evoke stories that are related
- rituals reflect or interpret sacred myths - did stories come before cult or were they created to make meaning of cult - vies from case to case
- anxiety of ancient world was associated with necessity of birth and death that defined human condition and course with nature of gods - association with pollution and miasma, story must be invented - divine wrath
- Bremmer = post structuralist - allowed for each society to change mythic versions to suit its purposes
- magic is in essence ritual performance designed to realise wish by enlisting help of divine

eros in greek religion

- erotic myths held vital role and excited poetic imagination from early stage
- number of ancient rites that delta with passage to adulthood were closely associated with sexual initiation for both sexes
- transformational power of eros - if fall in love you change/die - marriage is about procreation not for life, to make sure community continues to exist - not about individual personal stuff
- if die when in love, you will become resurrected as someone else and your responsibility to see what kind of person you'll be when resurrected - why they have stories to teach how to do it properly
- artemis and dionysus often preceded these rights
- festivals during which these rites were celebrated and myths enacted were major events in life of polis (City state).
- not all myths can be allegory of ritual

myth and philosophy

- start with pre-socratics, then plato (socrates), then sophists
- in 6th century in greek Ionia the natural philosophers or presocratics rejected mythology
- criticised poetic and myth tradition as source of authoritative speech. - challenge authority of twelve gods of mount olympus
- ionian philosophers understood creation and natural phenomena in terms of unions of elements which empedocles named after gods. consequently divine generations were attributed births, indulgences and wedding feasts death like experiences as part of adventures - everything flows and changes = use stories
- in 4th century, sophists were first to question validity of myth fundamentally and they even invented own myth - tradition employed as stable point of reference that facilitated understanding
 - appreciated myth use as public tool to sway crowds - yet still reject
 - first to say noble people are not born they are taught - homer said no hope in being noble if not born into it
- after sophists, plato and other philosophical movements (eg. stoics) employed myth allegories for purpose of their doctrines

mythos vs logos

- richard buxton - greek went through development from myth to reason from mythos to logos
- in 18th 19th centuries - origins of myth lay in childhood of humankind. interpretation relied on reconstruction of life of early man
- now, human need to invent myths is more complex than explaining it by lack of technological advance. - still believe and create myths

myth as history

- in antiquity, myth was called to play role of archaeology for specific communities depending on social and geopolitical needs - eg. big bones proof of giants from story
- blurred lines - was he brute conqueror or wonderful adventurer
- herodotus 6th century included all sorts of myths to explain customs of various people he visited
- aristotle who defined plot of tragedies as myth, talked of 'traditional histories' which contain implausibilities but we cannot change them. - aristotle defended these narratives as they served laws and interest in community
- term natural history: we must be aware of using terms nation and national and so term national myth since was coined in 19th century
- 'national' cause often monopolises art: parthenon friezes depict myths of a nation confident in its superiority over barbarian people.
- historicity of myth like myth itself also fluid: heinrichs examined blurred boundaries between history and myth in hellenistic period. due to establishment of royal cults in way that was never before accepted in greek world the distinction between human and divine, myth and ritual becomes less obvious. gods increasingly became culture heroes while men became deified. - god who allowed you to become king etc.

myth and literature

- once myth were introduced to literature they acquired an existence of their own as literary texts, which have invited criticism, comparison, interpretation since antiquity. various literary genres employ different semiotics and symbols or interpret them differently.
- claude calame - no such thing as greek myth, myth are available as particular texts in particular genres
- graf claims myths are narratives as such obey conventions of literary genre in which they are told. also assembled from narrative patterns which migrate from one myth to another
- hellenistic authors often employed myths for the sake of entertainment and in certain cases the mythographers would go as far as inventing ancient authors, whose work they claimed to have copied

theoretical approaches

- school of thought associated with myth - cambridge school
- R. Barthes introduced semiotic approach of myth, viewed as metalanguage, a linguistic version of reality behind myth. semiotics is very important in theory of structuralism, which analyses myth through certain patterns always believed to allude to specific meanings
- MP Nilsson argued all myths were traceable to Mycenaean period
- freud inspired by greek myth of psyche and tried to analyse myth as subconscious reference to powerful psychological anxieties