

THOUGHTS ON MYTH AND RELIGION IN EARLY GREEK HISTORIOGRAPHY

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RESUMEN: El artículo examina el nacimiento del concepto de *mythos*/mito en el contexto de la historiografía y la mitografía de la Grecia arcaica. La posibilidad de oponerse a relatos tradicionales es un factor crítico en este proceso y se relaciona estrechamente con los esfuerzos de los autores por fijar su autoridad. Se compara la práctica de Heródoto con la de los primeros mitógrafos y, aunque hay amplias similitudes, hay diferencias cruciales en el tratamiento de los asuntos religiosos. Los escrúpulos personales de Heródoto responden en parte a su bien conocida reserva en lo referente a los dioses, pero es también relevante su actitud acerca de la tarea del historiador y su noción de cómo los dioses intervienen en la historia. Mientras que los mitógrafos tratan de historicizar la mitología, Heródoto trata de modo notable de desmitologizar la historia, separando ambas, pero al mismo tiempo definiendo con más profundidad que nunca sus auténticas interconexiones. Esta situación sugiere algunas consideraciones generales acerca de la relación entre mito y ritual en Grecia.

ABSTRACT: The article examines the emerging concept of *mythos*/myth in the context of early Greek historiography and mythography. The possibility of contesting traditional stories is a critical factor in this process, and is closely related to the efforts of writers to establish their authority. Herodotos' practice is compared with that of the early mythographers, and though there are some broad similarities, there are crucial differences in their approach to religious matters. Herodotos' personal scruples account for some of his well-known reticence about the gods, but also relevant is his attitude to the historian's task, and his notion of how gods act in history. If mythographers attempt to historicise mythology, he quite remarkably attempts to demythologise history, separating the two but at the same time defining more profoundly than ever their true interconnections. This situation prompts some general thoughts on the relationship between Greek myth and ritual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: mito, historiografía, mitografía, religión, ritual.

KEYWORDS: myth, historiography, mythography, religion, ritual.

The relationship between 'myth' and 'religion' is an old and much-discussed topic. Though a general consensus about the pragmatic meaning of 'myth' as 'traditional tale' seems to have emerged, less agreement exists around 'religion', and even less around the phenomenology of either term, or their functional relation to each other. The purpose of this essay is not to offer, at least directly, general thoughts on these two concepts, but to explore their interaction in a particular context, that of

Greece of the fifth century BC, and more particularly in the context of its mythography and historiography. For myth I refer to the definition of Bruce Louden, itself an expansion of Walter Burkert's: 'a sacred, traditional narrative, which depicts the interrelations of mortals and gods, is especially concerned with defining what is moral behavior for a given culture, and passes on key information about that culture's institutions'¹. For 'religion', I wish to adopt a somewhat restricted meaning, to refer primarily to actions that people either individually or in groups perform because of their belief in divinity. This might seem to be a definition of 'ritual' rather than 'religion'. But I am interested in the social nexus and meaning of ritual actions, which may be called the social face of religion, and so wish to consider not only the actions but their context and understanding. This is at least part of what is meant by 'religion', but admittedly it is a much broader term, encompassing not only ritual but myth, belief, values, individual and group psychology and sociology. For a brief discussion some narrowing of scope is required.

The distinction of what people say and what people do about the gods is traditional and works well enough as a starting point for a functional analysis. But it does not take long before one encounters difficulties. With respect to Greek society, for instance, the question arises as to whether one should include stories about heroes in the category of myth. Heroes are humans, but have close relations with gods, normally being descended from them. Louden of course wants and needs to include the heroes of the *Iliad* in his definition, extending myth as 'stories about gods' to encompass 'stories about people closely related to gods'. Most people would accept that extension, and of course the gods are closely involved in the action of the *Iliad*. But the author's focus is on the human world, and if the real power of myth comes from its dealings with the supernatural, this is to deal with the supernatural at one remove. Most Greeks regarded the heroes of the Trojan War as historical humans. The more one considers stories about them to be history, the less room there would seem to be to consider them as myth, if these are 'sacred' tales. At the same time, many of these heroes received cult honours, in ways often indistinguishable from divine worship. We shall see that the ambivalent status of the heroes takes us directly to the heart of some interesting questions about Greek myth and Greek religion.

Another point of contention in speaking of Greek myth and religion is that these are not native Greek categories, raising difficult issues for those who would wish to discuss them. With respect to religion, I agree that it is not a Greek category, but do not think it matters; they had no categories 'economy'², 'society', or

¹ B. Louden, *The Iliad: Structure, Myth, and Meaning* (Baltimore 2006) 9.

² That is, in the modern sense of course, not *oikonomia*.

‘psychology’ either, but we can study them nonetheless. Realising that some of the assumptions we bring about these terms to their analysis in an ancient context can get in the way of understanding does not negate the existence of the object of study, or prove that it is fantasy. Religion is an anthropological constant and the problem posed here is the same for anyone who would study a foreign religion. No matter how different Greek religion is, if it were *totally* different it would not be possible to speak about it at all (translation would simply not work): the fact that people do continue to speak of it implicitly indicates that they believe translation is possible.

With respect to myth, the issue is subtler. Obviously it *is* a Greek category in one sense; *mythos* is a Greek word, and by the time one reaches the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, it is used very commonly—there are hundreds of examples—to denote old tales about gods and heroes that contain a pronounced element of imagination³. They are contrasted with rational *logos*. There is significant overlap here between the modern and ancient use of the word. There is danger, however, in carelessly thinking that they are identical. The *mythos/logos* contrast, as it has been theorised since the Enlightenment, transfers the qualities of particular tales to the minds and societies of those who tell them: thus we have mythical mentalities and mythical ages, which are supposedly superseded by rational ones. As an historical analysis, this is clearly an untenable construct⁴. But it is equally problematic to dispense with the terms altogether on account of this situation. A straightforward distinction between imagination and reason with respect to accounts about the past or about the gods existed already before the Hellenistic period. It is undeniable in Plato, and I would argue that the complexity of the doctrine in Plato, whereby *mythos* and *logos* in the sublunar world are thoroughly entangled with one another, suggests that the distinction is not original with him; rather he was refining a pre-existing, much simpler dichotomy which others had applied in ways that were to him

³ In what follows on *mythos* and *logos* I summarise what will be supported at greater length in a forthcoming article.

⁴ Extended critique in R. Buxton (ed.), *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* (Oxford 1999); see also F. Graf, ‘Myth’, in S. Iles Johnston (ed.), *Religions of the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA and London 2004) 45-58 for an overview. One end of the spectrum in this debate is staked out by C. Calame, who would deny the use of ‘myth’ in a Greek context altogether; see his contribution to the Buxton volume, ‘The Rhetoric of *muthos* and *logos*: Forms of Figurative Discourse’, 119-43, and ‘Greek Myth and Greek Religion’, in R. D. Woodard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* (Cambridge 2007) 259-85. From the vast literature on myth, religion, and ritual I mention B. Kowalzig, *Singing for the Gods. Performance of Myth and Ritual in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Oxford 2007) 13-55; J. Bremmer, ‘Ritual’, in Johnston, op. cit. 32-44, and ‘Walter Burkert on Ancient Myth and Ritual’, forthcoming in A. Bierl & W. Braungart, ed., *Gewalt und Opfer. Im Dialog mit Walter Burkert* (Berlin 2010) 1-16, each with further references.

problematic, but which nevertheless pointed the way to a true solution, linked to both epistemology and metaphysics. Plato's doctrine may be sophisticated, challenging, and at times very confusing, but starts from the simple contrast of reason *vs.* imagination, as many passages show⁵. For Plato, this contrast was a strongly philosophical and ideological construct. Choosing not to use the terms 'mythos' and 'logos' at best requires inconvenient and unnecessary periphrasis for concepts with which we are already comfortably familiar; at worst it could misrepresent an important chapter in intellectual history, in which the historians played their part.

A priori one would guess that the people against whom Plato was reacting were the Sophists; and since in the *Protagoras*, the arch-Sophist himself introduces the distinction with a flourish (320c), we should not doubt that it stems from his own work (for which there is some independent evidence anyway)⁶. Protagoras' *mythos* is about Prometheus, and satisfies Louden's definition on all counts. The Sophists would have introduced the distinction as part of their study of rhetoric: imaginative stories with morals or allegorical meaning can be very effective devices of persuasion, as much as (or even more than) dry logic. In itself this distinction does not require that the *mythoi* would be 'myths' in the sense of 'sacred tales', but this is what it came to in practice, for contingent cultural reasons: the great body of Greek tales propagated by poets, with whom the Sophists placed themselves in conscious rivalry, were the obvious body of material on which to draw; tradition further sanctioned individual interpretations and re-writings of these stories, according to the purpose to which they were put. So there was ample scope for the imagination here, without recourse to fiction such as that of the later Greek novels: these would not have the authority of tradition to enhance their persuasive power.

'Authority' is an important concept here, and provides a link to the historians. The history of the Greek word *mythos* has been carefully studied by various scholars. In Homer it is often associated with an authoritative speech-act⁷. The process by which its meaning changes from 'speech which commands obedience and respect' to 'imaginative tales' is not at first sight a straightforward one. I would argue that the key lies in the contestation of authority that characterised Greek public and

⁵ For discussions see the essays of P. Murray, C. J. Rowe, and T.K. Johansen in Buxton *From Myth to Reason?* (last note); K. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge 2000); C.J. Rowe, 'The Status of the "Myth" in Plato's *Timaeus*,' in *Plato Physicus. Cosmologia e antropologia nel Timeo*, edd. C. Natali, S. Maso (Amsterdam 2003) 21-31.

⁶ See R. Fowler, 'Herodotos and his Contemporaries', *JHS* 116 (1996) 62-87 at 86.

⁷ Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY 1989). I.J.F. de Jong in her review, *Mnem.* 4.45 (1992) 392-7, offers some important qualifications of Martin's arguments, but the tendency with respect to *mythos* remains clear.

intellectual life. The proem to Hekataios' *Genealogies*⁸ illustrates the issue. 'Thus speaks (*mytheitai*) Hekataios of Miletus: I write what I think to be true, since the tales (*logoi*) of the Greeks are many and ridiculous, as it seems to me.' Here, *logoi*-those of the Greeks-are ridiculous and incredible, whereas the *mythos* of Hekataios will be true: exactly the opposite of the later meaning of *logos* and *mythos*. In this proem, Hekataios is appropriating to himself the traditional role of the Muses; not they, but he, guarantees the veracity of his tale⁹. So he uses *mytheitai* in its Homeric sense of impressive, authoritative speech. *Mythos* is the marked term of the pair; *logos* is neutral. The two terms are not simply interchangeable, and careful attention is needed to their usage in context. When a term is marked, the marked force is often triggered by something in the linguistic context. For instance, *storie* in Italian means 'stories'; but if I say *storie!* in a certain tone of voice and with a gesture, it means 'nonsense'. In Hekataios, we are dealing with the opening pronouncement of a great work; a very significant context. The word *mytheitai*, without qualification, therefore conveys the necessary nuance ('this is authoritative speech'). *Logoi*, however, are of themselves simply utterances; the adjectives 'many' and 'ridiculous' indicate what kind of utterance is meant.

Thus Hekataios is demanding respect from his audience: he is speaking the truth. The trouble is, all his rivals made the same claim. They held quite different views, and scorned his. The proems of historical, philosophical, and scientific works all strike a similar tone, suggesting that *I* speak the truth, whereas *that man* lies. It is in this context that *mythoi* acquired their bad name. If *mythos* is linked to authority as it is in the proem of Hekataios' work, then, when it becomes routine to challenge that authority, *mythos* will be caricatured by rivals as a pretentious or ridiculous claim, open to question. This appears to be the meaning in both of Herodotos' two uses of the term, first when referring to (most people agree) Hekataios' theory of Ocean (2.23), then when referring to 'foolish' tales the Greeks (presumably again Hekataios) tell of Herakles in Egypt (2.45.1). Indeed, Klaus Nickau has attractively suggested that in both of these passages, Herodotos is taking direct aim at Hekataios: 'the man who spoke about Ocean has put his *mythos* into the realm of the invisible, and cannot be refuted'; 'this *mythos* too is foolish': *mythos* alludes scornfully to Hekataios' *mytheitai*¹⁰.

⁸ Fr. 1. References are to *Early Greek Mythography I Text and Introduction* (Oxford 2000).

⁹ See R. Fowler, 'Early *Historiē* and Literacy', in N. Luraghi (ed.), *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (Oxford 2001) 95-115 at 101-03.

¹⁰ K. Nickau, 'Mythos und Logos bei Herodot', in W. Ax (ed.), *Memoria rerum veterum. Festschrift für Carl Joachim Classen zum 60. Geburtstag (Palingenesia 32, Stuttgart 1990)* 83-100.

These two passages of Herodotus are suggestive, to say the least. On the other hand, these are the only two times that he uses the word *mythos*. In other passages, he discusses what later writers would call ‘myth’ without any embarrassment. In truth, Herodotus, and other writers of this period, are a half-way post in the transition from ‘authoritative speech’ to ‘imaginative tales’, which did not happen overnight. Pindar also associates *mythoi* with the problematic tales of poets and liars¹¹; but this does not prevent him from using *mythos* of his own poetry, and in other positive contexts¹². In the fifth century, it is possible for *mythos* to have both positive and negative connotations, even in the same writer: my *mythos* is true, but your *mythos* is false. Eventually, the balance shifts so that *mythoi* are presumed to be false unless proven otherwise; but, because of the tremendous cultural authority of the traditional stories, the possibility that there was *some* kind of truth about a *mythos* was never quite given up. In the case of the Sophists, ‘truth’, whether of *mythos* or *logos*, is of doubtful value anyway, at least according to Sokrates; but Protagoras means his *mythos* to convey the same conviction as his *logos*, only using different means. If we may judge from Plato’s dialogue, this *mythos/logos* distinction was a very important weapon in the intellectual arsenal of the Sophists; and as we know from their fragments that they made extensive use of traditional stories, it is possible that their very public activity started the trend whereby the word *mythos*, originally a broad term, came to mean the legends that we still call the Greek myths.

Now at the same time as this is happening we can see in Herodotus and others that these stories about the remote past were posing problems with respect to historical verifiability. Eventually, no later than the late fourth century, the whole class of such stories fell under suspicion, and writers could at most appeal to their symbolic or moral truth rather than their literal truth. The nature of the gods too was being hotly contested in the fifth century BC; Protagoras called into question the very possibility of our knowing anything about them. So we have intellectuals passionately debating the foundations of knowledge both about the cosmos and about human history. *Mythoi* are in transition: halfway between ‘uncontested, authoritative stories’ and ‘stories about which the most one can say is that they have symbolic (or moral, or allegorical) truth’; and most of these authoritative stories are about the past and/or gods. In the time of Herodotus and his contemporary mythographers, therefore, a *mythos* -why not call it ‘myth’?- is best defined as ‘a contestable story about the past and/or about gods’.

¹¹ *Ol.* 1.28-9, *Nem.* 7.23, *Nem.* 8.32-3.

¹² *Pyth.* 4.298, 9.76.

It becomes pertinent then to ask, in exploring the relation of ‘myth’ to ‘religion’ in these writers, which stories they were prepared to contest, and which they thought it best not to challenge. The more sacred a story, the more problematic changing it must be. The nature of the debate should reveal something about Greek religious feeling. Herodotos is a very rich text from this point of view. Some of his procedures will arise from personal predilection and scruple, but that is revealing enough, for he will certainly have echoed sentiments shared by at least some of his contemporaries. His procedures also relate to his conception of his task as an historian, and that too is revealing, as we are dealing with an author’s manoeuvring on the panhellenic intellectual scene.

Particularly in Herodotos’ second book, unsurprisingly in view of his fascination with Egyptian religion, we find numerous passages where the issue of what can or cannot be said about gods is explicit or implicit. At the very beginning of this book (2.3.2), Herodotos tells us that he will avoid relating ‘divine stories’ (*ta theia tōn apēgēmatōn*), except for the gods’ names, and if ‘compelled’ by the requirements of his story. The reason given is that ‘every man knows as much as his neighbour about them’. This appears to be a kind of tautology, meaning that he will not discuss them because they cannot be discussed. Regarding those stories that can be discussed openly, Herodotos would surely not think that every man knows as much as his neighbour—he would think that he, Herodotos, knows much more than his neighbour. His whole business is to publish the results of his inquiry into the causes of things, and there are many places where he is emphatic about the errors of others. Regarding ‘divine stories’, he is not however even concerned to know whether people hold different opinions: each person has his own opinion, and that will suffice, for this opinion is not open to contestation, and it may be held without challenge, whatever it may be. Therefore there is no point in discussing it. One may cite also 9.65.2, where Herodotos ventures an opinion why no Persian dead were found in the sanctuary of Demeter at Plataea: he apologises by saying ‘if one must have an opinion about divine doings (*theia prēgmata*)’. He claims no special authority for this opinion; you may take it or leave it. Traditionally in Greek literature, from Homer onward, individuals may detect the hand of god, but no more than that; they cannot with authority name the god in question or even, in many situations, be sure that a god has been at work, however much one may suspect it¹³.

¹³ See e.g. R. Parker *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford 2005) 140; J.D. Mikalson, *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars* (Chapel Hill and London 2003) 131, with further references.

As Burkert noted, Herodotos' discussion of foreign religions is focused almost exclusively on ritual—on the externally observable practices¹⁴. In this passage of Book 2, he declares his reluctance to relate the stories about gods connected to these rituals. Now as we peruse the list of divine stories that Herodotos does in fact relate in Book 2, or declines to relate¹⁵, we need to ask, in order to ascertain the nature of his scruple, whether he has observed the principle enunciated in 2.3.2, and again at 2.65.2. Four times he says there is a 'sacred story' (*hiros logos*) about something, which he does not then relate (2.48.3, 2.51.4, 2.62.2, 2.81.2). At 2.51.4 the *logos* comes from one of the Greek mystery cults, which were secret; divulging the story would be sacrilegious. Dionysos and Demeter were the main gods of Greek mystery religions; it is perhaps that which prevents Herodotos from mentioning even the name of Osiris, the Egyptian Dionysos, at 2.61.1, 2.86.2, 2.132.2, and 2.170-1. The silence about Orphics at 2.123.3 could be related, as Dionysos was central to Orphic doctrine. At 2.48.3 he does not relate the *hiros logos* about the phallic images of Dionysos. At 2.46.2, however, he says only that it would be 'unpleasant' to relate a story about Pan, and at 2.47.2 he says a certain tale would be 'unseemly' to tell. Here, Dionysos is in question, so perhaps we have another mystery cult, and the tale is therefore *hiros*; but the language here and in 2.46.2 suggests rather that Herodotos merely finds the stories distasteful (at 2.47.2 the context is Egyptian beliefs about pigs, which were disgusting in their view; swineherds were a class of untouchables). These two stories look to be suppressed for personal, not religious reasons. We need not perhaps require him to mention repellent things; and notice his propriety also at 2.132.2, where a story about incest revolts him¹⁶.

So far, then, we may say that, with the reasonable exception of these morally distasteful stories, the principle of 2.3.2 has been carried out consistently with respect to cults that were certainly or possibly mysteries. But at 2.65.2, where he reiterates his principle, he has just finished telling a story about Ares, which it is hard to see was necessary: he could have declined to tell it as he did others, and no harm would have been done. We know nothing of this cult, but one suspects (from the fact that Herodotos *does* talk about it) that it was not a mystery cult; but his principle as twice

¹⁴ W. Burkert, 'Herodot als Historiker fremder Religionen', in *Hérodote et les peuples non grecs: Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique XXXV* (Vandoeuvres/Geneva 1990) 1-32 = *Kleine Schriften VII: Tragica et Historica*, ed. W. Rösler (Göttingen 2007) 140-60.

¹⁵ See the Appendix.

¹⁶ We should take Herodotos at his word, and not understand his appeal to taste as a cover for religious scruple; that elsewhere his sense of impropriety seems inactive is neither here nor there, given the arbitrary nature of such things. Cf. T. Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford 2000) 186 n. 12.

enunciated does not obviously distinguish between mystery cults and others. All 'divine stories' should be excluded. Furthermore, at 2.42 he feels free to tell a story about Zeus and Herakles which explains a goat sacrifice, and other mythical material appears at 2.156 (the story of Leto and Apollo)¹⁷.

There appears to be no plausible way to save Herodotos' consistency, unless we accept that when he declines to discuss *ta theia tōn apēgēmatōn*, he means not stories in which gods figure as characters, but stories in which the gods have a direct interest, such that one might offend them if one is not careful. On this view, *theion* is more or less equivalent to *hiron*, sacred. To tread on the holy ground, the *abaton*, is impious, *ouk hosion*; so one avoids these topics. For some inscrutable reason Herodotos does not feel that he risks causing offence at 2.42, 2.65 and 2.156. But this would be a strange programmatic announcement, given that no one would expect him to reveal the details of mystery religions in any case. A simpler explanation would allow him these few lapses, and relate his procedure to 'the requirements of the story', that is, his conception of his task. As always in Herodotos we should assume some target, and the obvious one here is Hekataios. Herodotos delivers his pronouncement at the same time as he tells us he has been to Thebes and Heliopolis, where he consulted the learned priests. Hekataios' misadventure at Thebes is the subject of the famous anecdote at 2.143. Egyptian religion is one of country's marvels and will naturally form a prominent part of his *historiē*. Herodotos here is warning his audience what not to expect; so one infers that their expectations were conditioned by what they had heard elsewhere, i.e. from Hekataios. Hekataios, then, must have told some of these divine stories that Herodotos omits, even though the supposition is not borne out by the miserable remaining fragments¹⁸. More generally, one is tempted to see here a broader reference to all those who related divine stories, pointlessly peddling that about which all opinions are equally valid; that is, Herodotos is advising his audience 'expect no mythography from me'. If that is a legitimate reading, it implies a sense of generic definitions and boundaries, and acknowledges the existence of an obvious comparitor from which Herodotos would distance himself, and competitor whom he would claim to have left far behind.

¹⁷ At 2.91 the epiphany of Perseus, like all other epiphanies in the *Histories*, is reported in indirect speech; I take this as indicative of skepticism: see 'Gods in Early Greek Historiography', forthcoming in J.N. Bremmer and A. Erskine, ed., *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations* (Edinburgh 2009). For discussion of the problems raised by Herodotos' reticence in Book 2, see Harrison (above, n. 16) ch. 7; Mikalson (above, n. 13) 144, with references to earlier treatments.

¹⁸ For possible references to divine myth in the *Periodos* see the Appendix; for divine and heroic myth see the list on p. 146 of *EGMI*.

Herodotos' feelings in these matters were clearly strong, and may be related to other aspects of the *Histories*. His views of religion and of history are part of the same project¹⁹. In his proem, he rehearses different accounts of the origin of hostility between Greeks and Persians, placed in what we would call the mythical period; these stories Herodotos dismisses as unknowable (1.5.3). That famous declaration is of course highly significant for Herodotos' historiographical outlook, but for present purposes note that the dismissed stories are rationalised versions of the traditional tales. Herodotos has written the gods completely out of them. This is in keeping with his skepticism throughout the *Histories*, in many passages (including 2.123.1 in the Appendix), about face-to-face interaction of gods and humans; he is, on the other hand, very clear that the gods direct the general course of human history from afar, punishing transgressions and engineering the up-and-down cycle of history. Thus in the Helen story (2.118-20) he has no room for the Judgement of Paris, but concludes with an emphatic statement (2.120.5) that the gods arranged events in such a way that wrongdoing was seen to be punished.

In another well-known passage (3.122.2) he distinguishes the 'so-called' human generation and that of people like Minos²⁰. On which side of the line do the heroes fall? Herodotos had doubts about this, as well he might given the nature of heroes in Greek cult. Minos is son of Zeus (though not named as such in 3.122.2), so only one generation from the gods (and a sort of god in the Underworld after his death); but elsewhere in the *Histories* Herodotos speaks of him as if historical (1.171-3, 7.169-71). Stories about Herakles are told in book 2 and again in book 4; but in book 2 Herodotos thinks it prudent to ask forgiveness in case he has caused offence (2.45.3). Given this ambivalence, one can understand how he might adopt tactics to ensure that a tale was clearly on the right side of the line, and so a legitimate subject of discussion. The rationalising of the proem and the humanising of the Helen story are examples of this revision prior to open discussion. In 2.132, the story of Mykerinos' daughter, Herodotos reveals that there are competing stories about this girl: that alone suggests he did not consider the story *hiros*, therefore open for debate, and it is interesting that he has adopted a version that is decent, realistic and rationalised. Another and perhaps the most convincing example of this tendency is his consistency in not

¹⁹ See 'Gods in Early Greek Historiography' (above, n. 17).

²⁰ Nickau (above, n. 10) 96 well notes that this phrase presumes a certain amount of discussion on the topic, on which Herodotos is here adopting a non-committal stance.

naming the divine parents of human heroes; of ten examples in the *Histories*, he slips only once, calling Perseus ‘son of Zeus and Danae’ at 7.61.3²¹.

We have already noted how in epic Louden’s definition of myth requires one to stretch a point if heroes are to be part of it; one must stress their divine side. We have noted that for Herodotos, stories about gods not only create difficulties of verification, but present religious risks. But we have defined *mythos* as a contestable story. It seems to follow that stories one feels should not, or cannot, be disputed are not myths; in other words, that Herodotos’ stories about the gods, though fitting Louden’s definition perfectly, are not myths, whereas others which involve heroes, even though the divine element has been downplayed or removed, *are* myths because they can be contested. We appear to have a contradiction.

The way out of this dilemma is to realise that Louden’s definition is etic, not emic; it is that of an outsider. *We* would say that the divine stories relating to cults were myths, but that is because we no longer feel the religious sanctions attached to them, and we do not seriously consider that they might be true. The same dynamic exists today: believers in the great religions are apt to take offence if you call their sacred stories ‘myths’, since it implies the possibility of dispute. Even if one assigns symbolic rather than literal truth to the stories, believers will be unhappy. One has to be an outsider to recognise a society’s myths; by definition one cannot recognise one’s own myths. Herodotos shows himself aware of the problems inherent in some of these stories, and foregrounds the difficulty of knowing the truth about them. Some he rejects as false, others he modifies so that they can be verified or falsified, and about others he remains agnostic or silent. Veyne’s question, did the Greeks believe in their myths?²², is answered in the negative as soon as the concept of ‘myth’ is thought of. In fact, no one believes in their myths (or, put another way, belief can only exist where doubt is possible).

The status of heroes is comprehensible in this light. Excessive dispute about them would be unseemly if they were simply gods. Stories must first be desanctified if they are to be contested. By this process they become *mythoi* in the Greek sense, but one aims to find the true *logos* about them, defeating other, contesting interpretations. In truth the part-human, part-divine status of heroes always made it easy to offer competing stories about them, whereas gods are different. One can observe a similar dynamic in the mythographers, to whom we now turn. Of the 29 authors in the corpus of *Early Greek Mythography*, only two included theogonies in

²¹ Harrison, *Divinity and History* (above, n. 16) 89.

²² P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, tr. P. Wissing (Chicago 1988; French original 1983).

their works: Akousilaos and Epimenides -or rather, pseudo-Epimenides. This latter prose mythographical work is a reworking of a poetic theogony, attributed to the Cretan wonderworker. Akousilaos, for his part, was posing as a seer and prophet; his stance earned him a place on some people's list of the Seven Wise Men (test. 11) In other words, both these works claimed the stamp of divine authority, like Hesiod at the opening of his *Theogony*. Ordinary mythographers claimed no such status, and confined themselves to heroic mythology. This was true already before the great methodological debates of the mid-fifth century, i.e. in Hekataios and Pherekydes, which implies (unsurprisingly) that there were pre-existing cultural norms that affected the course of those debates-viz., that heroes weren't quite gods, and so elicited different responses²³.

In another way too the mythographers are like Herodotos. They are interested in religion, and report its outward manifestations. If they are local historians or, in the case of Hekataios, the author of a *Periodos*, their information, like Herodotos', often comes from first-hand familiarity. In the Appendix there are examples of references to local cults and religious phenomena, including at Samothrace which was the home of a mystery cult; this figures in no fewer than four authors. Unfortunately we do not have any actual quotations to see whether they were reticent like Herodotos. One can see in two cases (Akous. 20 and Pher. 48) their interest in those odd creatures, the Kabeiroi and the Korybantēs, who were at home in several locations-what was said of them at Samothrace was perhaps part of the public mythology surrounding the mystery cult (like the story in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* at Eleusis).

These references to gods, cults, shrines or sacred landmarks read superficially like those in Herodotos. In a fundamental way, however, the mythographers differ from him. They are interested in the stories, of which they tell hundreds, whereas he is interested in the cults, and hardly ever tells the related stories. Where we have verbatim quotations, we can gain some idea of the mythographers' procedure with respect to cult: they tell a story and draw the link with cult *en passant*, or at the end (rather in the manner of a Euripidean tragedy). Contrast Herodotos' procedure at 2.63 and 7.197, the stories of Egyptian Ares and Athamas: he proceeds the other way, from event or cult to myth. Of course, this is his genre: recent history, not *archaiologia*; ethnography, not mythography. Hekataios too, in his *Periodos*, would have first noticed a landmark, and then told us a myth connected with it. But surely

²³ Similarly tragedy concentrates overwhelmingly on heroic, not divine myth: R. Parker, *Polytheism* (above, n. 13) 137 citing B. Knox, *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore 1979) 8-9.

in Herodotos' long work he could have told many divine myths about the hundreds of localities he mentions (like Hekataios, in fact). This looks like deliberate omission. Outside Book 2 and its land full of strange gods, there is hardly a single divine myth.

The mythographers tell the stories, and occasionally draw an explicit link with a contemporary practices. Of course, many of the myths could have been connected with cult (and sometimes we know that they were: I have given a few examples in the Appendix), and the first pages of any local history explained the origin of landmarks and sites that were very familiar to the local audience. In this way-and through genealogies, which gave the ancestry of still living individuals-they explained the sacred foundation of the contemporary world order. One can say that Herodotos was demythologising history, whereas the mythographers were attempting to historicise mythology. Even while disputing each others' versions of tales, the mythographers had no doubt that one of these versions (theirs) had to be true. In that sense they are not dealing with myth at all. They did not call themselves mythographers²⁴ and would have regarded themselves as historians, if they could know the term. Herodotos, by contrast, displays doubts about the whole category; or at least he is much more aware of the problematic epistemology, and so he famously concentrates on what he can know. With that move, the big bang has occurred; mythology is born. Eden is left behind. It remained only to work out which stories were the myths.

The mythographers are less reticent than Herodotos about divine affairs, and his scruples account for some of the difference between them. His emerging sense of history as opposed to myth increases the gap greatly. The mythographers do not write the gods out of the heroic stories; the gods propagate the heroic clans, assist their favourites on their quests, and directly manipulate human affairs, with no more hint of doubt than in Homer. But both the mythographers and Herodotos are all fully involved in the process of contestation, and this points to a remarkable fact about Greek myths and their relation to Greek religion, which is the sheer amount that *is* contestable. With the exception of the secret myths of mystery cults and theogony (and even here prophets and poets could meddle), stories could be freely exchanged, and modified without offending the deity. Local stories were detached from their context and spread abroad, sometimes losing all trace of an original connection with cult. This intricate web of free-floating stories from all over the Greek world became the common mythological heritage, the pseudo-historical foundation of contem-

²⁴ The term first appears in the fourth century: R. L. Fowler "P. Oxy. 4458: Posidorios", *ZPE* 132 (2000) 133-42.

porary life, and the cultural capital of all educated people. It is a process that long predates our surviving texts, even Homer. In the passages in the Appendix one can see this at work: though I have distinguished between ‘panhellenic mythography’ and ‘local history’, in fact the line is blurred-panhellenic mythographers are happy to work local stories into their web; local historians show an interest in other localities than their own, and link their stories to the common heritage.

Myths constitute a parallel discourse to that of ritual, operating according to its own rules; it touches on ritual often, but leaves its essence unaffected. One is almost tempted to argue, in this perspective, that Greek myth had nothing to do with Greek religion! In a different sense, it had everything to do with Greek religion: it is through Greek mythology that the great poets elaborated a powerful and distinctive world-view, with the gods and heroes at the centre. This is the realm of values and beliefs. With respect to ritual, however, except in the mysteries where the myths link directly to the actions and their deadly serious meaning, the myths are detachable, and can live a life on their own, while the ritual goes on for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the myth. One has the impression that they would work just as well whatever story one chose to tell of them²⁵. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that links were routinely drawn -the precise myth might not make much difference, but one needed *a* myth- and one might fruitfully study the patterns and contexts of known connections between myths and rituals, to see if general conclusions could be drawn about the interplay of the two discourses; such a study, well beyond the scope of these brief reflections, might in its turn shed much light on Greek religious feeling. But on the level of specific rituals the adventitious nature of the myths is clear, and this lack of organic union is the reason why attempts to find connections between myths and rituals not known from independent evidence to be connected are so often unpersuasive.

Paradoxically, then, the heroic stories that are the glory of Greek myth are pertinent to Greek religion mainly in a special, if powerful, sense; but equally paradoxically, because of their peculiar nature, they gave rise to the notion opposite of myth, that is history. Like much else in human history, cultural contingencies played their role; in the case of Greece, if one asks what it was about their religion that allowed such a large body of tales with clearly religious aspects (involvement of gods in various ways) to become sufficiently desacralised that religious scruple no longer acted as a constraint on their content or use, one might appeal to various factors. The strongly anthropomorphic character of Greek religion broke down certain boundaries between sacred and profane; gods being familiar in a thousand

²⁵ Cf. Parker, *Polytheism* (above, n. 13) 374 ff. on the aetiology of festivals, and Graf (above, n. 4) 52.

everyday contexts meant that they acted as less of a constraint in other ways too when compared with some other religious traditions. Another thought might be that the process actually works in the opposite direction: we should not think of the heroes as gods needing desacralisation, but as having acquired a touch of divine aura during the development of poetic traditions, and through the rise of the hero cults; since the substrate was a proto-historical notion of ancestors, reversing the process of sacralisation was easier, given the right conditions and a spirit of critical inquiry, than would be the case if they were simply minor divinities. Then again one would not fail to think of the great panhellenic festivals and the splendid bards who performed at them; such occasions were in honour of gods to be sure, as all public occasions were, but the stories they told each other had no ritual imperative with respect to content, and audiences hungered to hear the wise poets relate and embellish the tales from every corner of the Greek world, themselves detached from original contexts and necessarily made over to fit the new one; and made new once, they could be made new a hundred times, by each successive storyteller. By such means the Greek heroic myths flourished and multiplied, to become the unique heritage that they were, continuing throughout antiquity to work as a necessary complement to Greek religion, but also, as I have sought to describe, capable of living a quite different existence²⁶.

²⁶ I am grateful to audiences at Valladolid and the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York for their helpful comments on the oral version of this paper, and to my respective hosts in those cities, Emilio Suárez de la Torre and Jacob Stern, for their invitations and hospitality; and to Jan Bremmer and Robert Parker for astute comments on the draft.

APPENDIX

CONTESTED AND UNCONTESTED STORIES ABOUT GODS IN HERODOTOS

- 1.182.1 Chaldaeans claim that the god comes in person to sleep in the temple: H. does not believe it
- 2.3.2 H. not eager to relate *ta theia tōn apēgēmātōn* ('divine stories'=myths?) apart from the names of the gods themselves, since 'each man knows as much as his neighbour about them. I shall mention only what is required by my story'.
- 2.42 H. relates the reason for a sacrificial custom at Egyptian Thebes (story of Herakles and Zeus)
- 2.45 Greeks tell a foolish *mythos* about how the Egyptians tried to sacrifice Herakles, but he dispatched his would-be sacrificers in their thousands. (Is Herakles a god or a man? H. seems to know it's debatable: he argues that if Herakles was a mere man, 'as people say', he could not have killed all those people single-handedly. He then promptly asks forgiveness of all the 'gods and heroes' for what he has said.)
- 2.46.2 H. declines to say, as being 'unpleasant' (*ouk hēdion*), why the Egyptians depict Pan as a goat, though they do not believe he looks like one. The context is the reason why some Egyptians do not sacrifice goats.
- 2.47.2 H. declines to relate, as 'unseemly' (*ouk euprepesteros*), the story (*logos*) which explains why the Egyptians do not sacrifice pigs except at this one festival
- 2.48.3 H. notes (but does not relate) a *logos hiros* about phallic images of Dionysos used in a procession
- 2.51.4 Anyone who is an initiate of the rites of the Kabeiroi on Samothrace will vouch for H.'s view that the Greeks adopted the practice of making ithyphallic herms from the Pelasgians. There is a sacred tale (*hiros logos*) about this told to the initiates.
- 2.57 H. rationalises the foundation legend of the oracle of Dodona (doves could not possibly speak like humans; it was the speech of the foreign women in the story, which sounded like the twittering of birds)
- 2.61.1 H. declines to say, as impious (*ouk hosion*), in whose honour the people beat their breasts after the sacrifice at this festival (it is in fact Osiris=Dionysos) (reticent again at 2.132)
- 2.62.2 At Sais, the rite involves lamps at night; why they do so is explained by a sacred story (*hiros logos*).

- 2.63 H. relates a local story about how Ares tried to force his way into his mother's temple: this explains the ritual combat which takes place at the festival in Papremis. Here he feels no qualms about relating the myth; but has he suppressed the original motif that Ares sought sexual intercourse with his mother. (Is this tale then not *hiros*, and therefore open to discussion and contestation?)
- 2.65.1-2 The Egyptians hold all animals to be sacred (*hira*). 'To explain why, I should need to enter into discussion of divine matters (*ta theia prēgmata*), which I particularly seek to avoid doing; whatever I have said by way of illustration has been a matter of mere necessity.'
- 2.81.2 Orphics and Bacchics are not permitted to be buried in woollen garments. There is a *hiros logos* about this.
- 2.86.2 H. declines to mention the deity in whose image the most expensive form of model mummy is made (it is Osiris again)
- 2.112-20 H.'s discussion of Helen. But is this 'myth'? Gods do not figure until the very end when he says that the Greeks refused to believe that Helen was not in Troy because the gods wished to show that wickedness will be punished.
- 2.122-3 The reason for a certain festival is that the Pharaoh Rhampsinitos descended to Hades and played dice with Demeter. 'Let him who finds these Egyptian tales credible believe them; for my part my intention throughout this book is simply to record what I have heard.'
- 2.123.3 H. declines to mention the names of authors who have adopted the Egyptian doctrine of the immortality of the soul (they are Pythagoreans and Orphics)
- 2.132.2 H. contests a second (NB: more than one in circulation, which indicates contestation of itself) story about the statues at the tomb of Mykerinos' daughter. The story he rejects involves incest.
- 2.156 Aetiology of the floating island of Chemmis (story of Leto and Apollo)
- 2.170-1 H. will not mention, as impious (*ouk hosion*), the name of the god in whose honours the rites at Sais are performed (it is Osiris=Dionysos again). He knows all about the rites but will remain quiet (*eustoma*). Similarly about the Thesmophoria, except what it is permissible (*hosie*) to mention: the rites were brought to Greece by the daughters of Danaos who taught it to the Pelasgians; after the Dorian invasion it was forgotten, except in Arcadia where the people were not evicted.
- 7.189 Story of Boreas and Oreithyia, and his assistance at Cape Sepias (leads to institution of cult in Athens) (The story is conveyed in indirect speech, and H. reserves judgement about Boreas' causing the storm)

- 7.191 Magi sacrifice to Thetis at Cape Sepias because this is where she was carried off; storm abates (H. offers alternative natural explanation)

Aetiological stories set in the legendary period: 2.91, festival in honour of Perseus at Chemmis, and his frequent epiphanies there (H. is always skeptical about these); 4.32-5, variants about the Hyperboreans and the rites at Delos; 7.197, story of Athamas, related to the cult of Laphystian Zeus. The latter (related in indirect speech) is required to explain why Xerxes avoided the sanctuary; the first two are accompanied by various indications of doubt. Aetiological stories / references to cult set in historical period: 1.167 of a festival at Agylla (arising from impious murder in 6th c.); 3.48 Samian festival (connected with dispute with Corinthians in time of Periander); 3.79 festival Magophonia in Persia commemorating the death of the Magi conspirators (accession of Dareios, 522 BC); 6.105 cult of Pan instituted at Athens after Pheidippides met him (490 BC). Among mythographers: Charon 7, cult of Lampsake at Lampsakos; Hekataios 138, virgin sacrifice to Lemnian goddess (inhabited by barbarians; Lemnos also in Hellanikos fr. 71); 324A Egyptian god Aphthos

REFERENCES TO CULT IN EARLY MYTHOGRAPHY

(Excluded are stories which we might suspect to be aetiological from other evidence or on general grounds-some possibilities are listed *ad finem* below; foundation legends, which usually involve a god mating with a local nymph-many examples of these in the fragments of local history; simple eponyms, such as the fountain of Ismene at Thebes in Pherekydes 95; and genealogies traced back to a god, which is not exactly cult anyway, but does claim a living relationship with a god.)

A) PANHELLENIC MYTHOGRAPHY

Akousilaos 20 and Pherekydes 48: Kabeiroi, Korybantēs: the rites on Samothrace explicitly mentioned. (Hellanikos 23 also conveys information about Samothrace, though with no mention of cult)

Deilochos: title of work *On Samothrace* turned up in palimpsest; nothing known of contents

Hekataios 305: shrine of Leto in Boutoi (Egypt)

Hellanikos 6 (from the *Deukalioneia*): Deukalion founds altar of 12 gods; 109 (from Phoronis?): Telamon founds altar of Herakles Alexikakos at Troy

Herodoros 34: Herakles establishes altars at Olympia; 48 information about Apollo of the Dawn

Pherekydes 43: information about Aigaios Poseidon; 47 Dactyls; 48 Kabeiroi; 84 shrine of Alkmene at Thebes; 149 cult titles Oulios/e Apollo and Artemis; 175 (dub.) cult titles Zeus Hikesios and Alastoros

B) LOCAL HISTORY

(Note these local historians sometimes give information about *other* people's localities.)

Agias and Derkyllus (Argive) 4 local wells at Argos supply water for young women in various rites; 8, *aition* for a cult of the Graces on Paros (reason why no auloi are used); 8A, *aition* for dog sacrifice at Argos

Aristophanes (Boeotian) 2 information about cult of Homoloios Zeus; 9 information about Argynnis Aphrodite; 9A *aition* for the Lysioi Teletai of Dionysos

Armenidas (Theban) 1 = Hek. 2 information about Itonis Athena (Thessalian cult; Iton mentioned by Hek. also at fr. 168); 6 information about the Seven Pyres in Thebes

Charon (Lampsakene) 5 Aphrodite called Kybebe by Phrygians and Lydians

Hellankos (Lesbian) 125 (from Atthis): story of Xanthos and Melanthos presented as *aition* for the Apatouria; 163 (from Atthis): information about shrine of Kolainis Artemis; 165 (from Atthis): Theseus founds Isthmian Games

Kreophylos (Ephesian) 1 aetiological myth for founding of various local shrines and temples; 3 his version of the story of the children of Medeia (connected with cult of Akraia Hera in Corinth) (Medeia at Corinth also in Hell. 133)

Menekrates (Xanthian) 2 Leto, Artemis and Apollo, and the foundation of local shrines and cults

Metrodoros (Chian) 3 information about Smyrmaean cult - details of sacrifice to Boubrostis

Xenomedes (Kean): 2 cult title Athena Taurobolos (perhaps corrupt for Taurobolos) Probably connected with cult, but link not explicitly drawn in surviving fragment: Akousilaos 23 Kaineus; 28 Proitides; Charon 2 Alkmene's cup at Sparta; Hekataios 15 unique story of Oineus and grapevines, probably from local source; 72 name of Zankle in Sicily from the sickle that castrated Kronos (perhaps a cult object); Herodoros 31 site in Herakleia where Kerberos was brought up from Hades; Pherekydes 34 Kephalos and Prokris at Thorikos; 47 = Hellankos 89 information about Idaean Dactyls; 49 Thriai; 64 legend of Neoptolemos at Delphi, and burial of the dagger beneath the threshold of the temple; 98 Phrixos (cf. Hdt. 7.197 above); 137 children of Helios and Rhode on Rhodes (local information vouched for); 140 Anios and the Oinotropoi on Delos; 167 Amazon invasion of Attica; Xenomedes 1 much information about first inhabitants, foundation of cities on Keos; story of Demonax probably aetiological.